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## What's Wrong With Cinderella?

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5 I finally came unhinged in the dentist's office — one of those ritzy pediatric practices tricked out with comic books, DVDs and arcade games — where I'd taken my 3-year-old daughter for her first exam. Until then, I'd held my tongue. I'd smiled politely every time the supermarket-checkout clerk greeted her with "Hi, Princess"; ignored the waitress at our local breakfast joint who called the funny-face pancakes she ordered her "princess meal"; made no comment when the lady at Longs Drugs said, "I bet I know your favorite color" and handed her a pink balloon rather than letting her choose for herself. Maybe it was the dentist's Betty Boop inflection that got to me, but when she pointed to the exam chair and said, "Would you like to sit in my special princess throne so I can sparkle your teeth?" I lost it.

10 "Oh, for God's sake," I snapped. "Do you have a princess drill, too?" She stared at me as if I were an evil stepmother. "Come on!" I continued, my voice rising. "It's 2006, not 1950. This is Berkeley, Calif. Does every little girl really have to be a princess?"

15 My daughter, who was reaching for a Cinderella sticker, looked back and forth between us. "Why are you so mad, Mama?" she asked. "What's wrong with princesses?" Diana may be dead and Masako disgraced, but here in America, we are in the midst of a royal moment. To call princesses a "trend" among girls is like calling Harry Potter a book. Sales at Disney Consumer Products, which started the craze six years ago by packaging nine of its female characters under one royal rubric, have shot up to \$3 billion, globally, this year, from \$300 million in 2001. There are now more than 25,000 Disney Princess items. "Princess," as some Disney execs call it, is not only the fastest-growing brand the company has ever created; they say it is on its way to becoming the largest girls' franchise on the planet. [...]

20 As a feminist mother — not to mention a nostalgic product of the Garanimals era — I have been taken by surprise by the princess craze and the girlie-girl culture that has risen around it. What happened to William wanting a doll and not dressing your cat in an apron? Whither Marlo Thomas? I watch my fellow mothers, women who once swore they'd never be dependent on a man, smile indulgently at daughters who warble "So This Is Love" or insist on being called Snow White. I wonder if they'd concede so readily to sons who begged for combat fatigues and mock AK-47s.

25 More to the point, when my own girl makes her daily beeline for the dress-up corner of her preschool classroom — something I'm convinced she does largely to torture me — I worry about what playing Little Mermaid is teaching her. I've spent much of my career writing about experiences that undermine girls' well-being, warning parents that a preoccupation with body and beauty (encouraged by films, TV, magazines and, yes, toys) is perilous to their daughters' mental and physical health. Am I now supposed to shrug and forget all that? If trafficking in stereotypes doesn't matter at 3, when does it matter? At 6? Eight? Thirteen? On the other hand, maybe I'm still surfing a washed-out second wave of feminism in a third-wave world. Maybe princesses are in fact a sign of progress, an indication that girls can embrace their predilection for pink without compromising strength or ambition; that, at long last, they can "have it all." Or maybe it is even less complex than that: to mangle Freud, maybe a princess is sometimes just a princess.

30 And, as my daughter wants to know, what's wrong with that?

The rise of the Disney princesses reads like a fairy tale itself, with Andy Mooney, a former Nike executive, playing the part of prince, riding into the company on a metaphoric white horse in January 2000 to save a consumer-products division whose sales were dropping by as much as 30 percent a year. Both

45 overstretched and underfocused, the division had triggered price wars by granting multiple licenses for  
core products (say, Winnie-the-Pooh undies) while ignoring the potential of new media. What's more,  
Disney films like "A Bug's Life" in 1998 had yielded few merchandising opportunities — what child wants to  
snuggle up with an ant? It was about a month after Mooney's arrival that the magic struck. That's when he  
50 flew to Phoenix to check out his first "Disney on Ice" show. "Standing in line in the arena, I was surrounded  
by little girls dressed head to toe as princesses," he told me last summer in his palatial office, then located  
in Burbank, and speaking in a rolling Scottish burr. "They weren't even Disney products. They were generic  
princess products they'd appended to a Halloween costume. And the light bulb went off. Clearly there was  
latent demand here. So the next morning I said to my team, 'O.K., let's establish standards and a color  
55 palette and talk to licensees and get as much product out there as we possibly can that allows these girls to  
do what they're doing anyway: projecting themselves into the characters from the classic movies.'" [...]

The first Princess items, released with no marketing plan, no focus groups, no advertising, sold as if blessed  
by a fairy godmother. To this day, Disney conducts little market research on the Princess line, relying  
instead on the power of its legacy among mothers as well as the instant-read sales barometer of the theme  
60 parks and Disney Stores. "We simply gave girls what they wanted," Mooney said of the line's success,  
"although I don't think any of us grasped how much they wanted this. I wish I could sit here and take credit  
for having some grand scheme to develop this, but all we did was envision a little girl's room and think  
about how she could live out the princess fantasy. The counsel we gave to licensees was: What type of  
bedding would a princess want to sleep in? What kind of alarm clock would a princess want to wake up to?  
65 What type of television would a princess like to see? It's a rare case where you find a girl who has every  
aspect of her room bedecked in Princess, but if she ends up with three or four of these items, well, then  
you have a very healthy business." [...]

At the grocery store one day, my daughter noticed a little girl sporting a Cinderella backpack. "There's that  
princess you don't like, Mama!" she shouted.

70 "Um, yeah," I said, trying not to meet the other mother's hostile gaze.  
"Don't you like her blue dress, Mama?"  
I had to admit, I did.  
She thought about this. "Then don't you like her face?"

75 "Her face is all right," I said, noncommittally, though I'm not thrilled to have my Japanese-Jewish child in  
thrall to those Aryan features. (And what the heck are those blue things covering her ears?) "It's just,  
honey, Cinderella doesn't really do anything."  
Over the next 45 minutes, we ran through that conversation, verbatim, approximately 37 million times, as  
my daughter pointed out Disney Princess Band-Aids, Disney Princess paper cups, Disney Princess lip balm,  
80 Disney Princess pens, Disney Princess crayons and Disney Princess notebooks — all cleverly displayed at the  
eye level of a 3-year-old trapped in a shopping cart — as well as a bouquet of Disney Princess balloons  
bobbing over the checkout line. The repetition was excessive, even for a preschooler. What was it about my  
answers that confounded her? What if, instead of realizing: Aha! Cinderella is a symbol of the patriarchal  
oppression of all women, another example of corporate mind control and power-to-the-people! my 3-year-  
85 old was thinking, Mommy doesn't want me to be a girl?

According to theories of gender constancy, until they're about 6 or 7, children don't realize that the sex  
they were born with is immutable. They believe that they have a choice: they can grow up to be either a  
mommy or a daddy. Some psychologists say that until permanency sets in kids embrace whatever  
90 stereotypes our culture presents, whether it's piling on the most spangles or attacking one another with  
light sabers. What better way to assure that they'll always remain themselves? If that's the case, score one

for Mooney. By not buying the Princess Pull-Ups, I may be inadvertently communicating that being female (to the extent that my daughter is able to understand it) is a bad thing.

95 Anyway, you have to give girls some credit. It's true that, according to Mattel, one of the most popular games young girls play is "bride," but Disney found that a groom or prince is incidental to that fantasy, a regrettable necessity at best. Although they keep him around for the climactic kiss, he is otherwise relegated to the bottom of the toy box, which is why you don't see him prominently displayed in stores.

100 What's more, just because they wear the tulle doesn't mean they've drunk the Kool-Aid. Plenty of girls stray from the script, say, by playing basketball in their finery, or casting themselves as the powerful evil stepsister bossing around the sniveling Cinderella. I recall a headline-grabbing 2005 British study that revealed that girls enjoy torturing, decapitating and microwaving their Barbies nearly as much as they like to dress them up for dates. There is spice along with that sugar after all, though why this was news is beyond me: anyone who ever played with the doll knows there's nothing more satisfying than hacking off all her hair and holding her underwater in the bathtub. Princesses can even be a boon to exasperated parents: in our house, for instance, royalty never whines and uses the potty every single time.

110 "Playing princess is not the issue," argues Lyn Mikel Brown, an author, with Sharon Lamb, of "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers' Schemes." "The issue is 25,000 Princess products," says Brown, a professor of education and human development at Colby College. "When one thing is so dominant, then it's no longer a choice: it's a mandate, cannibalizing all other forms of play. There's the illusion of more choices out there for girls, but if you look around, you'll see their choices are steadily narrowing."

115 It's hard to imagine that girls' options could truly be shrinking when they dominate the honor roll and outnumber boys in college. Then again, have you taken a stroll through a children's store lately? A year ago, when we shopped for "big girl" bedding at Pottery Barn Kids, we found the "girls" side awash in flowers, hearts and hula dancers; not a soccer player or sailboat in sight. Across the no-fly zone, the "boys" territory was all about sports, trains, planes and automobiles. Meanwhile, Baby GAP's boys' onesies were emblazoned with "Big Man on Campus" and the girls' with "Social Butterfly"; guess whose matching shoes were decorated on the soles with hearts and whose sported a "No. 1" logo? And at Toys "R" Us, aisles of pink baby dolls, kitchens, shopping carts and princesses unfurl a safe distance from the "Star Wars" figures, GeoTrax and tool chests. The relentless resegregation of childhood appears to have sneaked up without any further discussion about sex roles, about what it now means to be a boy or to be a girl. Or maybe it has happened in lieu of such discussion because it's easier this way.

130 Easier, that is, unless you want to buy your daughter something that isn't pink. Girls' obsession with that color may seem like something they're born with, like the ability to breathe or talk on the phone for hours on end. But according to Jo Paoletti, an associate professor of American studies at the University of Maryland, it ain't so. When colors were first introduced to the nursery in the early part of the 20th century, pink was considered the more masculine hue, a pastel version of red. Blue, with its intimations of the Virgin Mary, constancy and faithfulness, was thought to be dainty. Why or when that switched is not clear, but as late as the 1930s a significant percentage of adults in one national survey held to that split. Perhaps that's why so many early Disney heroines — Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Wendy, Alice-in-Wonderland — are swathed in varying shades of azure. (Purple, incidentally, may be the next color to swap teams: once the realm of kings and N.F.L. players, it is fast becoming the bolder girl's version of pink.) [...]

140 I mulled that over while flipping through "The Paper Bag Princess," a 1980 picture book hailed as an antidote to Disney. The heroine outwits a dragon who has kidnapped her prince, but not before the beast's fiery breath frizzles her hair and destroys her dress, forcing her to don a paper bag. The ungrateful prince

rejects her, telling her to come back when she is “dressed like a real princess.” She dumps him and skips off into the sunset, happily ever after, alone. There you have it, “Thelma and Louise” all over again. Step out of line, and you end up solo or, worse, sailing crazily over a cliff to your doom. Alternatives like those might  
145 send you skittering right back to the castle. And I get that: the fact is, though I want my daughter to do and be whatever she wants as an adult, I still hope she’ll find her Prince Charming and have babies, just as I have. I don’t want her to be a fish without a bicycle; I want her to be a fish with another fish. Preferably, one who loves and respects her and also does the dishes and half the child care.

150 There had to be a middle ground between compliant and defiant, between petticoats and paper bags. I remembered a video on YouTube, an ad for a Nintendo game called Super Princess Peach. It showed a pack of girls in tiaras, gowns and elbow-length white gloves sliding down a zip line on parasols, navigating an obstacle course of tires in their stilettos, slithering on their bellies under barbed wire, then using their telekinetic powers to make a climbing wall burst into flames. “If you can stand up to really mean people,”  
155 an announcer intoned, “maybe you have what it takes to be a princess.”

Now here were some girls who had grit as well as grace. I loved Princess Peach even as I recognized that there was no way she could run in those heels, that her peachiness did nothing to upset the apple cart of expectation: she may have been athletic, smart and strong, but she was also adorable. Maybe she’s what  
160 those once-unisex, postfeminist parents are shooting for: the melding of old and new standards. And perhaps that’s a good thing, the ideal solution. But what to make, then, of the young women in the Girls Inc. survey? It doesn’t seem to be “having it all” that’s getting to them; it’s the pressure to be it all. In telling our girls they can be anything, we have inadvertently demanded that they be everything. To everyone. All the time. No wonder the report was titled “The Supergirl Dilemma.”

165 The princess as superhero is not irrelevant. Some scholars I spoke with say that given its post-9/11 timing, princess mania is a response to a newly dangerous world. “Historically, princess worship has emerged during periods of uncertainty and profound social change,” observes Miriam Forman-Brunell, a historian at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Francis Hodgson Burnett’s original “Little Princess” was published at  
170 a time of rapid urbanization, immigration and poverty; Shirley Temple’s film version was a hit during the Great Depression. “The original folk tales themselves,” Forman-Brunell says, “spring from medieval and early modern European culture that faced all kinds of economic and demographic and social upheaval — famine, war, disease, terror of wolves. Girls play savior during times of economic crisis and instability.” That’s a heavy burden for little shoulders. Perhaps that’s why the magic wand has become an essential part  
175 of the princess get-up. In the original stories — even the Disney versions of them — it’s not the girl herself who’s magic; it’s the fairy godmother. Now if Forman-Brunell is right, we adults have become the cursed creatures whom girls have the thaumaturgic power to transform.

180 In the 1990s, third-wave feminists rebelled against their dour big sisters, “reclaiming” sexual objectification as a woman’s right — provided, of course, that it was on her own terms, that she was the one choosing to strip or wear a shirt that said “Porn Star” or make out with her best friend at a frat-house bash. They embraced words like “bitch” and “slut” as terms of affection and empowerment. That is, when used by the right people, with the right dash of playful irony. But how can you assure that? As Madonna gave way to Britney, whatever self-determination that message contained was watered down and commodified until all  
185 that was left was a gaggle of 6-year-old girls in belly-baring T-shirts (which I’m guessing they don’t wear as cultural critique). It is no wonder that parents, faced with thongs for 8-year-olds and Bratz dolls’ “passion for fashion,” fill their daughters’ closets with pink sateen; the innocence of Princess feels like a reprieve.

190 “But what does that mean?” asks Sharon Lamb, a psychology professor at Saint Michael’s College. “There are other ways to express ‘innocence’ — girls could play ladybug or caterpillar. What you’re really talking about is sexual purity. And there’s a trap at the end of that rainbow, because the natural progression from

pale, innocent pink is not to other colors. It's to hot, sexy pink — exactly the kind of sexualization parents are trying to avoid." Lamb suggested that to see for myself how "Someday My Prince Will Come" morphs into "Oops! I Did It Again," I visit Club Libby Lu, the mall shop dedicated to the "Very Important Princess."

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Walking into one of the newest links in the store's chain, in Natick, Mass., last summer, I had to tip my tiara to the founder, Mary Drolet: Libby Lu's design was flawless. Unlike Disney, Drolet depended on focus groups to choose the logo (a crown-topped heart) and the colors (pink, pink, purple and more pink). The displays were scaled to the size of a 10-year-old, though most of the shoppers I saw were several years younger than that. The decals on the walls and dressing rooms — "I Love Your Hair," "Hip Chick," "Spoiled" — were written in "girlfriend language." The young sales clerks at this "special secret club for superfabulous girls" are called "club counselors" and come off like your coolest baby sitter, the one who used to let you brush her hair. The malls themselves are chosen based on a company formula called the G.P.I., or "Girl Power Index," which predicts potential sales revenues. Talk about newspeak: "Girl Power" has gone from a riot grrrrl anthem to "I Am Woman, Watch Me Shop."

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Inside, the store was divided into several glittery "shopping zones" called "experiences": Libby's Laboratory, now called Sparkle Spa, where girls concoct their own cosmetics and bath products; Libby's Room; Ear Piercing; Pooch Parlor (where divas in training can pamper stuffed poodles, pugs and Chihuahuas); and the Style Studio, offering "Libby Du" makeover choices, including 'Tween Idol, Rock Star, Pop Star and, of course, Priceless Princess. Each look includes hairstyle, makeup, nail polish and sparkly tattoos.[...]

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On my way out of the mall, I popped into the "'tween" mecca Hot Topic, where a display of Tinker Bell items caught my eye. Tinker Bell, whose image racks up an annual \$400 million in retail sales with no particular effort on Disney's part, is poised to wreak vengeance on the Princess line that once expelled her. Last winter, the first chapter book designed to introduce girls to Tink and her Pixie Hollow pals spent 18 weeks on The New York Times children's best-seller list. In a direct-to-DVD now under production, she will speak for the first time, voiced by the actress Brittany Murphy. Next year, Disney Fairies will be rolled out in earnest. Aimed at 6- to 9-year-old girls, the line will catch them just as they outgrow Princess. Their colors will be lavender, green, turquoise — anything but the Princess's soon-to-be-babyish pink. To appeal to that older child, Disney executives said, the Fairies will have more "attitude" and "sass" than the Princesses. What, I wondered, did that entail? I'd seen some of the Tinker Bell merchandise that Disney sells at its theme parks: T-shirts reading, "Spoiled to Perfection," "Mood Subject to Change Without Notice" and "Tinker Bell: Prettier Than a Princess." At Hot Topic, that edge was even sharper: magnets, clocks, light-switch plates and panties featured "Dark Tink," described as "the bad girl side of Miss Bell that Walt never saw." Girl power, indeed.

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A few days later, I picked my daughter up from preschool. She came tearing over in a full-skirted frock with a gold bodice, a beaded crown perched sideways on her head. "Look, Mommy, I'm Ariel!" she crowed. referring to Disney's Little Mermaid. Then she stopped and furrowed her brow. "Mommy, do you like Ariel?" I considered her for a moment. Maybe Princess is the first salvo in what will become a lifelong struggle over her body image, a Hundred Years' War of dieting, plucking, painting and perpetual dissatisfaction with the results. Or maybe it isn't. I'll never really know. In the end, it's not the Princesses that really bother me anyway. They're just a trigger for the bigger question of how, over the years, I can help my daughter with the contradictions she will inevitably face as a girl, the dissonance that is as endemic as ever to growing up female. Maybe the best I can hope for is that her generation will get a little further with the solutions than we did. For now, I kneeled down on the floor and gave my daughter a hug. She smiled happily. "But, Mommy?" she added. "When I grow up, I'm still going to be a fireman."

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