

Selections from:

What's Wrong With Cinderella?

By PEGGY ORENSTEIN

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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.

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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 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?

Mooney picked a mix of old and new heroines to wear the Pantone pink No. 241 corona: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Mulan and Pocahontas. It was the first time Disney marketed characters separately from a film’s release, let alone lumped together those from different stories. To ensure the sanctity of what Mooney called their individual “mythologies,” the princesses never make eye contact when they’re grouped: each stares off in a slightly different direction as if unaware of the others’ presence.

It is also worth noting that not all of the ladies are of royal extraction. Part of the genius of “Princess” is that its meaning is so broadly constructed that it actually has no meaning. Even Tinker Bell was originally a Princess, though her reign didn’t last. “We’d always debate over whether she was really a part of the Princess mythology,” Mooney recalled. “She really wasn’t.” Likewise, Mulan and Pocahontas, arguably the most resourceful of the bunch, are rarely depicted on Princess merchandise, though for a different reason. Their rustic garb has less bling potential than that of old-school heroines like Sleeping Beauty. (When Mulan does appear, she is typically in the kimonolike hanfu, which makes her miserable in the movie, rather than her liberated warrior’s gear.)

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 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? 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.”

Every reporter Mooney talks to asks some version of my next question: Aren’t the Princesses, who are interested only in clothes, jewelry and cadging the handsome prince, somewhat retrograde role models?

“Look,” he said, “I have friends whose son went through the Power Rangers phase who castigated themselves over what they must’ve done wrong. Then they talked to other parents whose kids had gone through it. The boy passes through. The girl passes through. I see girls expanding their imagination through visualizing themselves as princesses, and then they pass through that phase and end up becoming lawyers, doctors, mothers or princesses, whatever the case may be.”

Mooney has a point: There are no studies proving that playing princess directly damages girls’ self-esteem or dampens other aspirations. On the other hand, there is evidence that young women who hold the most conventionally feminine beliefs — who avoid conflict and think they should be perpetually nice and pretty — are more likely to be depressed than others and less likely to use contraception. What’s more, the 23 percent decline in girls’ participation in sports and other vigorous activity between middle and high school has been linked to their sense that athletics is unfeminine. And in a survey released last October by Girls Inc., school-age girls overwhelmingly reported a paralyzing pressure to be “perfect”: not only to get straight A’s and be the student-body president, editor of the newspaper and captain of the swim team but also to be “kind and caring,” “please everyone, be very thin and dress right.” Give those girls a pumpkin and a glass slipper and they’d be in business.

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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.

"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."

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 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 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.