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PART OF THEIR WORLD:  
GENDER IDENTITY FOUND IN DISNEY PRINCESSES,  
CONSUMERISM, AND PERFORMATIVE PLAY

by  
Emily Grider Ray

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Theatre and Media Arts  
Brigham Young University

December 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Emily Grider Ray in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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# ABSTRACT

PART OF THEIR WORLD:  
GENDER IDENTITY FOUND IN DISNEY PRINCESSES,  
CONSUMERISM, AND PERFORMATIVE PLAY

Emily Grider Ray

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Master of Art

One way that children explore concepts of gender is through make-believe and performative play. One of the most prevalent presentations of gender that is packaged for children's play is the Disney Princess brand. In 2007 the Walt Disney Princess campaign profited over four billion dollars and expanded to include over 25,000 items for sale. Princess paraphernalia reflects a change in the way that young girls (ages 3-5) engage in imaginary play by creating a whole new paradigm of thought. As these girls project themselves into the role of a certain Princess, typical play transforms into a consumer based theatrical experience. Girls not only identify with the ideas of playing princess, but of *being* a Princess as well. Judith Butler examines gender as consisting of performative "acts" that are stylized, repeated, and public. Gender identity usually includes aligning one's self with socially accepted definitions of male or female. Using Butler's idea's about gender performance, this thesis looks closely at the Disney Princess brand and how it contributes to the idea of a gender identity through films, live performances at Disneyland, and merchandise designed for enhancing play. As media and consumerism plays an increasingly

large role in children's lives, careful attention must be made to the influence of such brands, especially as the Princesses become defining models of the word female.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To young girls everywhere

*Special Thanks:*

To my husband Daniel, for his never-ending support.

To William and Oliver for their unconditional love, for putting things into perspective, and for making life worthwhile.

To my parents for always believing in me.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction: The Princess Phenomenon**

*I like the real Princess stories better...*  
– Stacy, age 5

After reading Robert Munsch's classic book *The Paper Bag Princess*, which depicts a strong female protagonist who happens to be a princess, I desired to share it with my five-year-old niece who was obsessed with the Disney Princesses. The princess in this book differs from traditional Disney women in many empowering ways. When a dragon destroys Elizabeth's kingdom, burns her fancy clothes, and kidnaps Prince Ronald, she has no choice but to wear a paper bag as she sets off to save her fiancé. She outwits the dragon and rescues Ronald, but he turns up his nose at her appearance and refuses to marry her until she looks more like a "real" princess. Princess Elizabeth triumphantly decides to live on her own when she realizes how shallow Prince Ronald actually is. Not only does the princess save the prince in this story, deviating from traditional fairy tale form, but she refuses to put up with him when she discovers his true character. However, my niece Stacy was somewhat unimpressed and said, "It was weird how the princess acted. She wasn't like the Disney Princesses." Despite my explanations as to why Elizabeth's character might have more substance, finds worth unrelated to her personal



appearance, derives little happiness from material possessions, and does not require a prince to save her in the end, Stacy told me she liked “real” Princess<sup>1</sup> stories better.

I still think of this experience and wonder what it means to be a “real” princess. Both Prince Ronald and Stacy were convinced that Princess Elizabeth did not fit that mold. Though the Disney Princess brand had not yet been created when *The Paper Bag Princess* was written, the story still deconstructs traditional Princess behavior as presented by popular Disney Princess films. Since Stacy was growing up amidst some excessive exposure to Disney Princess movies, products, and dress up clothes, she had developed a particular world view that did not include females such as Princess Elizabeth. It seemed the Disney Princesses were the standard by which she measured all heroines. The growing presence of the Disney Princesses in girls’ lives makes the brand a rich area of inquiry about the way they present gender. For this reason I decided to explore the possible problems associated with the overwhelming presence of the Disney Princess brand, which I refer to as the Princess Phenomenon. Despite the appeal of this trend, this Phenomenon is something that imposes on gender ideology under the guise of make-believe. Though, not intrinsically bad, it is something that should be examined with a critical eye.

There is merit in looking at the way women are constructed in the Disney Princess brand in order to more fully understand how the Princess Phenomenon might impact young girls ages 3-5. Further insight will be helpful to scholars studying media for young audiences, scholars interested in the way that performative play influences gender identity, and parents looking at the possible problems associated with consumerism and the Disney Princess brand. Since these fairy tale females are serving as models for young girls as they gain ideas about gender roles, it becomes increasingly important to reexamine the way women are represented by the popular

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will be distinguishing between Disney Princesses and other princesses by the use of capitalization, marking reference to Disney Princesses with a capital “P.”

Disney Princesses. By exploring how women are portrayed in a variety of Disney Princess movies, as well as in live performances, I evaluate how consumerism and the Disney Princesses may limit how girls play and explore womanhood in their own performative space. Throughout this thesis I refer to “performative” play, which refers to a type of play where someone takes on the role of someone else. While this is not necessarily a fixed term in the academic world, I am defining this as a specific type of play relating to playing Princess. Whether playing a part alone, with a friend, or for an audience, there is a performance at work that requires an interpretation by the actor presenting the character.

The topic of female construction in Disney films has already been widely explored. During the 1980s and 1990s, many journals published articles looking at the way Disney constructs gender in animated features. This correlated with the rise of the VCR becoming more commonplace, causing concern about media playing a larger role in children’s lives. Old Disney “classics” embedded with gender ideology and stereotypes from previous eras were now available to be watched in the home with multiple viewings.

The book *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells remains a leading source that investigates the Disney Company and its films. The book contains essays from a variety of contributors, including articles from Jack Zipes and Henry A. Giroux who write about “Disney Film as Pedagogy.” In Zipes’ essay “Breaking the Disney Spell,” he addresses the need to break down the idea that Disney seems off limits from interrogation due to its association with innocence. He believes “The Disney Spell” allowed Walt Disney to achieve a monopoly over fairy tales during his lifetime becoming the main educator of children through that medium. Giroux looks at the way Disney sanitizes history, politics, and culture by presenting an idealized version of

America in “Memory and Pedagogy in ‘The Wonderful of Innocence’: Beyond the Politics of Innocence.” Both Zipes and Giroux consider how Disney films refashion important issues in American past to be “pedagogical politics of innocence.”<sup>2</sup>

*From Mouse to Mermaid* also looks at “Disney Film as Gender Construction.” Elizabeth Bell discusses the creation of female animated bodies as being multilayered. Not only are animated women an imaginative creation, but real women often stood and moved as models for the characters being drawn. In fact, the entire film of *Sleeping Beauty* was acted out by live dancers for the animators to recreate. Real women also painted the individual “cels” of film that created the movie. Since so many people contributed in different aspects to building the females seen onscreen, Bell views gender in Disney animated films as being multi-authored. Gender becomes a literal construction of society and popular culture.

The final section of the book explores “Disney Film as Identity Politics.” In “‘Where Do Mermaids Stand?’: Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*,” Laura Sells views Disney’s version of *The Little Mermaid* as a tale about gender. Replacing Hans Christian Andersen’s metaphors about aristocracy and the entrance into class circles as a feminist’s rise to power in a masculine world, Ariel must give up her voice and body to gain access to white male circles. Though Sells acknowledges other possibilities are presented through the character of Ursula who she describes as “a drag queen who destabilizes gender as she performs it.”<sup>3</sup>

The way Disney depicts the female role of motherhood is discussed in Lynda Haas analysis entitled “‘Eighty-Six the Mother’: Murder, Matricide, and Good Mothers.” The title references a reported comment made during the early drafts of Disney’s *Aladdin*, in which

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells Laura Sells, introduction to *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Jeffrey Katzenberg told writers to “Eighty-six the mother. She’s a zero.”<sup>4</sup> Haas looks at the way mothers are absent, killed, or replaced in Disney films as voicing Luce Irigaray’s view that a “patriarchal story over the sacrifice of mother and her daughters,” has been ingrained in our society. The Princess characters are either orphans or are raised solely by their fathers. Their mothers are rarely, if ever, mentioned.

While *From Mouse to Mermaid* looks at sanitizations, contestations, and erasures made by Disney and its films, it was published in 1995 before the creation of the Disney Princess brand, which has largely re-popularized animated Princess films. There are also many other books that acknowledge Disney’s troublesome presentation of gender. One book *Disney: The Mouse Betrayed* by Peter and Rochelle Schweizer published in 1998, identifies gender politics at works in animated films with patriarchal fathers and external male characters causing problems for females. Additionally, *Deconstructing Disney* by Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan first published in 1999, recognizes a change in the way women are presented in Disney films with characters such as Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine. These teenagers do not readily accept domestic and maternal roles, yet their mothers are still absent and their paternal relationships are with their fathers who are infantilized to some degree. However, these books are mostly concerned with politics, economy, and greed associated with the Walt Disney Company. Amy Davis’s more recent book *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Animated Films* was published in 2006 and attempts to look at how certain representations of femininity in Disney animated films are part of the larger American society. However, the book only mentions the Disney Princess line in one paragraph and focuses on gender construction solely in movies.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Not much has been written on the way the Disney Princesses present gender outside of their respective films. In addition to the films, certain images of Princesses and femaleness are represented in merchandise, live performers at places such as Disneyland, and new media such as animated sequels, books, and dress up costumes. The Princess line allows the Princess characters to exist outside their original films and makes them marketable female role models.

There lacks an in-depth look at how female representation in the various facets of the Disney Princess brand might present gender and influence performative play. The Disney Princesses also seem to infringe more than ever on children's play, a space where they can explore certain ideas about gender. The revival and proliferation of the Princess movies, some of which represent old ideologies pertaining to gender roles and stereotypes, makes it necessary to reevaluate the way Disney represents women through the Princesses. Little girls interpret the way they perceive women as they physically enact the roles of Princesses themselves. Investigating the presentation of females in Princess movies and in live Princess performances, I look at how consumerism associated with the Disney Princess brand may limit play and the construction of a young girl's gender identity.

### **The Rise of Disney Products**

A brief history of the Disney Corporation helps situate the Princess brand in what has become a powerful company in our society. Walt Disney<sup>5</sup> began making animated shorts in 1923. Consumer products soon followed as Walt remembers, "A fellow kept hanging around my hotel waving \$300 at me and saying that he wanted to put the mouse on paper tablets for school

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<sup>5</sup> To distinguish between Disney the person and Disney the corporation, I will refer to Disney the person as "Walt" or "Walt Disney" and the corporation simply as "Disney."

children. As usual, Roy and I needed money, so I took the \$300.”<sup>6</sup> Before long, Mickey Mouse’s likeness was available on products ranging from alarm clocks to bath towels.

In 1937 the Disney Company completed their first full-length animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* with great success. They continued to make animated features and after World War II they also created live action films and tapped into the television market. By 1955 Disneyland opened, which not only furthered their consumer tie-ins, but fulfilled Walt’s dream of establishing an amusement park with attractions and rides that would appeal to both parents and children.<sup>7</sup> Children could engage with cartoon characters embodied by live actors in costumes, which helped fuel the desire to join them in the game of fantasy buying hats, plush toys, pins, and souvenir books. The popular Mickey Mouse ears, when they were first introduced by the *Mickey Mouse Club* TV show in 1955, sold at an estimated 24,000 a day. Two hundred other Disney items were manufactured by seventy-five other manufacturers at the time, as well.<sup>8</sup> Today Mickey Mouse ears are now sold in a variety of colors and designs at all Disney theme parks for about \$15 a piece. It was recently reported by the Disney Corporate Web site that 2.5 million Mickey ears are sold at Disney World every year.<sup>9</sup>

Early on, Disney created a “clean” and “happy” version of the world where beauty is equated with goodness and virtue is rewarded. Evil is ugly and always defeated. Producing work primarily for children, the Disney Company became associated with innocence and was viewed as wholesome entertainment that “the whole family could enjoy.” Disney’s association with family values persists today. In fact, Bell, Haas, and Sells believe:

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<sup>6</sup> Walt Disney Corporation, “Company History,” [http://corporate.disney.go.com/corporate/complete\\_history\\_1.html](http://corporate.disney.go.com/corporate/complete_history_1.html).

<sup>7</sup> Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>9</sup> Walt Disney Corporation, “Walt Disney World Fun Facts,” Disney, [http://corporate.disney.go.com/media/news/Fact\\_WDW\\_Fun\\_Facts\\_08\\_06.pdf](http://corporate.disney.go.com/media/news/Fact_WDW_Fun_Facts_08_06.pdf).

Disney audiences, and Disney films is treacherous critical terrain: legal institutions, film theorists, cultural critics, and loyal audiences all guard the borders of Disney film as ‘off limits’ to the critical enterprise, constructing Disney as metonym for ‘America’ – clean, decent industrious, ‘the happiest place on earth.’<sup>10</sup>

Disney evokes a comforting nostalgia from people’s childhood. For this reason some may hesitate to look at Disney in a critical manner.

Disney continued to expand across countries to create the first Disney park in a different country with Tokyo Disneyland in 1983. That same year the company expanded further with the creation of the Disney Channel. In 1984 Michael Eisner became chief executive officer and Frank Wells became president. They brought box office records to a new high by releasing classic animated films on video cassette, distributing these stories to new generations. As mentioned earlier, this brought about a boom in Disney studies reflecting a certain apprehension about the repeated viewing of films embedded with stereotypes. One scholar, Deborah Ross, says, “How much more complete the Disney conquest will become for our children and grandchildren with the constant replay made possible by video and DVD, [it] is definitely cause for concern.”<sup>11</sup> Despite widespread unease by consumers, Disney products were produced and distributed at an increased volume with the creation of Disney stores in 1988. The company also increased assets by acquiring additional television stations, radio stations, newspapers, a cruise line, and by producing Broadway productions.

Looking for a way to increase sales with their cartoon toy tie-ins, Disney marketers noticed that many of the movies all had princesses in common. The Princess brand was born, debuting at the Disney store in 1999 and appearing in other stores in 2000 with merchandise and

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<sup>10</sup> Bell, Haas, and Sells, intro. to *From Mouse to Mermaid*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Ross, “Escape From Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination,” *Marvels & Tales* 18 (2004): 63.

toys unifying characters from different films in a large collection of Princesses. The success of the campaign was seen immediately and continues to grow. In 2007 Disney Princess products made an estimated \$4 billion worldwide.<sup>12</sup> With the Princess marketing campaign, the original films have been re-popularized, new Princess media has emerged, and girls everywhere dress up as Disney Princesses each day.

### **Disney Princesses in a Consumer Society**

The Disney Corporate Web site states that the Disney Princess brand is a “powerful lifestyle brand” that “touches every aspect of girls’ lives.”<sup>13</sup> Products appear in stores throughout every department including toys, electronics, home, apparel, décor, stationary, food, health and beauty, and books. Henry A. Giroux addresses the way Disney shapes multiple aspects of daily life in his book *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Giroux looks at Disney as a powerful cultural and social teacher that hides behind the mask of innocence. This innocence provides a safe identity for adults and children alike, but also makes them consumers as a part of that identity. He states, “Disney’s pretense of innocence appears to some critics as little more than a promotional mask that covers its aggressive marketing techniques and its influence in educating children to become active consumers.”<sup>14</sup> As Disney influences so many facets of children’s life it is only natural that it would teach children some ideas about morals, behavior, and points of view.

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<sup>12</sup> Walt Disney Corporation, “Disney Consumer Products,” [http://corporate.disney.go.com/news/consumer\\_products.html](http://corporate.disney.go.com/news/consumer_products.html) (accessed December 19, 2008; link is now changed).

<sup>13</sup> Walt Disney Corporation, “Disney Princess,” [http://licensing.disney.com/Home/display.jsp?contentId=dcp\\_home\\_ourfranchises\\_disney\\_princess\\_us&forPrint=false&language=en&preview=false&imageShow=0&pressRoom=US&translationOf=null&region=0](http://licensing.disney.com/Home/display.jsp?contentId=dcp_home_ourfranchises_disney_princess_us&forPrint=false&language=en&preview=false&imageShow=0&pressRoom=US&translationOf=null&region=0).

<sup>14</sup> Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 89.



Thus, the relationship between Disney Princess products and ideology can best be explored through the lens of consumerism. Consumer culture plays a large part in children's lives. Since this is a prevalent topic that surfaces throughout my exploration of the Disney Princess Phenomenon, I will be referencing a variety of contemporary theorists. In addition to Giroux, another important scholar is Jack Zipes, whose lectures and publications on fairy tales have become some of the most influential work pertaining to children's literature and culture. Zipes edited *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, has translated multiple fairytales, and has written about folklore, fairytales, and authors. Throughout his work he engages in discussions about cultural practices, social learning, and socialization.

This thesis is mostly concerned with his writings about the cultural homogenization of American children. In his book *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, Zipes raises questions about the way mass-media conglomerates are shaping participation in movies, sports, and school. He states, "Whatever healthy differences in perspectives and identities that are fostered by the family, school, or church in heterogeneous communities are leveled by homogeneous market forces that confuse the issue of freedom and choice and equate the power to buy with the power to determine one's identity and destiny."<sup>15</sup> Looking at the Princess brand as a powerful market force, Zipes' exploration relates to my investigation looking at how branded merchandise creates limitations that seep into the performative play area, a place of identity formation.

The work of media critic Ellen Seiter is also valuable to my exploration of the Princess Phenomenon. In her book *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*, she

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.

discusses the way children appropriate consumer goods and media and create meaning. Through her research and observations on advertising addressed at children, she recognizes that what is presented as “normal” for children revolves around material objects. Discussing the struggles for under privileged Americans who cannot always find fulfillment by succumbing to material desires she says, “Class oppression expresses itself in children’s everyday lives through deprivation, through the absence of material goods.”<sup>16</sup> Self worth and identity become attached to the sum and quality of merchandise one can acquire. Seiter’s investigation supplements my discussion about how buying into a particular brand helps a girl present a certain image about herself and reflects a prepackaged identity.

I also reference the work of Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, whose book *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers’ Schemes* examines the media that girls come into contact with including what girls see, hear, wear, and read. They believe that even as society began to embrace girl power, the movement “got co-opted and turned into a marketing scheme that reinforced age-old stereotypes”<sup>17</sup> Written with the intent to make sense of what media is impacting girls today and encourage a questioning attitude, their research provides valuable insight into girl’s culture that corresponds with my investigation of how the Princess brand influences perceptions of gender.

The toys and products available largely determine the ways we define ourselves. With already constructed narratives embedded with gender stereotypes, the Disney Princess line provides limited choices for the preschool age girl group. As I discuss “girls” throughout this

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Gender: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers’ Schemes*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 1.

thesis, I am specifically referring to young girls between the ages of three to five. The Princesses are mostly geared towards this particular demographic.

The Princess brand is also a way for girls to fit in with their peers. An appealing aspect of playing Princess is that it provides a common ground with which all young girls can understand. Though girls may choose to play Princess, their choice is somewhat coerced. Lamb and Brown state, “These aren’t freely made choices. They are choices made within a very narrow definition of girlhood, a definition that is getting narrower all the time.”<sup>18</sup> The brand is so pervasive that it has become an easy basis for play with other children. No one needs to explain the Disney Princesses to anyone else. However, with narrower choices, their understanding of gender becomes narrower in their play. The lens of consumerism helps explain the impact of marketing schemes on young children and the creation of their identity.

## **Gender Trouble**

In addition to a discussion of consumerism, this thesis will also center on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. First published in 1990, Butler wrote the book to voice her concern about the way feminism must define “women” and implement boundaries on gender in order to fight for their cause and be represented politically. The title refers to the “trouble” that is associated with questioning the already established meanings of gender.

Butler first discusses the compulsory order of sex, gender, and desire. She references Simone Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which declares that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. Beauvoir’s writings reflect the view that gender is a cultural construct and that within this masculinist discourse only the female gender is marked. Women, in particular are associated

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

with the body and as being Other from the male Universal.<sup>19</sup> Butler states, “This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.”<sup>20</sup> In this embodied sense, women are subjugated objects and are passive mediums for culture itself to be written upon.

Throughout Butler’s discussion she refers to different laws or guiding systems. The paternal law, or Law, refers to those systems that have dominated and controlled society throughout time. While it is recognized that there is not one singular masculinist enemy to the feminist cause, many of the guiding systems that defined gender throughout time have been phallogocentric, or masculine dominated and controlled. The time from which *Cinderella* was made reflects such a system. Cinderella is depicted as a very feminine character in action and appearance. The paternal law necessitated very sharp differences between masculinity and femininity in order to maintain its order.

The idea of compulsory heterosexuality, or a built-in impulse for men and women to pair together, produces a binary between genders. Within this system the recognizable standards of gender become attached to sexual practice and desire. Gender identity finds uniformity through this compulsion. Butler also explores the idea of identity only being known through gender. Gender and identity can only be understood through the norms and set laws that already exist. Still, the meaning of gender shifts depending on different purposes. Identity results from doing things in accordance to certain frameworks, such as compulsory heterosexuality. Princess stories are structured so that the Princess always marries a Prince. Yet identity cannot be known prior to

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout her work Butler capitalizes “Other” and “Universal,” which seems to point to the political implications of both terms.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12.

its achievements. As Butler says, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>21</sup> Gender is created in acting and doing. Live Princess performances reflect these actions as actresses embody the characters and present certain actions associated with their femaleness.

Additionally, Butler visits the work of Levi-Strauss and structuralism’s system of exchange to see how women are attributed value and meaning in kinship societies. He refers to the Law as singular with one Universal structure that characterizes all systems. In kinship, the object of exchange between different patrilineal tribes is women, given as gifts in marriage. The bride does not have an identity, but rather serves to consolidate the identity of one clan with another. Butler describes, “The woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity.”<sup>22</sup> Within this universality, women serve a symbolic purpose. Males are attributed identity, whereas women “*reflect* masculinity identity precisely through being the site of its absence”<sup>23</sup> and are given a subordinate status. I explore this notion in relation to Cinderella’s character who is given an identity as a maternal body by the paternal law. I also explore Ariel as an object of exchange between the mermaid and human worlds.

Butler looks at the body politics of Julia Kristeva pertaining to subversive bodily acts. Kristeva believes that the maternal body bears meaning prior to culture and is therefore not a paternal structure. The maternal body produces a homosexual desire of the female child for the mother. Desire can only be achieved within culturally sanctioned acts, which she identifies as

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

poetic language and the act of giving birth. I visit this discussion in relation to the motherless Cinderella, who sings poetic lyrics and is viewed as a maternal body by the king. However, Butler disagrees that desires towards maternity predate the paternal law. She describes the maternal body “as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire.”<sup>24</sup> If bodies gain meaning in the context of power relations, “maternal drive” can be seen as a tactic to conceal the necessity for women to assume identity in terms of their reproductive function under the paternal law and keep men in a role of power.

Yet, through drag, or gender parody, gender loses its internal stability in relation to sex. Butler argues that drag further points to the performative nature of gender. The acts on the surface of the body create the appearance of an interior gender core. Though, if someone performs the outer appearance of a gender in opposition to its sexed body, the humor lies in the fact that there is no origin for gender after all. I explore this further looking at Ursula, who is presented as a drag character. Though not necessarily presented as a comical character, in the world of *The Little Mermaid* she makes a perfect villain since she goes against traditional gender roles. Gender laws are given meaning on and through the body itself. Butler concludes that gender is composed of a series of acts that must be repeated and done publicly. Through this lens, I also explore how live Princesses perform femaleness through a stylized performance on a daily basis.

Butler returns to the idea that a unifying identity need not be in place for feminist politics to be elaborated. By subscribing to a singular notion of woman, it would be contributing to the paternal law’s definition of female. Butler searches for agency and states, “In a sense, all

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<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 92.

signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.”<sup>25</sup> Only within practices that are already in place can subversion take place, by redescribing existing possibilities. Denaturalized performances can also draw attention to the performative nature of gender.

I draw upon many of the theories that Butler explores in her work, acknowledging that the idea of gender comes from numerous sources. Butler’s analysis helps identify the different ways that gender identity is supposedly constructed, leading to the understanding that gender is ultimately performative in nature. Most notably, Butler’s ideas about gender acts resonate with the performative nature of the Princess Phenomenon. She states, “Because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”<sup>26</sup> Butler’s book will assist me in looking at how gender constructions in Princess films and media present certain gender acts for young girls to follow.

Considering what goes into the creation of gender identity, I look at how the gender acts presented in films/media and during interaction with live Disney Princesses are then performed and explored in children’s performative play, an important space for exploring one’s gender identity. Though different merchandise features different assortments of Princesses, the Disney Princess Web site features all the characters they promote as Princesses together: Snow White, Pocahontas, Aurora (Sleeping Beauty), Ariel, Cinderella, Jasmine, Belle, and Mulan.<sup>27</sup> Chapter Two examines the two main Princesses I wish to focus on in this thesis: Cinderella and Ariel. The Disney corporate Web site states that Cinderella and Ariel are the top two favorite Disney

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> Before the completion of this thesis Disney added Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* as the ninth Princess to their collection. The majority of this work was written before Disney began featuring Tiana in merchandise to promote the film, which is scheduled to be released in theaters December 11, 2009.

Princesses among girls age 3-5.<sup>28</sup> I have limited my in-depth investigation to these Princesses to keep the length of my work reasonably concise. I have also found that these Princesses give a general representation of what gender acts the Disney Princess brand presents for young girls to follow. Cinderella represents a classical era of Disney and Ariel reflects a more modern woman. I should also mention that I have chosen not to discuss at great lengths Jasmine, Mulan, or Pocahontas not only because they have fewer products and bring in less revenue, but because this would necessitate a whole different discussion about race. While valid, this is not the focus of my thesis.

Chapter Two looks at the animated features *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* as performances to discover how gender is represented. In this chapter I analyze the films in the context of their original theatrical release using pieces of history to see how the ideal woman was defined at the time and then presented in the films. *Cinderella* is read next to a *Ladies' Home Journal* advice column and *The Little Mermaid* is viewed with an eye towards Madonna's "Material Girl" music video. The chapter also looks at how the Princesses are further presented in their Disney Princess context with new media. Since the films and media serve as the basis for the Disney Princess identities it is important to see how women are constructed, what ideologies they carry with their characters, and what gender acts they present, which play a large part in the performative play girls embark upon with their Disney Princess toys and dresses.

Chapter Three looks at live representations of Disney Princesses at Disneyland. At this venue, children are able to interact with an actress taking on the persona of a particular Disney Princess. This begins to blur the line between passive observer and active participant and makes

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<sup>28</sup> The Walt Disney Corporation, "Disney Consumer Products," [http://corporate.disney.go.com/news/consumer\\_products.html](http://corporate.disney.go.com/news/consumer_products.html).



Princess stories and ideologies more tangible, further impacting a girl's notion of these characters they mimic in play. Live representations "convey the image of the glittering feminine in Disney, yet the Disney feminine is also dark and often morbid."<sup>29</sup> Again, this necessitates a closer look at how women are presented to children at theme parks by these live incantations of Disney Princesses and how the experience adds to the consumerism related to Disney Princess products. I also explore Henry Jenkins ideas about brand community and participation in corporate images. As I use some of my own observations from experiences at Disneyland, my fieldwork includes a range of methods as part of the participant-observer model of performance studies including informal interviews, direct observation, and participation in the environment itself.

Chapter Four first explores the concept of play. It looks at the importance of play in the lives of children and how it seems to contribute to gender identity. This leads into a discussion about how media and consumerism imposes on children's play space. I again look at the concept of gender as a performance to see how the Disney Princesses contribute to gender play by drawing upon my own observations, parent and child questionnaires, interviews, and examples from psychologists. Next, I examine some of the interactive media that the Disney Princess brand has generated including interactive DVDs and Web sites to see how this media might further impact children's play.

Chapter Five explores various ideas for talking to young children about gender amidst the Disney Princess Phenomenon. It also presents various ideas pertaining to how we can expand the definition of "princess" through additional folk stories and real life figures. It also suggests how to be more careful consumers. With the enormous amount of money spent each year on

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<sup>29</sup> Allison Craven, "Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9 (2003): 136.

Princess products, which limit choices for children, the Princess Phenomenon is not something that can be ignored. Recognizing the narrow way women are presented to young girls, the Princess brand should be a stepping stone for one's imagination rather than a lifestyle choice.

## CHAPTER 2

### Investigating Old and New Media: The Disney Princess Identity

*Disney's films offer children opportunities to locate themselves in a world that resonates with their desires and interests. Pleasure is one of the defining principles of what Disney produces, and children are both its subjects and objects. Hence, Disney's animated films have to be interrogated and mined as an important site for the production of children's culture.*

– Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared*

Stories about princesses, or about a girl becoming a princess, have been reworked to adapt to the audiences of different eras and cultures. One such story, *The Legend of the Seventh Princess*, an Indonesian folktale, has been passed down through oral tradition relating the origin of Dumai. English translations describe the seventh princesses' beauty as being “an ideal body shape,” flawless silk like skin, an angelic face, moist red lips, thick eyebrows, and long straight hair.<sup>1</sup> Another folktale called *The Princess Frog* comes from Russia. In this story the title princess is a frog, but she is able to shed her skin to become a “beautiful maiden” and becomes distinguished as the most desirable princess by making the finest embroidered shirt, best loaf of bread, and proving herself to be the best dancer.<sup>2</sup> And notably, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm wrote two of the most popular European versions of the *Cinderella* story. Perrault's

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<sup>1</sup> Center For Research and Development of Maylay Culture, “Cerita Rakyat Nusantara,” <http://ceritarakyatnusantara.com/en/folklore.php?ac=10&l=the-seventh-princess-the-origin-of-dumai>.

<sup>2</sup> Russian Crafts, “Russian Tales,” <http://russian-crafts.com/tales/frog.html>.

version, penned in 1697 emphasizes Cinderella's female helplessness and the fashions of King Louis XIV's court. The Grimm version written in 1812 stresses the virtues of a Protestant woman: self-denial, obedience, and industriousness.<sup>3</sup> The depiction of princesses in these stories shifted with the feminine ideal of their times. The most popular fairytale teller of our time is Walt Disney, whose company took over telling stories in a similar fashion after his death. In fact, with the revival of Princess films with the popular Disney Princess brand, Disney's fairytale versions are the most well known and have in many ways replaced the originals. A lot can be learned about the way society thinks women should ideally act by looking at the Disney Princesses. They embody certain dreams and fantasies about women that are woven into their characters.

In this chapter I will be looking at the way women are presented by the Disney Princess brand, focusing on Cinderella and Ariel. These Princess films were released during two different eras: Cinderella during the post World War II domestic revival and Ariel following the age of second wave feminism. These characters represent different qualities of what it means to be a woman by codifying particular characteristics of femaleness from the time in which their original films were released. By presenting acts of gender performance for a new generation of viewers, the Princesses revitalize female stereotypes in new media and merchandise. In order to better understand how gender is being presented by the prolific Princess brand, it necessitates a careful examination of the Princesses in the context of their theatrical releases as well as their more current Disney Princess context.

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 196.

In 2004, the Disney Princess brand released an easy reader book entitled *What is a Princess?* Within the pages of this book, the brand posits that a Princess is kind, smart, caring, likes to dress up, is brave, ready for fun, loves to see new things, is a dreamer, is polite, loves to sing and dance, and always lives happily ever after.<sup>4</sup> According to this definition, anyone can be a Princess so long as she follows this formula. The Disney Princess brand has expanded the boundaries of what it means to be princesses to not only allow room for more characters to be coined in their merchandise, but to invite girls into the Princess sphere. The Princess persona becomes something attainable for the consumer. Through a performance of Princess behavior fused with branded merchandise, a girl can create her own lineage to royalty. She becomes a Princess by virtue of her looks and actions so long as she is female, or at least adopts the signs of femininity pertaining to a Princess. The later criterion brings up the notion of gender performance.

Since the Princesses are undoubtedly female, the looks, actions, and ideologies they encompass help create a performative definition of the female gender. Butler describes such a performance pertaining to the presentation of gender as “a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”<sup>5</sup> The performance of Princess creates the meaning of Princess, just as the performance of femininity creates the meaning of the female gender. If one must act female to be a Princess, the definition of being a Princess and of being female merges together. As girls align themselves with the female attributes of Princesses with the desire to be like them, they place the Princesses on a figurative, as well as literal, pedestal. The Princesses serve as models, presenting certain acts for girls to perform and explore.

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Liberts Weinberg, *What is a Princess?* (New York: Random House, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.

## **Cinderella: The Domestic Princess**

Originally released in 1950, *Cinderella* ushered in a golden age of animation for Disney after World War II. Studying the postwar culture Lynn Spigel observes, “The 1950s was a decade that invested an enormous amount of cultural capital in the ability to form a family and live out a set of highly structured and generational roles.”<sup>6</sup> Some believed the structure of family with specific roles provided a sense of control and security that was lost in previous decades. In her book *Feminine Mystique*, 1960s feminist Betty Friedan addressed what she saw to be the problems of women being coerced into the ideal housewife image. She identified the relationship between keeping women in the home and the rise of consumer culture when she wrote, “[T]he perpetuation of housewifery... makes sense (and dollars) when one realizes that women are the chief customers of American business... women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives.”<sup>7</sup> Friedan believed this system produced what she termed “the problem that has no name,” referring to an overall unhappiness that many housewives expressed, but were unable to explain. Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows further define this problem as “feelings of failure, nothingness, and lack of completion.”<sup>8</sup> Friedan believed that this “problem” sprung from the drudgery of housework and from a woman’s inability to find an identity apart from her husband and children. It also related to the expectation of maintaining an impossible to achieve image of perfection.

Historian Catherine Gourley discusses the beloved Jackie Kennedy who experienced similar unhappiness in her younger years resulting mostly from her mother’s pressure to fit the

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1992), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), 206-7.

<sup>8</sup> Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows, eds., *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

mold of a perfect housewife. Her mother encouraged her to act less intelligent than she really was and pressured her to put aside her career to focus on finding a husband. Gourley states, “[Jackie’s] mother encouraged [her] to flirt with young men by speaking in a soft, little girl voice and staring at them wide-eyed as they talked.”<sup>9</sup> Such counsel adds to the dangerous sexism of which Friedan was writing and leads to an acceptance of being less important or subservient to men. Though many women, such as Kennedy were able to rise above such a stereotype and achieve success in their own right, it was difficult to depart from the ideal housewife image entirely.

Magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* targeted both business women and homemakers, but ultimately maintained the status quo that a woman being in the home was desirable through its advice columns, short fiction, and ads featuring beautifully kept housewives shown cooking or cleaning. In Jennifer Scanlon’s book *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture*, she writes that *Ladies’ Home Journal* consistently advocated for women to make sacrifices and accommodate their husbands in order to preserve families. She states, “If wives grew less accommodating, they feared, husbands would not grow more so; instead, marriages would fall apart.”<sup>10</sup> Responsibility for successful marriages was placed mostly on women. Women’s magazines featured advice columns written by “experts” aimed at molding the perfect wife in efforts to keep marriages together.

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<sup>9</sup> Catherine Gourley, *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 96.

One regular column in *Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "Making Marriage Work," was written by Dr. Clifford R. Adams, Ph. D., the director of Marriage Counseling Service at Pennsylvania State College. He was a prominent psychologist, whose name frequently appeared in popular culture, such as *Time Magazine*, *Women's Home Companion*, and *Marriage and Family Living*, making him out to be an authoritative figure when it came to marriage.<sup>11</sup> His column in the January 1955 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* features a short section entitled "Are You Qualified for Marriage?" Dr. Adams posits, "Some girls just don't understand what being a good wife means...a girl cannot afford to assume that professional ability qualifies her for a successful career as a wife."<sup>12</sup> He then lists and discusses the "attributes of the woman worthy and capable of achieving a happy marriage." These attributes include putting home and family first, being adaptable, cultivating homemaking skills, being responsible, and keeping up with one's husband. I propose that this advice column, given at the time by a respected doctor who specialized in marriage advise, can be understood as part of larger ideological discourse pertaining to the way women should act during the 1950s, defining the ideal woman as the perfect housewife. Dr. Adams is also a man, but in a position where he can define what it means to be the ideal woman, demonstrating the masculine controlled system of the time maintaining paternal law.

I use this column as an historical anecdote because it almost exactly mirrors the way Cinderella is presented in the Disney version of the story. Through the character of Cinderella, a woman can be understood as a maternal body, in terms of her domesticity, and as being flawless in her abilities, actions, and appearance. Her behavior and appearance win her the role of

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<sup>11</sup> See *Time Magazine* (Nov. 12, 1945); "The Companion Marriage Clinic," *Woman's Home Companion* (Nov 1945); *Marriage and Family Living* (Nov 1959). Dr. Adams also co-authored *How to Pick a Mate* (1946).

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Clifford R. Adams, "Are You Qualified for Marriage?" *Ladies' Home Journal* 72 (1955): 22.



Princess. By following Cinderella, or embodying her actions and characteristics, a woman could achieve success in the 1950s world. Considering how Cinderella exemplified the ideal woman of the 1950s brings an understanding about what gender ideologies are being presented to young girls by reintroducing Cinderella in today's Disney Princess brand.

### *Maternal Body*

Dr. Adams claims that a “worthy and capable wife” puts her home and family first. The implication of being a wife also includes having a family and being a mother. This idea is reflected in *Cinderella* in the king's attitude. Cinderella's appeal to the king lies in her ability to bear children. He is less concerned about his son falling in love than finding someone who will be a mother to his grandchildren. At the ball the king tells the grand duke, “There must be at least one who'd make a suitable mother... [coughing] [whispering] A suitable wife.”<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler discusses the female role of motherhood as a cultural practice rather than a drive predating paternal law. Since a female body is needed to produce children, Cinderella's maternal body becomes essential for carrying on the royal family line. Yet, in order to maintain power over the female body, a paternal law conceals its dependence. Butler states, “the clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity.”<sup>14</sup> By constructing the female body as a maternal body, a paternal law can conceal its power by making motherhood seem compulsory. Cinderella is willing to be defined as a maternal body not only because her

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<sup>13</sup> *Cinderella*, DVD, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wilfred Jackson (1950; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 93.

womb is needed by the Prince who will one day be the King, but because it seems natural for her as a woman to submit to the role.

Playing the role of mother implies a certain amount of nurturing, being “adaptable,” and being “responsible,” as Dr. Adams outlines. These attributes of being a “qualified” wife and mother are evident in Cinderella’s character. Cinderella already plays the role of mother perfectly by nurturing and caring for the animals and being adaptable to their needs. She frees mice from traps, clothes animals, and chastises them in order to teach them simple life lessons. She has the ability to adjust her schedule to care for others and fit the needs of the situation, which would allow her to fit the mold of wife and mother for the Prince and his children. But, as Butler discusses, such actions associated with being female are an effect of culture rather than its primary cause. Cinderella assumes the role of caretaker because she needs to by the paternal law. Her actions associated with mothering continue to present her as a maternal body.

It is also worth mentioning that Cinderella herself is missing a mother. Lynda Haas discusses the way mothers are depicted in Disney films by stating, “the typical mother is absent, generously good, powerfully evil, or a silent other, a mirror that confirms the child’s identity without interference from hers.”<sup>15</sup> The mother has no influencing identity “because the mother and mother-daughter relationship are, as yet, unsymbolized in our cultural imagination.”<sup>16</sup> In *Cinderella*, the main character is depicted without a mother to relate to, learn from, or value as a female role model. Butler analyzes the body politics of Julia Kristeva who believes that women are separated from their mothers by both homosexual and incest taboos. Kristeva further believes that such drives felt towards a mother can only be satisfied through displacements that are allowed within paternally sanctioned culture, which include poetic language and giving birth.

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<sup>15</sup> Lynda Haas, “‘Eighty-Six the Mother’: Murder, Matricide, and Good Mothers,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid*, 196.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Cinderella is not only physically separated from her mother as an infant due to taboos as posited by Kristeva, but her mother is further removed from her life through death. This makes Cinderella's need to fill the void of a missing mother even more adamant. Cinderella is depicted as enacting poetic language through song. For example, she sings, "A dream is a wish your heart makes / When you're fast asleep / In dreams you lose your heartaches / Whatever you wish for you keep."<sup>17</sup> The beautiful words accompanied with a flowing melody express her desires and provide an outlet for the tension she feels in her circumstances. But, the bodily act of giving birth can further enable her to appease feelings of loss towards her own mother. The ultimate resolution of the movie places Cinderella in a position to be a mother. Though, Butler does not fully embrace Kristeva's notions of maternal bodies existing prior to the paternal law, she does suggest that seeking to fulfill certain desires through child birth reifies maternity as part of the paternal law, further defining women as maternal bodies.

### *Domesticity*

Dr. Adams also defines a qualified wife as a woman who cultivates homemaking skills. He states, "she accepts her obligation to run the house." A 1950s woman, married or single, was obligated to take care of housework. Cinderella is depicted as a domestic woman who practices her homemaking skills most of the day. She cooks breakfast, scrubs floors, mends, irons, and cares for the garden. Not only does she work as a servant in her home, she tidies her own room before she begins each day.

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<sup>17</sup> David Mack, Jerry Livingston, and Al Hoffman, performed by Ilene Woods, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," *Cinderella* Soundtrack, CD, Walt Disney Records, 2005.

According to Dr. Adams, a qualified wife must not only cook and clean, but needs to do so with a positive attitude to also help create a positive home environment. Cinderella is practicing for the role of wife by creating a feeling of “home” in difficult circumstances. Her blanket is old, but carefully mended. She jokes around with the birds that awaken her in the morning and creates an atmosphere of happiness and familiarity for her family of animals to visit. The birds nest outside her window and the mice live right inside her wall in order to be near the warm environment Cinderella has created. She makes an art of beautifying her surroundings. Her tiny room contains curtains, an extra comfort for her servant quarters. She also attempts to fix up her mother’s old gown by making some simple adjustments. Homemaking skills will also be essential after Cinderella marries the Prince and acquires servants. According to Dr. Adams, even women with servants need to possess these skills, “Otherwise she cannot adequately supervise the service she pays for, nor take over in an emergency.”<sup>18</sup> Being a Princess does not exempt a woman from cultivating homemaking skills.

Just as Dr. Adams defines a model wife as “perform[ing] her tasks faithfully,” Cinderella also seems adept at managing her schedule and can perform several tasks in an impossible amount of time. She also does not cut corners when given extra chores before the ball and makes sure every corner of the floor is scrubbed properly. When her step-mother punishes her and makes her clean the large carpet in the main hall, she redoes the job properly, even though the rug was already clean and she could have done a less thorough job. Her family can count on the fact that she will perform her chores fully.

The association of domestic acts with females during the 1950s further instituted a binary gender system, where women's responsibilities were confined within the domestic sphere and

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Adams, “Are You Qualified?” 22.

men's responsibilities were fulfilled in the outside realm. This binary system suggests a heterosexual context, which Butler, analyzing Foucault, identifies as “precisely [the context] in which identity is constituted.”<sup>19</sup> Within the context where women are given certain roles that differ in relation to those associated with men, gender is ascribed meaning. Butler states, “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.”<sup>20</sup> Female identity becomes restricted by the association of gender acts with the female sex. For the time when *Cinderella* was released, identity as a female was found in being a housewife and related to how successfully she was able to run a house.

The embodiment of these ideals presents a socially constructed version of what it means to be female. While Cinderella performs acts of selflessness and forgiveness towards her uncaring step-family, she is demonstrating that a woman should put home and family first in her life, even before herself. In the context of the 1950s, Cinderella fulfills the monotonous attributes of domesticity to make her “worthy” and “capable” of a happy marriage, which was the standard for women to follow. She completes each domestic task with good posture and a quick pace. Her body performs domestic work with great confidence. By performing the role of homemaker so skillfully, she demonstrates domesticity as another marker of ideal womanhood.

### *Flawless in Abilities, Action, and Appearance*

Another qualification for a 1950s wife is to “keep up with one's husband.” As a man continued to achieve success in the business world, a woman was expected to keep up with her

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<sup>19</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

own achievements to complement him. According to Dr. Adam's standards, which are reflective of the time, a wife was expected to be a sort of "Renaissance" woman. She should not only be able to keep a perfect house and maintain a perfect physical appearance, but also possess broad interests and abilities within society's parameters. Cinderella's character is depicted as finding ways to achieve her own accomplishments. She practices singing and dancing around the house. Even though a girl in her situation would not likely have had any dance training, animators present her as dancing perfectly and beautifully in front of the entire kingdom. Her performance is reflective of the inherent grace a Disney Princess possesses. Much like the ideal of a perfect woman in the 1950s, a Princess such as Cinderella is also constructed as appearing flawless in many areas of her life. Cinderella is depicted as being able to balance a third breakfast tray and basket of laundry on her head to cut down on transit time and perform her duties with efficiency. Cinderella's talents fulfill a requirement of female accomplishment which corresponds with the ideal "trophy wife" image Dr. Adams describes.

Dr. Adams also states, "She tries new recipes, rearranges the furniture, and invites new friends to dinner. She reads fashion articles, follows sports and tries her luck at a new game. Her development is measured not by a pay check but by her husband's growing admiration, appreciation and love." Again, these achievements are related to the domestic sphere, but they also imply that female success relates to how well a woman can please her husband. Men are given power to measure a woman's worth and define femaleness as someone who fits his needs. If a wife does not comply with expectations, she fails to measure up as a "woman." Acts and behavior that correspond with the female gender result in submission to the male gender.

According to articles of the time, another attribute of a perfect woman is to conceal her emotions. Dr. Adams says, "The happy wife adjusts her mood to her husband's, conceals her

disappointments, and puts the big chair by the fire where he wants it even though it spoils the effect she planned.”<sup>21</sup> After Cinderella’s father died, her home fell into disrepair, her fortune was squandered, and she was forced into being a servant. Yet, as the storyteller describes, “Cinderella remained ever gentle and kind.”<sup>22</sup> Her ability to adjust to such drastic changes in her life and remain happy demonstrates Cinderella’s ability to adapt to any situation. She continually masks outward disappointment with simple replies such as, “Yes, step-mother.” Her face also performs great composure by maintaining a delicate smile and soft glance. She does not let disappointment or unhappy expressions remain on her face for long. Though her house is headed by a female, the step-mother possesses a masculine demeanor with a deep voice and rugged facial features. The step-mother also dresses in dark shades deemphasizing any femininity that her character may have at one time possessed. Cinderella’s ability to adjust to authority demonstrates a submission to patriarchal figures and being compliant with 1950s family ideology.

The perfect woman not only acts the part, but maintains a flawless outward appearance as well. Cinderella’s natural beauty aside, Disney sets forth a definition of beauty as being able to labor in the home, but also look well groomed and put together. Her hair is meticulously set, her complexion perfect, and her clothes are mended and form fitting even though she performs some fairly heavy labor throughout the day. Her image resonates with popular 1950s TV housewives seen on *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* where women cooked and cleaned around the house with well set hair and makeup, pretty dresses, and high heels (see Figure 2.1). These women set forth difficult to achieve ideals, but represented the perfect wife much like Cinderella, whose body is used as a surface upon which to write

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<sup>21</sup> Dr. Adams, “Are You Qualified for Marriage?” 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Cinderella*, DVD.

history and culture. Butler describes the body as a “variable boundary” that signifies an interior or authentic core of gender.<sup>23</sup> What is seen on the outside creates the appearance of an inner identity, but it is only skin deep. Any deeper feelings of inadequacy are repressed and hidden under the surface of a perfect exterior.

Other messages about the female body are presented in this film. While there are other lovely women at the ball and the high inquisitor recognizes that any number of women might fit the glass slipper, Cinderella is depicted as extraordinarily beautiful. The slipper serves as a metaphor for the role of womanhood as well. She is the only one who fits that role and is “worthy” of living “happily ever after.” Undernourished and practically starved in her home, her immensely slender frame captures the attention of the elusive Prince Charming. By maintaining a perfectly groomed exterior, she was “worthy” of the Prince who was the most desirable bachelor in the kingdom. This success reflects the need to improve one’s self, like Cinderella, who functions as an ideal woman.



**Figure 2.1** – Above left to right, “Happy Housewife.” Photo still from *Leave It to Beaver*, 1958. Barbara Billingsley as June Cleaver. Courtesy of Darla Shrine’s official Web site, “Happy Housewives’ Club,” <http://www.happyhousewivesclub.com/homemaking/?m=20090101>; “Harriet Nelson.” Publicity photo for *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, 1960. Harriet Nelson as the perfect homemaker. Courtesy of Alcus Greer’s personal Web site, “Vintage TV & Movies,” <http://www.incredibletvandmovies.com/nelsons.html>; “Father Does Know Best.” Photo still from *Father Knows Best*, 1955. Jane Wyatt as Margaret Anderson. Courtesy of “Keo Blog,” <http://keoughp.wordpress.com/2008/12/>.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.



*Cinderella* did a tremendous job reinforcing the status quo of the domestic housewife during the 1950s. The qualities and attributes demonstrated by the main character not only applied to married women, but to women in general during the time in which the film was released. Dr. Adams concludes his article by stating, "Preparing for a business career is commendable in itself. But the career of marriage is a woman's greatest opportunity for happiness. Whether you are single or married, do not neglect or take for granted your qualifications for the role of wife."<sup>24</sup> Dr. Adam's words imply the need to practice and perform certain things associated with femaleness in order to be qualified as a wife. Discussing how gender is something that one is perpetually "becoming," Butler concludes that gender should be understood as "an incessant and repeated action of some sort."<sup>25</sup> *Cinderella* "performs" femininity daily through her actions. As she follows the mold of what her society defines as a woman, she reinstates the female gender to be defined as a maternal body, in terms of domesticity, and as being flawless in abilities, action, and appearance. Studying the film in conjunction with the time period when it was first released reflects the socially constructed acts of gender that *Cinderella* presents.

### *The Princess Brand Cinderella*

On October 4, 2005 Disney released *Cinderella* to a new generation of girls as part of its Platinum Edition DVD series. The first day in stores it sold one million copies and was coupled with 2,200 *Cinderella* consumer products such as dolls, bedding, toy cell phones, and dress up

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. Adams, "Are You Qualified for Marriage?" 22.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 112.

shoes for girls to buy and play with as part of their experience with the story.<sup>26</sup> Still, there was already a strong familiarity with Cinderella not only from previous releases to home video, but as a Princess in the Disney Princess Collection. Girls everywhere recognize her beautiful gown and delicate face. By re-releasing the classic film, the story is put at the forefront of young consumers' minds and the narrative is reintroduced to children's play. Now with a closer connection to consumer culture, girls' relationship with *Cinderella* becomes more performative than ever. Girls can act out the glamorous scenes at the ball wearing the same dress as the fictional character. They can perform the part of Cinderella with material goods and apparel reenacting the gender acts demonstrated in the original film.

Additionally, the Princess Collection has generated a handful of sequels and short stories in recent years. Looking at the way Cinderella is constructed in these new mediums reveals some of the ways her character has been modified from the 1950s ideal woman. The Disney Princess Cinderella is more focused on beauty and the body, but it is impossible to remove the nostalgia of the 1950s housewife image since domesticity and the image of being a maternal body are so intrinsically woven into the original story. Although she is different, she is still an echo of the original performance.

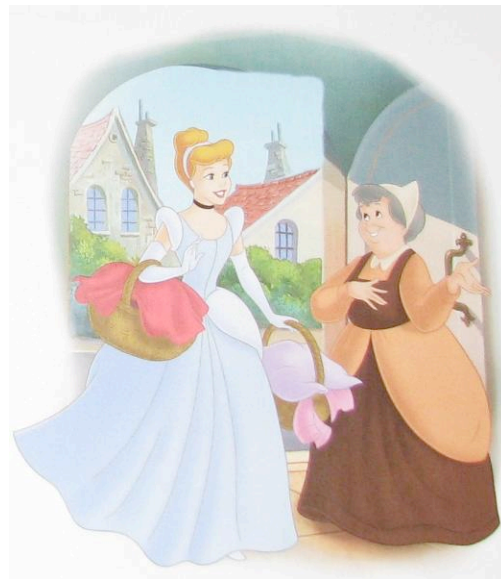
One popular Disney Princess book is called *Princess: The Essential Guide*. This book features pages and illustrations giving information about six of the Disney Princesses, such as their favorite things, what kind of clothes they wear, and who their friends are. One of Aurora's captions reads, "Her beauty is as natural as a bloom." Belle is described as "a beauty by nature as well as by name." Jasmine's hair is pointed out as being long, flowing, and like satin. On the pages featuring Cinderella the book describes, "Cinderella's golden hair is swept up on her head

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<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Netherby, "Cinderella Seems to be Cleaning Up," *Video Business*, October 10, 2005.

and she looks like a real princess.”<sup>27</sup> In this book, her appearance is very important in what defines her as a Princess. While each of the Princesses are described according to their beauty, Cinderella’s description points out certain aspects of her “look” that are specifically labeled as being “Princess.” The overall focus on outward beauty reinforces the importance of a well put together appearance as a sign of successful and glamorous womanhood.

This female definition relating to a beautiful outer appearance is also reflected in the short stories released by the Princess Collection. One such short story about Cinderella is entitled “A Royal Friend.” In this story Cinderella visits a school for girls, helps them read, brings them clothes and toys, and plans a grand ball for the young girls at the palace. Cinderella befriends a young girl named Emma who fantasizes about the glamorous life of a princess, like many of the



**Figure 2.2** – “A Royal Friend.” An illustration from a children’s picture book. Cinderella bringing food to the poor in her iconic blue gown. Courtesy of Disney Storybook Artists, “A Royal Friend,” *A Treasury of Tales* (New York: Disney Press, 2006), 201.

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<sup>27</sup> Walt Disney Productions, *Princess: The Essential Guide* (New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishers Ltd., 2004), 21.

young readers of the book. However, Cinderella teaches Emma there is more to being a princess than wearing fancy clothes and living in a castle. Together they gather food and clothing and take them to schools and orphanages. While she does charity work, her activities are still specifically domestic—working with children, providing food and clothes. Her actions correspond with traditional views of femaleness. Cinderella is also still illustrated in her usual mode of visual perfection. In every picture she is wearing her blue ball gown with her hair and makeup perfectly set (see Figure 2.2). The glamorous aspect of the Princess still supersedes any goodness Cinderella may perform in society.

The most prevalent images of Cinderella exist on posters, backpacks, T-shirts, and other merchandise that is used on a daily basis and features the Princess in her signature blue gown. The ball gown is what makes her a Princess in the eyes of the consumer. In these products Cinderella’s flawless appearance and body are exaggerated. She is disproportionately skinny to the rest of her body and showing cleavage (see Figure 2.3). Even though in some Cinderella



**Figure 2.3** – *Left to right*, “Cinderella Dreamland Party.” Picture from online catalogue, 2009. Cinderella party ware. Courtesy of Shindigz official Web site, “Decoration for a Cinderella Dreamland Party,” <http://shindigzparty.wordpress.com/2008/06/25/decorations-for-a-cinderella-dreamland-party/>; “Cinderella.” Cinderella poster, 2005. Cinderella’s idealized body shape. Courtesy of MoviePoster.com official Web site, “Disney Princess Poster,” [http://www.movieposter.com/poster/MPW-8977/Disney\\_Princesses.html](http://www.movieposter.com/poster/MPW-8977/Disney_Princesses.html).

sequels and books she prefers to wear her house rags around the castle, there is not a house rag costume for girls to purchase, nor would it likely sell as well as her ball gown. By putting on the dress, a girl adopts the outward appearance of being a Princess and does not need to worry about being “kind, smart, [or] caring” like the book *What is a Princess?* tries to present.

Though new media seems to focus more on the physical glamorous aspect of womanhood, there are still some presentations of a woman being defined as a maternal body and being linked to domesticity. Cinderella’s character was revisited in *Cinderella II: Dreams Come True*, which was released direct-to-DVD in 2002. It features three short stories, the first one centering on Cinderella, the second on Jaq the mouse, and the third on Cinderella’s step-sister Anastasia. In the first story Cinderella just returns from her honeymoon to be placed in charge of the Royal Banquet. Prince Charming and the king leave immediately for royal business putting an uptight woman named Prudence in charge of helping Cinderella prepare for the Banquet and learn how to be a princess. In this story Cinderella is still portrayed as a nurturer. She treats the mice like her children and allows them move to the palace where she continues to dress and feed them.

Though she is less blatantly painted as a maternal body, the Disney Princess Cinderella is still depicted as being in a position of powerlessness. In another Cinderella sequel, *Cinderella III: A Twist in Time*, Cinderella’s character presents femaleness similarly to the original film. In this direct-to-DVD movie released in 2007, Cinderella’s step-mother steals the fairy godmother’s wand and reverses time so that Cinderella never tried on the slipper and never married the Prince. Instead, with a flick of the wand, Cinderella’s step sister Anastasia fits in the slipper, the Prince forgets Cinderella’s existence, and Prince Charming agrees to marry Anastasia as quickly as possible. When the Prince does not remember her, Cinderella permits herself to be pulled

away and whispers, “But, it was me,” too quiet for anyone to hear. When she is arrested and put on a boat to leave the kingdom, she puts forth no resistance or physical restraint, and behaves in compliance until the Prince comes and rescues her on horseback. Cinderella later demonstrates some bravery by throwing herself in front of Anastasia to prevent her from receiving the wrath of her step-mother, but the Prince still is the one to save Cinderella by stepping in front of her with a sword. Prince Charming rescues her from peril only to place her in the role of housewife in the domestic sphere of the castle, mirroring the ending of the original film.

Her submissiveness resonates with the way women can be defined as maternal bodies by the paternal law. Butler discusses Levi-Strauss’s analysis of maternity being “a social practice required and recapitulated by the exigencies of kinship.”<sup>28</sup> Kinship, under paternal law, she argues, requires women as maternal bodies for the system to thrive. Women are needed to not only be objects of exchange, but to ensure progeny. As discussed earlier, with a reliance on the maternal body, the paternal system masks its dependency in order to maintain its power. Butler further believes that “paternal law *generates* certain desires in the form of natural drives.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of “maternal instinct” allows the female body to be oppressed and forfeit power to the Law without even realizing it.

Yet, Prince Charming plays a minimal role in the Princess Collection. He appears in new stories and films even less than in the original movie and is only mentioned in passing if at all. For the Cinderella of the 1950s, the Prince was the means to Cinderella’s end in achieving happiness. Rather, in the Princess brand, the goal of the Cinderella story replaces the Prince as the main object of desire with beauty, a nice castle, and fancy things, as Emma dreams of in “A Royal Friend.” The Prince becomes a medium for Cinderella to achieve the fancy material

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

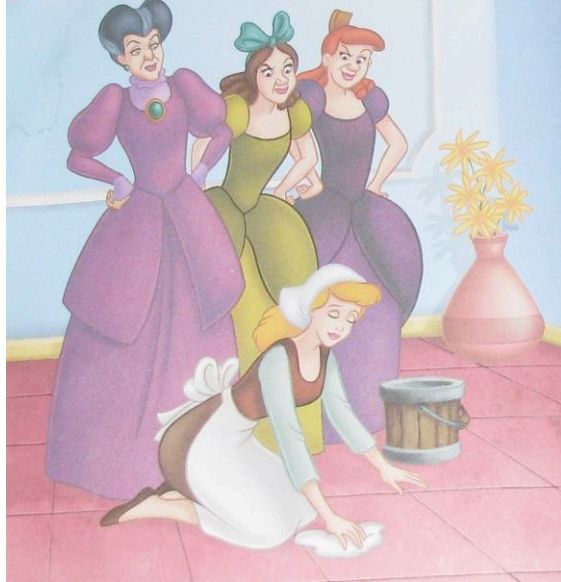
things associated with being a Princess. By marrying someone with power and money, she can not only have a glamorous lifestyle, she is entitled to it. The Disney Princess Cinderella continues to present through new media that a girl can achieve beauty and nice things by being dependent on men to give them what they want.

As with the maternal body, while domesticity is not a major focus of the Princess brand Cinderella, she is still perceived as a domestic figure. In *Cinderella II: Dreams Come True* she prefers to wear her cleaning clothes around the palace and cook for her mice friends, recalling a priority to homemaking skills. She is also put in charge of the Royal Banquet, a glorified dinner party, resonating with domesticity and keeping up with a successful husband. While there is nothing wrong with doing domestic things, Cinderella is somewhat defined by these actions and is still limited to the domestic sphere in this movie. Her identity as a female role model for those buying into her as a brand labels her in terms of domesticity whether it is acknowledged by the buyer or not.

Another example of the way Cinderella is defined in terms of domesticity in new Princess merchandise, is in the easy reader book *A Dream for a Princess*. The Cinderella story is reduced to its bare basics for young readers to follow. Though the words are simple and short, the illustrations fill in the gaps where words are lacking. For example, on one page the text reads, “Cinderella lived with her wicked Stepmother and stepsisters.”<sup>30</sup> The words do not lend us much information about why the Stepmother is wicked or what the stepsisters are like. Yet, the colorful and detailed illustration that accompanies the words show three finely dressed women looking down their noses at a fourth woman scrubbing the floor. The three women have their hands on their hips and are scowling at the woman cleaning the floor who maintains a peaceful

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30 Melissa Lagonegro, *A Dream for a Princess* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6.



**Figure 2.4** – “A Dream for a Princess.” Illustration from a children’s picture book. Cinderella scrubbing the floor while her step family watches with disdain. Courtesy of Melissa Lagonegro, *A Dream for a Princess* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6.

and gentle expression (see Figure 2.4). From this scene the reader gathers that the three women standing are the step family and Cinderella is the one scrubbing the floor.

According to Perry Nodelman’s analysis entitled “How Picture Books Work,” pictures demand an emotional involvement with the story.<sup>31</sup> The reader automatically sympathizes with Cinderella since she is the object of disdain. At the same time a feeling is evoked to look down upon the Stepmother and sisters who are not doing any work or contributing to the household in any way. Cinderella carries out her duty with peaceful resignation while they idly stand around watching her. Despite the simplicity in this book, the ideology of hard working domestic housewives is seen as positive and the way to true happiness. Cinderella achieves her dream at the end by “wearing a fancy gown,” and “dancing with the Prince!” while her step family watches with angry expressions from the sidelines. Her reward from the fairy godmother is

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31 Perry Nodelman, “How Picture Books Work,” in *Only Connect: Readings on Children’s Literature*, eds. Sheila Egoff, Gordon Stubbs, Ralph Ashley, and Wendy Sutton (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 144.



linked visually to her diligence in fulfilling her duties in the home. While this part of the story is linked to Cinderella's identity in the original film, the Cinderella image continues to carry domesticity with it that reinforces a dated image of what womanhood can be.

Through the Disney Princess brand, Cinderella is mostly a figure of glamour and beauty. However, since much of her identity stems from the 1950s, it carries with it the definition of the female body as maternal and being associated with acts of domesticity. While the long term effects of incorporating the Cinderella identity in children's play is unknown, these representations of womanhood are outdated, restrictive, and confining. As Gillis and Hollows describe, "Investing in domesticity did women an immense amount of psychological harm: the drudgery involved in doing Sisyphean housework produced fatigue and breakdown."<sup>32</sup> The labors associated with domesticity are generally repetitive, yield little reward, and offer no identity apart from manual labor. Analyzing the housewife image, Colette Dowling discusses the "Cinderella Complex," which she describes as women "waiting for something external to transform their lives."<sup>33</sup> Dowling believes that rather than risking failure, women feel safety performing domestic duties and allowing others to take responsibility for their fate. While some may disagree with such a claim, as Cinderella's character is closely intertwined with the image of a domestic housewife, the glamorous aspect of being a Princess is also tied to traditional domestic tasks. This is potentially problematic as it presents the homemaker Princess image as being a safe occupation that one assumes while waiting for their "happily ever after." Performing this image can teach girls to be passive, submit to stereotypes out of necessity, and to avoid the larger world outside.

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<sup>32</sup> Gillis and Hollows, *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Colette Dowling, *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* (New York: Summit Books, 1981), 31.

## **Ariel: The Material Girl**

*The Little Mermaid* was released in theaters November 17, 1989 during a much different era for women than when *Cinderella* was released. Women were beginning to fight using the legal system in efforts to end discrimination and sexual harassment and to secure equal pay. By 1980, fifty percent of all women worked outside the home.<sup>34</sup> Still, the 1980s was a decade that pushed to return to traditional family values as exhibited by Ronald Reagan's radio address to the nation on family. Similar wholesome family values were stressed by the George H.W. Bush administration in 1989 when *The Little Mermaid* was released. Though the women's liberation movement made some significant changes in women's rights, the second wave of feminism molded into a third-wave where the sexes become viewed as being "different" rather than inferior to each other.

At this point, the children of the second wave generation were becoming parents. Professor Jo Paoletti at the University of Maryland discusses the return to segregation of boys and girls through toys, clothes, and colors as a rebellion against the unisex phase implemented by their parents. She states, "The kids who grew up in the 1970s wanted sharp definitions for their own kids...I can understand that, because the unisex thing denied everything—you couldn't be this, you couldn't be that, you had to be a neutral nothing."<sup>35</sup> Many women chose to emphasize, for themselves as well as their children, their femininity through fashion and material goods.

During this decade a popular female figure presented herself as a role model for how women should look and act: Madonna. Similar to the way women were presented in *Ladies' Home Journal* advice column, Madonna became a ubiquitous image of femaleness in popular

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Gourley, *Ms. and the Material Girls: Perceptions of Women From the 1970s Through the 1990s* (Minneapolis: Twentieth-Century Books, 2008), 35.

<sup>35</sup> Peggy Orenstein, "What's Wrong with Cinderella?" *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 2006.

culture. Yet, Madonna was troublesome to many feminists who had worked hard to erase the idea that women were sexual objects. But others felt that the work of the women's liberation movement allowed women such as Madonna to express their sexuality openly and freely without feeling ashamed of it as women had in the past. While people could not agree who the real Madonna was, that was part of her appeal. She changed her image according to her mood and desires. Her shift in personas with different costumes, poses, speech, and body language were related specifically to a gender identity she was trying to convey. This resonates with Butler's description of "[s]uch acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means."<sup>36</sup>

Madonna's different acts of being female had no internal origin as demonstrated by her multiple images and shifts throughout her career. Each makeover presents a new definition of womanhood which she generates on a surface level. She not only performs as a singer, dancer, and actress, but as a woman presenting sexuality, desire, and orientation. Looking at the effect Madonna had on the public during the 1980s, the carefree and bold icon attracted many young "Wanna Be's," who dressed and presented their bodies just like her. She also started to be referred to as the "Material Girl," after one of her successful songs featured on her *Like a Virgin* album, demonstrating how such a performance of femaleness is tied to consumerism and material objects.

I propose that *The Little Mermaid* reflects a similar type of female character. Rather than emphasizing ideal maternal and domestic qualities like Cinderella, Ariel exemplifies the

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 37.

Material Girl image set forth by Madonna in the “Material Girl” music video.<sup>37</sup> Discussing the Material Girl image, I look specifically at the character that Madonna plays in the video, as opposed to looking at Madonna the person or the persona she exuded in the public eye.<sup>38</sup> Her character’s image presents the defining characteristics of the female gender in terms of materialism, her body, and sexuality. Looking at how Ariel encompasses the qualities of a Material Girl as associated with Madonna’s “Material Girl” music video, gives us an idea about how Ariel is presented to young girls today in the Disney Princess brand.

### *Materialism*

Journalist Peter Jennings refers to the United States in the 1980s as “a culture of money and glitz. Wealth and its excess became a public fascination.”<sup>39</sup> The growing materialism of the decade is reflected by Madonna in the 1984 song, “Material Girl,” which declares she is only interested in men with money. The music video depicts Madonna in the likeness of Marilyn Monroe’s performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.<sup>40</sup> She is surrounded by men in tuxedos trying to win her over with expensive jewelry, which she selectively takes. In another episode in the video, Madonna is being pursued by a powerful movie executive who pretends to be poor and wins her over by giving her hand cut flowers and taking her out in an old truck. While the words say things such as, “cause the boy

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<sup>37</sup> There already exists much scholarship on Madonna. Rather than going into a discussion about her specifically, I will be using the “Material Girl” music video as an anecdote against which to read *The Little Mermaid*.

<sup>38</sup> For a differentiation between person, persona, and character, see Michael L. Quinn, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 6. 22 (1990): 154-161

<sup>39</sup> Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster, *The Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 480.

<sup>40</sup> Madonna, Perf., “Material Girl,” Peter Brown and Robert Rans, *Like a Virgin*, Sire Records, Music Video, Dir. Mary Lambert, Limelight Productions, 1985.

with the cold hard cash is always mister right,”<sup>41</sup> the music video demonstrates her attempts to poke fun at the growing materialism and greed of the 1980s. Her message might be that while material things are nice, love cannot be bought. However, for many, the lingering message suggests contradictory things. *Time Magazine’s* John Skow describes a concert performance of the “Material Girl” song:

Luxuriating in materialism, poking fun at greediness—she is performing for adolescents who feel deprived if their cars don't have quadraphonic cassette players—Madonna is singing that she is available to the highest bidder, then denying that. And at the end, she pulls wads of fake banknotes out of the top of her dress and tosses them all to the audience. Do the Wanna Be's see materialism glorified here, or mocked? Of course, they see both, and see no contradiction.<sup>42</sup>

The Material Girl image that emerges includes both the glorification and mockery of materialism that Skow describes. A Material Girl wants everything: power, love, money, and all the nice things that come with money, but also reserves the right to be disgusted by it all.

Madonna and the Material Girl image resonate with the way Ariel is depicted in *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel’s main concern seems to be material objects. She goes to dangerous lengths to acquire artifacts from the human world. The song “Part of Your World” describes Ariel’s fascination with her material possessions, “Look at this stuff isn’t it neat / Wouldn’t you think my collection’s complete?”<sup>43</sup> Yet, while she realizes others might view her as a “girl who has everything,” she is not content. She “wants more.” With the song set in her treasure trove

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Brown and Robert Rans, Perf. by Madonna, “Material Girl,” *Like a Virgin*, Sire Warner Brothers, CD, 1984.

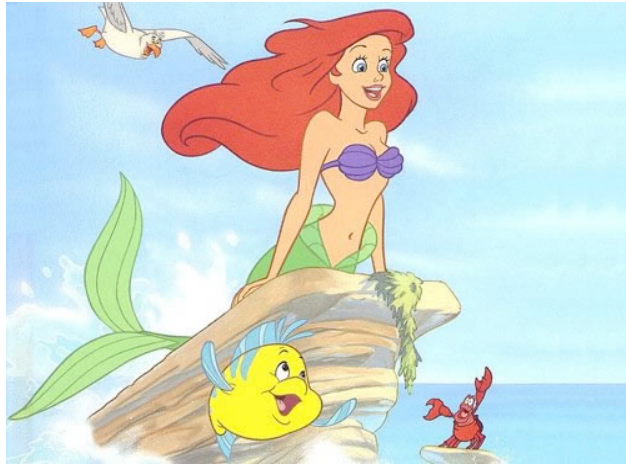
<sup>42</sup> John Skow, “Madonna Rocks the Land,” *Time Magazine* 125 (1985), 78.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Menkin and Howard Ashman, Performed by Jodi Benson, “Part of Your World,” *The Little Mermaid* Soundtrack, CD, Walt Disney Records, 1989.

with dark blue tinting, the atmosphere becomes engaging and soothing with just enough sun light overhead to call attention to the world of objects waiting to be had. The human or material world seems alluring. Ariel desires to be part of the wealthy, material world above her, the world Madonna's character is flaunting with diamonds and furs in the music video. Yearning for more forces her to make sacrifices later that compromise her safety, but she is determined to get what she wants. Ariel's behavior justifies the impulse to buy and seek after material objects. She defies her father and continues to pursue humans and human objects. She helps define the "I want more lifestyle" as rebellious and dangerous, but also desirable. Audience members are also reaffirmed in their own materialistic urges since they see someone desiring their lives and things.

Looks and appearance become important for Ariel. When she approaches an unconscious Eric she becomes transfixed on his face and sighs, "He's so beautiful." He becomes another material object for her to add to her collection. She begins to pursue him aggressively, which is a very modern representation of womanhood. First she just plans to swim around his castle to get his attention, but once she has a run in with her father she puts her soul on the line with Ursula to pursue her latest curiosity or obsession with the human world.

The Material Girl is also presented as being in control and speaking her own mind. As Madonna's character walks out on her rich boyfriend and controls the action as men follow her around, she breaks the female image of submissiveness found in *Cinderella*. Likewise, Ariel's character is painted as a rebellious figure asserting independence. She saves Eric from drowning, going against traditional fairy tales where the Prince rescues the Princess. She becomes empowered by the knowledge that Eric is being manipulated into marrying Ursula and swims after the ship on which they are board. Her character is portrayed as making assertions that reflect her determination to tread new paths. She sings loudly, waves swelling behind her,



**Figure 2.5** – “Part of Your World.” Photo still from *The Little Mermaid*, 1989. Ariel depicted like a swim suit model. Courtesy of DisneyPrincess.net, “Ariel,” <http://www.disneyprincesspicture.net/princess-ariel.html>.

posing on a rock like a cover of *Sports Illustrated* (see Figure 2.5), “Watch and you’ll see / Someday I’ll be / Part of your world.”<sup>44</sup> The end of the movie also depicts her character asserting independence when she leaves the mer-kingdom.

At the same time, the glitz and glamour of the human world easily distract Ariel. She forgets about the concert at which she was supposed to sing because she was pursuing human artifacts, also showing her lack of maturity and responsibility. She ignores her father’s rules and restrictions about staying away from humans since they merely spoil her fun. Sebastian’s song “Under the Sea” is a plea for her to consider that ocean life is just as exciting as life on land. There are already “such wonderful things around [her].” Ariel leaves before Sebastian finishes his song, not wanting to hear words of advice contrary to her desires. Her rebellious attitude reflects a selfish mind frame. By becoming human at the hand of Ursula, she was only thinking about herself and not how her father, the mer-kingdom, or her friends Sebastian and Flounder might be affected.

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<sup>44</sup> Menkin and Ashman, “Part of Your World (Reprise).”

Just as Madonna's character is forced to choose between the non material world and the world of wealth, Ariel is forced to choose between her life as a mermaid and joining Eric as a human. While Ariel truly loves Eric, he also represents all the material things she has been craving. Ariel's choice to live above the sea reflects the idea that materialism paves the way to happiness for the rebellious and freedom seeking woman.

### *Body*

The Material Girl's body is on display for people to admire. Dressed as Marilyn Monroe, Madonna draws attention to her voluptuous figure, which was seen as being in opposition to the desirable skinny, yet toned body type of the day. Her body helped establish a female identity: being out of step with the times, self loving, and intrinsically sexy. Discussing how the idea of interiority moves to gender performance, Butler observes, "The figure of the interior soul understood as 'within' the body is signified through its inscription *on* the body."<sup>45</sup> Though Madonna continually reshaped her body throughout her career (see Figure 2.6), in "The Material



**Figure 2.6** – *Left to right*, "Boy Toy." Photo from MTV Awards, 1984. Dressed "like a virgin"; "Madonna as Marlon Brando." Publicity photo, 1991. More toned and trim. Both images courtesy of *NY Daily News*, "Madonna's Biceps a Retrospective," Celebrity Photos, [http://www.nydailynews.com/gossip/galleries/beyond\\_fit\\_at\\_50/beyond\\_fit\\_at\\_50.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/gossip/galleries/beyond_fit_at_50/beyond_fit_at_50.html).

<sup>45</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 135.



Girl” music video, her body was a type of rebellion, an external manifestation of what was perceived to be an inner core. The essence of her free spirit was written upon the surface or shape of her body.

Ariel’s body is similarly on display in *The Little Mermaid*. However, since Ariel’s body is drawn by animators, it can not only possess the desirable curves of Madonna’s rebellious body, but it can also be made tight and skinny. Depicted as wearing nothing more than a shell bra, the animators draw attention to Ariel’s breasts, slender waistline, hips, and belly button. During “Part of Your World” Ariel moves and sways as she sings about her desire to be human. By depicting her from behind, the camera focuses on her sashaying hips by framing them in the center of the screen while she sings, “Strolling along down the... what’s that word again? Street.” Her body is an unrealistic and unachievable creation of the female body, which is displayed for viewers to aspire to and admire, but never hope to achieve.

Ariel demonstrates a confidence with her body even after she is transformed from being a mermaid. As Scuttle reminds her, “The first thing you got to do is dress like [a human].” Using rope and a sail from a boat, she fashions a ridiculous outfit that still manages to show off her legs and body. She pulls her hair back in a flirty way and sways her hips back and forth to cabaret flavored background music. The music itself reflects a burlesque house objectification where women use their bodies to present a desirable image of female sexuality for men. Scuttle even encourages her by giving her a wolf whistle. Ariel’s performance relates to what Butler says, “gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices.”<sup>46</sup> Femaleness is defined differently by culture and society, requiring various sets of actions. In this instance, Ariel is playing the part of the desirable female

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<sup>46</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

human as she understands it: someone who flaunts her body and sexuality in order to succeed in the material world. Butler further addresses that the female body is marked in a way that the male body is not. There are “cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity.”<sup>47</sup> While the male body is often perceived as the Universal, its association with the mind allows it to be free from the defining constraints and limitations of the human body. The female body, on the other hand becomes a “defining and limiting essence”<sup>48</sup> and Ariel’s identity is limited by her gendered body, which can get more attention than her mind. The film furthers this notion by removing Ariel’s voice altogether. Her thought and intelligence are diminished in importance and her body becomes her only sign of identity while on land.

Though, Madonna can continually reshape and control the way her body looks, Ariel cannot reshape her body without magic or, ultimately the permission of her father. Her body is controlled by patriarchal powers who not only determine what is acceptable, but who also use her body as an object of exchange. King Triton gives Ariel to Prince Eric almost as a peace offering, similar to exchanges between kinship tribes. As Butler describes, “The woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity.”<sup>49</sup> Her body and identity are not her own. Her body becomes a symbol of the union of two worlds, binding mermaids with humans.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

## *Sexuality*

History scholar Catherine Gourley addresses the change in the way women were viewed during this era by stating, “By the 1980s, sexiness had replaced innocence as a desired female characteristic.”<sup>50</sup> The ideal woman was now perceived as a sexual being. As Madonna is physically passed around by men who handle and fondle her body in “The Material Girl” music video, she is presented as an object of lust. The choreography even has men in tuxedos gyrating while facing Madonna, who is the only female in the video with the exception of a few blurry extras in the background. While Madonna’s character seems to be in control, her power over the men seems to be a sexual power. She sings, “Some boys kiss me, some boys hug me / I think they’re O.K. / If they don’t give me proper credit / I just walk away.”<sup>51</sup> The “proper credit” seems to be jewelry and money symbolizing her worth and serving as payment in exchange for sex. As she flirts with the men and plays hard to get, she caresses and leans in to kiss some of them, only to pull away once she has taken a ring off of their finger or pulled money out of their pockets. She continues, “Experience has made me rich / And now they’re after me.” Her “experience” is sexual experience, which makes her desirable to men who fall at her feet at the possibility of having sex with her.

Madonna’s Material Girl image as a sexual being resonates again with the way Ariel is depicted. She is not only dressed revealingly, but as a mermaid she represents a sexual fantasy dating back to early sea mythology and folklore. Many cultures have mermaid myths telling of either a mermaid’s malevolence or her generosity, but always conveying her beauty and

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<sup>50</sup> Catherine Gourley, *Ms. and the Material Girls: Perceptions of Women from the 1970s through the 1990s* (Minneapolis: Twentieth-Century Books, 2008), 78.

<sup>51</sup> Brown and Rans, “Material Girl,” CD.

enchantment.<sup>52</sup> The Syrian goddess of land and sea, Atargatis, is often depicted as a woman from the waist up and a fish from the waist down. She is associated with fish as a symbol of fertility and life of the sea.<sup>53</sup> Some believe that mermaids are the creation of seamen, having been deprived of female company, wanting to believe they saw a tempting female sea creature. The Marine Bio Society describes a mermaid as “a figure of eroticism mixed with fear”<sup>54</sup> who uses the mystery of her female allurements to tempt human men. Similarly, Dorothy Dinnerstein describes, “The treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representation of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom.”<sup>55</sup> Within these references, words such as “eroticism,” “seductive,” and “lures” imply the mermaid uses the temptation or possibility of sex to captivate men.

When Ariel does take human form, the animators draw her naked silhouette being brought to the surface where she emerges from the water to take her first breath of air like a skinny dipper in an adult magazine. In slow motion, her wet hair is heavily tossed from forward to back and her lower back is arched to emphasize her female curves. Ariel’s fascination with her legs corresponds with her sexual desires as well. She can now have a reciprocal physical relationship with a man. Ariel’s sexually charged behavior is also forward compared to the way Disney’s Princesses were depicted in earlier years. After saving Eric from the ocean she pulls him to land and drapes herself on top of his body in a sexually aggressive and dominating position. Wearing seashells, a sort of fantastical lingerie, she caresses his face while he moans

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<sup>52</sup> Celtic folk tales tell of mermaids sharing medicine and healing powers, whereas other European tales depict mermaids leading human men underwater to their death. See Vincent Carlucci, “The Legend of the Mermaid,” *Beautiful Mermaid Art*, <http://www.beautiful-mermaid-art.com/legend-of-the-mermaid.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Thalia Took, “Atargatis,” *Obscure Goddess Online Dictionary*, <http://www.thaliatook.com/OGOD/atargatis.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Marine Bio Society, “Ocean Mysteries,” <http://marinebio.org/Oceans/Mysteries/>.

<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 5.

and touches her hands. Even by taking on human form, she exerts a sexual forwardness about the freedom to be intimate with a male. Ariel's fully developed and mature body, drawn to look much older than sixteen, is a tool used for achieving fulfillment through sexual acts.

Yet, within this performance of sexuality, Ariel is still categorized as a sexual being in her relation to men. Ariel becomes fixated on Prince Eric. The standards of gender identity relate to sexual practice and desire, falling in line with compulsory heterosexuality. The villain of *The Little Mermaid* further depicts noncompliance with this system as being evil. With Ursula's deep voice differing from the high pitches of Ariel, she demonstrates a masculine persona that does not coincide with ideal heterosexual femininity. Yet, Ursula also knows the importance of performing to present one's gender. During "Poor Unfortunate Souls," Ursula tells Ariel how to be a woman by fixing one's hair, doing one's makeup, and shimmying and shaking using body language. Discussing drag as gender parody, Butler comments on the notion of an original gender identity, "as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences."<sup>56</sup> Those who do not comply or perform their gender adequately are punished somewhat by society.

In fact, the character of Ursula was modeled after the drag queen Divine with the voice of Pat Carroll, both known for cross-dressing roles.<sup>57</sup> Butler further discusses the humor of gender parody by saying it "...reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin."<sup>58</sup> Drag performance deconstructs the idea that an origin of gender exists. As Madonna demonstrates in the performance of sexual desire, gender constitutes certain acts and different presentations of one's self with the recognition that the performance is not a

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<sup>56</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Sells, "Where Do Mermaids Stand?" in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 182.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

“true” gender identity. Drag also calls attention to the performance of gender since the qualities that define gender change with time. Butler states, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.”<sup>59</sup> Viewing Ursula as a potential drag character, she demonstrates the presentational outward nature of gender. Yet in Disney’s traditionally structured world, Ursula threatens traditional sexuality and is therefore represented as evil. Ursula demonstrates the performative nature of gender and the need to work within the system to succeed. She is the only character who is content with her body even though she is presented as ugly. Further, her ugliness downplays her confidence as someone who resists compulsory heterosexuality.

Despite Ariel’s bold female personality, she is depicted as still needing strong patriarchal figures in her life to fix her problems. Eric kills Ursula and King Triton turns her permanently into a human. Her independence in the material world does not resign her to domesticity, but rather places her in a heterosexual nuclear family where she still plays an updated version of ideal womanhood. By depicting Ariel as a woman in terms of materialism, her body, and sexuality much like Madonna in “The Material Girl” music video, the movie can appeal to the similar “Wanna Be” masses, but *The Little Mermaid* also tames the image as it ultimately falls in line with traditional gender roles.

### *The Princess Brand Ariel*

Ariel has, like Cinderella, been re-popularized through merchandising and new media as part of the Disney Princess brand. The Platinum Edition of *The Little Mermaid* was released

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

October 3, 2006 in the midst of the Princess Phenomenon. Girls everywhere are drawn to her fantastical appeal. One mother tells me, “The girls always fight over who gets to be Ariel when they play together. They all like her because she swims.”<sup>60</sup> She not only swims, but she breaks the rules of reality more than any other Princess because she is not always human. While Ariel’s character in the original Disney film desires to leave the ocean and become human, much of Ariel’s appeal for young girls lies in leaving the human world and becoming a mermaid. In fact, the Princess Collection seems to have a difficult time deciding whether Ariel should be depicted as a human or as a mermaid in their merchandise. For many Halloweens the only Ariel costume available was a mermaid, yet in order to remain consistent with other Princesses in ball gowns or wedding dresses, she is more recently presented as human on occasion. Now there are a few Ariel Princess brand dresses available, though they are difficult to find. It seems she is more popular and fun to dress up as when she is a mermaid. New *The Little Mermaid* media, such as DVD sequels and additional story books, reflect the mermaid desire and present Ariel as a fantasized model of what it means to be female. Looking at this new media Ariel continues to be presented as a female model for young girls to mimic in terms of materialism, her body, and sexuality.

The preoccupation with materialism demonstrated in the *The Little Mermaid* continues in *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*. In this direct to home video sequel released in 2000 and again as a Special Edition in December 16, 2008, the story revolves around Ariel’s daughter Melody who is an awkward human princess obsessed with the world under the sea. When Melody was a baby Ursula’s sister Morgana threatened her, so Ariel and Eric go to great lengths to protect her. This includes building a wall between the ocean and the castle, forbidding

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<sup>60</sup> Laura Jones, phone interview, April 2, 2009.

Melody to swim in the ocean, and not telling Melody the truth of Ariel's origins. Still, Melody is approached by Morgana who promises to turn her into a mermaid permanently if she brings her King Triton's trident. Unaware of her relation to King Triton, Melody sets off as a temporary mermaid to the mermaid kingdom which is referred to in this movie as Atlantica. When Ariel discovers her daughter is missing, she has King Triton turn her back into a mermaid to search for Melody. Rather than collecting human treasures behind the backs of her parents, Melody collects treasures of the sea. She states, "How could there be anything wrong with something so wonderful"<sup>61</sup> resonating with Ariel's words in *The Little Mermaid* "How could a world that makes so many wonderful things be bad?"<sup>62</sup> A locket with a hologram of Atlantica, sparks her desire to investigate the sea, demonstrating the value she places on material objects and obtaining new things.

The integration of the consumer lifestyle leads to selfish behavior. Melody goes out to sea by herself to seek answers. She agrees to steal King Triton's trident in an unknown place. She breaks rules and ignores her own safety. Melody mocks Ariel's rules, "It is expressly forbidden for you to be swimming beyond the safety of the sea wall." Later as Melody hands the villain, Morgana, King Triton's trident she defiantly says, "too late, Mom." The film revolves around mother issues, something most Disney Princess movies do not explore since the mother figure is usually dead. Yet, here the teenage rebellious attitude against the mother is magnified not only through Melody's character, but Morgana who bitterly says, "that's all my mother did was criticize. Why can't you be more like Ursula?" She relates to Melody by saying, "You're not the only one with a mother who doesn't understand."<sup>63</sup> Morgana also promises to

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<sup>61</sup> *The Little Mermaid II*, DVD.

<sup>62</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, DVD.

<sup>63</sup> *The Little Mermaid II*, DVD.



grant Melody permanent status as a mermaid. Melody engages in defiant behavior to get her own way. She is a rebellious and curious individual who does not seek the guidance or wisdom of anyone who has something to say that she does not want to hear. While Melody is not technically one of the Disney Princesses, in this story released as a part of the Princess brand, both Melody and Ariel serve as models of Disney Princesses for girls to follow. Melody stands in Ariel's place for most of the movie while she is a mermaid and mirroring her mother's behavior from the original film. Yet, Melody is not kind, smart, caring, or polite—all generic Princess traits that would make her a more redeeming role model. At the end of the movie she does apologize to her mother, but Ariel quickly replies, “Oh, no, *we're* sorry. We should have told you the truth.” The blame is reverted to the parents and Melody takes no responsibility for the disastrous events that transpired.

The value on objects is also seen in *The Little Mermaid: Ariel's Beginning*, a prequel introduced direct to DVD on August 26, 2008. The movie shows what life was like when Ariel was young and her mother Queen Athena was alive. King Triton, Queen Athena, and their seven daughters live happily in Atlantica, which is filled with music and laughter. One day the mermaids are relaxing above water when a ship comes. Queen Athena is killed. Heartbroken, King Triton bans all music in Atlantica since it reminds him of his beloved wife. The story skips ahead ten years to a time when Ariel and her sisters are distanced from their father and raised by a governess named Marina Del Rey, who aspires for power within the kingdom. In this movie, it is revealed that Ariel's mother, Queen Athena's appreciation for material objects caused her demise. Sebastian describes King Triton's love of his wife and said, “he took every opportunity to show her,” meaning he gave her gifts and presents as he was depicted handing her a music box. When a boat comes near the mermaids, Athena dives to rescue her music box, which is a

symbol of her husband's love, but also a demonstration of her attachment to material objects as she loses her life trying to retrieve it.

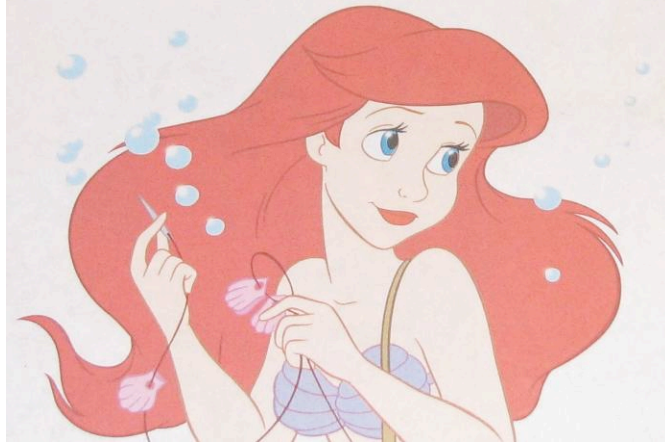
Not only is materialism reflected in *The Little Mermaid: Ariel's Beginning*, but Ariel is also depicted demonstrating rebellious behavior associated with being a Material Girl. She runs away from home after breaking some friends out of prison who were caught playing music. She does not accept the way things are and tries to achieve her own desire, which is to get music back into the kingdom. She constantly talks back to her father and questions him asking, "But why?" She naturally assumes her way is the right way, another example of feeling entitled.

Similarly, in *Watch Out, Ariel! (A Story About Paying Attention)* Ariel is preoccupied with herself most of the story. This story book featuring Ariel was released as part of the Disney Princess Collection. The plot is simple for young readers to follow. Busy daydreaming about being human, she bumps into an octopus, fails to hear Sebastian ask to borrow seashells, forgets directions because she was not paying close enough attention, nearly gets stung by sea anemone, and gets sprayed by a squid ruining the plants she has already picked to decorate for a party. Her daydreaming behavior becomes selfish as she ignores others.

Yet, the illustrations in *Watch Out, Ariel!* portray her dreamy far off looks that lead to accidents, as making her exceptionally beautiful (see Figure 2.7). When she stops paying attention to the task at hand she is drawn with softened features. Her hair becomes extra full and wavy at those particular moments, she possesses a coy smile, and there is particular emphasis on her large blue eyes. Her careless behavior is presented as attractive. Further, once she realizes she disappointed people she asks herself, "*What would a princess do?*"<sup>64</sup> By acting like a

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<sup>64</sup> Jacqueline A. Ball, *Watch Out Ariel! (A Story About Paying Attention)* (Danbury, CT: Scholastic Inc.), 2002.



**Figure 2.7** – “Watch Out Ariel.” Illustration from a children’s picture book. Ariel’s far off look. Courtesy of Jacqueline A. Ball, *Watch Out Ariel! (A Story About Paying Attention)* (Danbury, CT: Scholastic Inc.), 2002.

“Princess,” Ariel resolves all conflict in the story. The book establishes that Princesses are models of how a young girl should act. Yet, Ariel is a Princess all along. She gets to decide what will fix the problem and her behavior throughout the entire story defines what a Princess is.

One recurring trend in these stories that define Ariel’s character is that there are no consequences for her materialistic, selfish, and rebellious behavior. At the end of *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*, Melody, who functions as a younger version of Ariel still gets what she wants with no punishment for running away. Similarly in *The Little Mermaid: Ariel’s Beginning*, Ariel succeeds in getting her father to allow music back to the kingdom and everyone is happy about it. The authority figure, or older generation, is wrong and she gets her way without consequences. Even though she is thoughtless to others in *Watch Out Ariel*, the ending is quick and barely acknowledges that she made any mistakes. Out of the thirty-two pages of the book, only the last five show Ariel trying to resolve the trouble she has made. While Ariel is presented as a modern character, she still demonstrates immaturity that goes unpunished in the world of the Princesses, but that would not necessarily be rewarded in the real world. These stories posit the idea that the young Material Girl is almost always right, her parents are out of

step with the times, and a “Princess” will eventually always get her way by virtue of who she is: someone entitled to define right and wrong. By adopting Ariel’s identity through consumerism, something Ariel also embraces, the Princess identity can present challenging views about the consequences and effects of a person’s behavior.

The Disney Princess brand not only presents Ariel as a model for female behavior in terms of materialism, but also in terms of her female body. In *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* Ariel’s body is depicted as looking exactly the way it did when she was sixteen, even though this film takes place twelve years in the future after Ariel has had a baby. Her beauty as a human and a mermaid present outward beauty as an important trait in the Disney Princess brand, where beauty is defined as being young, small waisted, and curvy. Princesses’ bodies cannot get older or else they lose their appeal. The focus on maintaining a perfect body and outer appearance is also seen in *The Little Mermaid: Ariel’s Beginning* where Ariel and her sisters delight in their physical beauty and go to their vanities first thing in the morning to beautify themselves. In this movie, Ariel is younger and less experienced than she is in the original movie, yet her body is still drawn to have the same mature figure that she has later on. Her body, whether old or young, is depicted in the same idealized shape that becomes part of her iconic look in the Disney Princess brand.

Similarly in *Watch Out, Ariel!* the illustrations portray her stereotypical desirable female body. As she is lost in her daydreams the pictures show her back arched or her hips bumped to the side, drawing attention to her feminine figure, which she uses to draw attention to herself. Her torso is bare with exaggerated cleavage that is more apparent than in any film depicting Ariel. As unrealistic as it is to maintain the same perfect appearance and shape throughout all stages of one’s life, Ariel is presented to girls in this fashion.

Ariel also continues to present womanhood in terms of sexuality. Most of the new stories are set in the ocean, recalling Ariel's mermaid status as a sexual being. Melody is clumsy in her body as a human princess. At her own birthday party she falls into the cake while dancing with a young boy. She tells Ariel, "Mom, I'm the princess of disaster." She feels more comfortable in the water and tells Morgana that, "I don't want to go back to being a regular girl." Still, Melody was never just a "regular girl." She was born a princess, which demonstrates the appeal of the exotic sea as being more enticing than the human world above. Yet, the mermaid fantasy, as innocent as it may be for young girls, fulfills a sexualized fantasy for adults. Commonly featured in fantasy and science fiction as a beautiful and enticing creature, the mermaid often allures men with her bare torso. The "Mermaid Problem," as it is commonly titled, refers to the difficulty in having sexual intercourse with a mermaid due to the fact she lacks female genitalia. Stories deal with this problem in differing ways—fins splitting open to reveal genitalia, turning into human at will, possessing sexual organs similar to a dolphin in the navel. Others believe the mermaid is a symbol of an unachievable desire. As young girls adopt the sexualized representation of Ariel as a mermaid it creates a feeling of pedophilia. It places girls in a sexually desirable position—literally, a desire that cannot, or at least should not, be had.

The Disney Princess brand also continues to depict noncompliance with traditional heterosexuality as being evil. Morgana is voiced by Pat Carroll, the same woman known for drag roles who voiced Ursula. Morgana is also a power seeking single woman. Not part of a nuclear family or distinguishably heterosexual, she is the villain and does not achieve any success in the world of the movie.

The compliance with heterosexual norms is also seen in the short story "Ariel and the Sea-Horse Race." In this story Ariel wants to compete in a sea-horse race, but her father says,

“It’s a dangerous competition—for mer-men! No mermaid has ever competed.”<sup>65</sup> Knowing Triton will never change his mind, she defiantly disobeys him and decides to dress up as a boy so she can compete. While Ariel works against the restrictions of a patriarchal society to win the sea horse race, she is still presented as feminine while cross dressing so as not to present any question about her “true” gender. Her efforts to perform the part of the opposite sex consist mostly of tucking her hair under a helmet and wearing her father’s old racing uniform. The illustrations depict the costume as being tailored to her feminine figure despite the fact that her father’s jacket would not have been so form fitting since King Triton has a very large masculine build (see Figure 2.8). There is also really no attempt to hide her made up face. While performing the part of boy, she continues to perform the part of girl, yet in this case both parts consist of outward markers of gender. In order to maintain Ariel’s identity as a feminine



**Figure 2.8** – “Ariel and the Sea-Horse Race.” Illustration from a children’s picture book. Ariel pretending to be a boy. Courtesy of Disney Storybook Artists, “Ariel and the Sea-Horse Race,” *Happily Ever After Stories: Tales of Love and Friendship* (New York: Disney Press, 2007), 5-14.

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<sup>65</sup> Disney Storybook Artists, “Ariel and the Sea-Horse Race,” *Happily Ever After Stories: Tales of Love and Friendship* (New York: Disney Press, 2007), 5-14.

character falling in line with heterosexual roles, she could not be anything but a girl even when she was pretending to be a boy in the story.

Through new *The Little Mermaid* media, Ariel is presented as a modern reflection of the ideal woman. Mysterious and fantastical as a mermaid, her appeal carries with it a definition of womanhood as being associated with materialism, the female body, and sexuality. As a model of femaleness, Ariel is troublesome for children and adults alike. Her female definition presents the Princess brand Ariel as being associated with selfish and self-consuming behavior. She is also objectified, rude, and acts entitled.

Both Cinderella and Ariel represent ideals associated with gender from the times in which their films were originally released. Butler describes such performances of gender ideals as “acts, gestures, and desire[s] [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produces this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.”<sup>66</sup> Doing these acts creates a surface female identity that changes as society changes. While society has moved beyond domestic ideals to some extent, it still has not been able to eradicate the Material Girl image for young girls. Though Madonna’s 1980s image is gone, today preschool girls identify with others who have followed in her footsteps such as Britney Spears and Hannah Montana. These icons demonstrate similar behaviors that these girls imitate, but that center on merchandising. Continuing to present Ariel as a Material Girl promotes the desire to buy and spend money on branded products.

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<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

Demonstrated in the Disney Princess brand, the performance of gender is tied to consumerism. As Butler points out, there is no origin for certain gender traits; they are societal structures that are reinforced and masked by the purported innocence of children's entertainment and toys. Even as new media attempts to present the Princesses as more virtuous and desirable women, past ideologies about what it means to be an ideal woman become reintroduced as acceptable social beliefs today. Behind Disney's definition of a Princess lies a consumerist agenda. Henry Giroux points out that "children are growing up in a world shaped by a visual culture under the control of a handful of megacorporations that influence much of what young people learn."<sup>67</sup> As both old and new media reflect troubling ideologies of what it means to be female, the Disney Princesses serve as models, presenting certain acts for girls to perform and explore in play.

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 166.



## CHAPTER 3

### **Gender Identity and Consumerism: Interaction with Live Princesses at Disneyland**

*By creating environments and narratives through which spectators/consumers are interpolated into fictions produced and marketed in both shows and stores, entertainment and retail based corporations allow bodies to inhabit commodities and so suggest that commodities, in turn, can be brought to life.*

—Maurya Wickstrom, “Making Americans”

While there are varying degrees of engagement with the Disney Princess brand, one usually begins as a spectator watching a Princess film. With a movie as a starting point, girls can then delve further into the brand through play and by engaging with Princess products. Yet, there is another level of participation with Disney Princesses that occurs when girls interact with live Princesses. Gender in the performance of the live Princesses is presented in a way similar to the films, yet instead of watching a cartoon character drawn by an illustrator, the model of Princess is presented in human form with which one can converse. The actresses putting on Princess costumes become extensions of the characters in the movies, further adopting and presenting gender in limited ways.

Interacting with live Princesses at a theme park or paid event has a different impact on participants than the experience of watching a Princess movie or reading a Princess book. Steve

Wurtzler states that, “the live comes to stand for a category completely outside representation.”<sup>1</sup> An actress is not playing a character for others to watch as mere spectators. To some extent, the live interaction with fictional characters makes those characters seem real. It creates a community by encouraging participation from the audience, inviting them to enter and internalize the world being explored. This can further lead to audience members dressing up in costume and presenting the persona on their own.

Discussing the popularity of events where audience members interact with performers, Peter Marks wrote in the *New York Times* that “in the age of cable and computers, audiences yearn for tangible connections.”<sup>2</sup> The act of meeting with live characters and interacting as part of their world creates a connection for consumers to the Princess brand similar to a meaningful human relationship. After spending three days at Disneyland, I observed that live performances of Disney Princesses aid in the creation of girls’ gender identity by presenting codified acts of gender, creating a shared community, contributing to the homogenization of girlhood, and by presenting an idealized view of the world. As this interactive theatrical experience invites girls to become active participants in the Disney Princess brand, gender identity and exploration becomes tied to consumerism.

### **The Disney Princess Experience**

Experiences interacting with live Disney Princesses exist on a large scale with increasing popularity. The Grand Floridian Resort hosts a “Perfectly Princess Tea Party” where girls drink tea, eat cake, and meet Aurora while wearing their own tiara. Cinderella’s castle at Disney

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Wurtzler, “She Sang Live, but the Microphone Was Turned Off: the Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation,” in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Marks, “When the Audience Joins the Cast,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1997.

World also features a restaurant where patrons are visited by different Disney Princesses. The restaurant experience is so popular that seats sell out within minutes of becoming available and it is recommended that people call 180 days in advance to make a reservation.<sup>3</sup> Belle hosts story time in Fairy Tale Garden. At Epcot, people can meet Snow White in Germany, Belle in France, Jasmine in Morocco, and Sleeping Beauty near International Gateway. Further, Disney Cruises provide meet and greet opportunities with Disney Princesses. There are also independent contractors who can be hired to visit birthday parties, other private events, and companies with “Princesses” who call children on their birthday. However, for the purposes of this chapter I draw mostly upon my own observations from a recent visit to Disneyland that took place February 12-14, 2009. I will be discussing two main attractions that make up the Princess experience there: The Princess Fantasy Faire Walk and Ariel’s Grotto Restaurant. Both of these attractions provide opportunities to interact with live Disney Princesses and foster a creation of gender identity attached to merchandise.

### *The Princess Fantasy Faire Walk*

The children walking the paths in Disneyland’s Fantasyland seem to be younger than elsewhere in the park, and wear more elaborate costuming as well. One major attraction of this area in Disneyland is the “Disney Princess Fantasy Faire,” where girls wait in line for as long as an hour to go through the “Princess Walk” and meet their favorite Disney Princesses. There are only three Princesses in the Walk at any given time and they rotate in and out throughout the day, including: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine. Pocahontas and

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<sup>3</sup> Disney Information Center, “Disney Princesses,” Werner Technologies, <http://www.wdwinfo.com/wdwinfo/princessess.htm>.



**Figure 3.1** – “The Line.” Photo taken at Disneyland, 2009. Waiting in line to enter the Princess Walk. Picture by author.

Mulan will occasionally enter the Walk area as an added fourth, but are never featured as one of the main three at any given time.

Meeting the Princesses is only one aspect of the Walk. The entire experience loosely follows the formula of the well-made play,<sup>4</sup> which is structured to create an emotional involvement in the audience for the climactic moments. Similarly, viewing the parts of the Princess Walk as being comprised of an exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution demonstrates how the experience compels patrons to become emotionally invested in the Princess brand. The exposition of the experience includes approaching the line with the

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<sup>4</sup> The well made play formula was first articulated in Gustav Freytag’s book *Technique of the Drama* published in 1863 and was made popular by the playwright Eugene Scribe. See Barbara McManus Professor of Classics Emerita homepage, The College of New Rochelle, <http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/freytag.html>; Theodore Hatlen, *Orientation to the Theater*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), 186.



**Figure 3.2** – “The Autograph.” Picture taken at Disneyland, 2009. Girls getting an autograph inside the Princess Walk. Picture by author.

expectation of meeting Princesses and surveying the wait time. The rising action takes place while patrons move forward in line, talking to family members and other people around them (see Figure 3.1). Waiting in line, I overheard girls discussing their favorite Princesses. Mothers asked the workers which Princesses were waiting inside the Walk area. Children noticed and discussed the merchandise and costumes their peers were wearing. The longer the wait, the greater the anticipation built to enter the Princess area. The climax of the experience occurs when patrons are allowed into the Walk and approach actresses portraying the Disney Princesses. The Princess Walk consists of two outside walls designed to look like a walk through the forest with three separate stops. This creates an even more theatrical experience with three separate Disney Princesses at each stop where patrons can talk to the Princess, get an autograph, and pose for pictures in front of a beautifully illustrated backdrop (see Figure 3.2). The falling action





**Figure 3.3** – “The Gift Shop.” Picture taken at Disneyland, 2009. Costumes at the Royal Wardrobe store. Picture by author.

occurs as patrons leave the Walk area, which is closely followed by a resolution where people end up in “The Royal Wardrobe” shop (see Figure 3.3) to calmly peruse Princess products and everything needed to complete a young girl’s Disney Princess wardrobe. Purchasing Princess items becomes more meaningful after patrons spend time waiting and then meeting the Princesses. The formula of the experience coinciding with the well-made formula, writes the patron into the “production” since they are part of the event and living the performance in real time. This unconsciously gives the patrons an emotional investment in meeting with the Princesses, making a visit to the gift shop, even if nothing is purchased, feel like the ultimate resolution. The many products available for purchase are tangible demonstrations that the Princesses are an important investment of time, as well as money.



**Figure 3.4** – “The Empty Stage.” Picture taken at Disneyland, 2009. Princess stage area no longer in use. Photo by author.

Another noticeably theatrical area of the Princess Fantasy Faire is the elaborate stage (see Figure 3.4) that is now empty where there used to be performances, crafts, and story times with the Princesses. At the beginning of 2009, budget cuts ended these additional live Princess events. Waiting in line, I overheard many patrons ask workers when there would be Princess events in this beautiful area, but they were disappointed to discover the Princess Walk is the extent of the Princess experience in this portion of the park. In some ways, the void patrons may feel who were expecting more Princess activities can be filled by consuming products from the gift shop or getting one of the Princess makeovers offered at the Royal Wardrobe. The gift shop becomes an integral attraction of the Princess Fantasy Faire area since it extends the shortened experience with live Princesses. It becomes an additional event to further link the patron to the Princesses. Almost all the patrons I observed at least walked around the gift shop browsing the

merchandise after going through the Walk. If nothing else, looking at things in the Royal Wardrobe makes leaving the Walk after a long wait seem less abrupt.

### *Ariel's Grotto Restaurant*

Another main live Princess experience occurs at Ariel's Grotto, a partially underground restaurant at California Adventure, part of the larger Disneyland Resort. The entrance is on ground level, so customers must go down a spiral staircase to meet Ariel and be seated to eat, creating a feeling of going under the sea. Live Disney Princesses go around to each table to engage in small talk, sign autographs, and pose for pictures. The Disney Dining Service encourages, "Take your seat at this royal repast hosted by everybody's favorite Disney Mer-Princess, Ariel. Delight in learning proper princess etiquette from Ariel's royal friends, like Snow White, Belle, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella! It's an experience you will treasure forever." Marketed as being hosted by Ariel and her Princess friends, the restaurant appeals to families as a place to be on the same plane as fairy tale royalty. The restaurant is not only a place to meet Princesses, but is a place where one can be treated like a Princess, as well.

Ariel's Grotto also serves as a stage for presenting Ariel as both a mermaid and a human. Ariel formerly appeared in her mermaid fins sitting in a giant shell in Fantasyland. However, the area was recently renovated and converted into Pixie Hollow. Ariel was put in a less revealing green dress so she could move around more easily and be part of the Princess Walk. The gown became the standard Ariel costume for live Disney Princesses and ultimately presents Ariel as a human (see Figure 3.5). By making her human, some of her distinguishing physical attributes are removed making her more like the rest of the characters in the brand. I did not see any





**Figure 3.5** – “Under the Sea Restaurant.” Picture taken at California Adventure, 2009. Girl meeting "Ariel" inside Ariel's Grotto. Picture by author.

mermaid costumes being worn around the Princess attractions. The shops do not sell the Ariel mermaid costume either. While it seems impractical to dress in a mermaid costume at a theme park, due to modesty, weather, and convenience (it would be difficult to walk around without legs), I only observed one girl in an Ariel wedding dress, which is the main human Ariel costume that is available for purchase through the Disney brand. This dress does not seem very popular despite the statistics that show that Ariel is one of the most popular Princesses in the brand. There is no way to dress like the live human Ariel since the dress the actress wears is not available for purchase. Even though they cannot dress like her, girls still imitate Ariel's behavior when interacting with a live actress playing Ariel, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

## **Codified Gender Acts**

Live Princesses are overtly female. Mimicking behavior from cartoons, the actresses portraying the roles of Princesses must convey already established surface identities with little deviation from the characters presented in the films. As an actress takes on the persona of a Princess, her body also takes on the historical meaning attached to that Princess from the time in which the film was originally released. This codifies the way a particular Princess looks, acts, and presents herself as a reflection of the way the female gender is defined. Interaction with live Disney Princesses impacts the creation of a gender identity by maintaining certain standards of appearance, creating repeated stylized actions, and by performing gender acts publicly.

The standards of physical appearance for casting live Princesses demonstrates the codified way gender is presented by the Disney Princess brand. The Princesses are considered “face characters” and casting calls are only open to current Disney cast members.<sup>5</sup> The audition for being a Princess consists of standing in front of a group of casters who look for a specific height, look, and body type that fits their particular molds. Most Princesses are 5’5” to 5’7” with the exception of Ariel who is generally shorter. Actresses should have no distinguishing facial features such as moles, scars, or protruding bone structure. The Princess dresses also only go up to a size ten, so bodies must be small enough to fit the signature Princess costumes.<sup>6</sup>

If women auditioning pass this phase, they are asked to stay for a fitting for a particular Princess. Actresses are put in wigs, makeup, and dresses. Those who look the most like the cartoon Princesses are then cast. Butler believes that “‘persons’ only become intelligible through

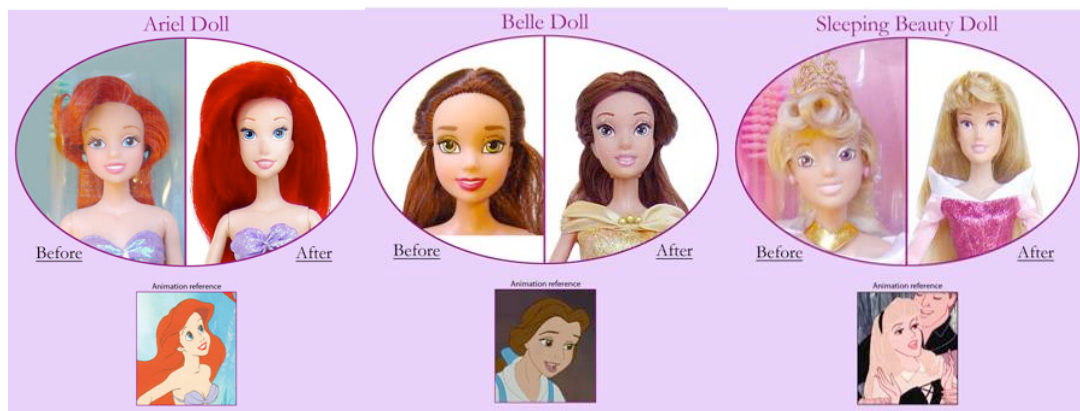
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<sup>5</sup> “Face characters” are all the characters that show a real head (not covered by a mask). Princesses fall under this category.

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with former cast member, May 9, 2009.

becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.”<sup>7</sup> As the actresses reflect certain stereotypes about female appearance, live Princesses become recognizable as personable beings. Gender identity also becomes attached to maintaining an appearance that meets expectations for how women *should* look. As the Princesses are presented as models of female beauty, the way they look becomes the expectation for females to emulate.

While physical appearance seems imperative for casting certain iconic characters, the mass production of people to look and perform a certain way sends a troubling message. In March 2009, the Disney Princess dolls were given “plastic surgery” in efforts to make them look more like their animated counterparts. *People Magazine*’s “Celebrity Baby Blog” featured before and after pictures of the doll’s physical transformation (see Figure 3.6). Many people voiced their distaste over the new dolls’ “anorexic” faces, excessive use of makeup, and unrealistic bodies in the “Response” section. However, “Meg,” who works at Disney, wrote



**Figure 3.6** – “Princess Dolls.” Image from *People Magazine* blog, 2009. Comparison of old and new Disney Princess dolls. Courtesy of Danielle Friedland, “Celebrity Baby Blog,” *People Magazine*, <http://celebrity-babies.com/2009/03/04/disney-princess-dolls-get-makeovers/>.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.

about the new dolls, “[Belle and Sleeping Beauty]—as someone who works with them everyday—look more like the girls who [M]eet at Disney World. And that’s what they’re going for now.”<sup>8</sup> The “look” of the live actresses is merging with merchandise. Now people, as well as dolls and cartoon renderings are branded. “Cinderella” is able to maintain an outward appearance of being flawless much like in the film. Her physical body looks the part with perfect hair, perfect makeup, and her signature gown. As mentioned earlier, she is also slender, average height, and has no distinguishing facial features. The guidelines and restrictions for casting live Princesses result in a cast of women whose bodies are all the same and present one body image to the young girls they meet. By encountering women whose physical appearances are recognizably Princess and female, the standards for casting becomes the standards for ideal female appearance. Through the representation of live Princesses, beauty is ascribed to those who look ideally female.

Idealized beauty is only one way that gender is codified by live Princess performances. Their stylized codes of conducts are reflective of socially accepted female acts. The sustained performance of Princess similarly resembles Butler’s ideas about sustained gender performance. Butler explains, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>9</sup> The Princesses’ recognizable female acts present them as behaving as “natural” women. “Cinderella” greets girls with gentle composure maintaining an upright posture and softly touching the arms or shoulders of the patrons with whom she is being photographed. She talks in a high pitched voice, speaks softly, wears a beautiful gown, is

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<sup>8</sup> Danielle Friedland, “Celebrity Baby Blog,” *People Magazine*, <http://celebrity-babies.com/2009/03/04/disney-princess-dolls-get-makeovers/>.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

concerned with pleasing others, and makes exaggerated movements highlighting her womanly figure. The more the part is played, the more it becomes legitimized for those who participate in this make believe play. Her performance is given substance and she becomes an authority figure of femininity over the course of time. As the live Princesses perform certain gender acts repeatedly throughout the day with numerous girls, many of whom are already dressed in full Disney Princess attire, their acts of gender are not only codified for themselves, but are passed along to the multiple patrons with whom they come in contact.

Since the Disney Company itself writes and regulates the criteria for Princess performance at Disney parks, Disney becomes the political power writing and maintaining the boundaries of the female body in their characters. The Disney Auditions Web site provides tips for Princess auditions by saying, “Remember that most roles in this category will require you to portray one of our world-famous Disney Characters with no words at all. You'll communicate through gestures and movement.”<sup>10</sup> Movement and actions are essential for creating the character of a Disney Princess and those actions seem to consist of simplistic manifestations of feminine behavior.

People employed by Disney go through a training program and are required to follow certain guidelines and rules in attempts to make the role standard no matter how many different women play the part. The embodied practice of performing Princess in the same way each time makes, in essence, the live interaction experience the same for all patrons. Philip Auslander argues that “live performances can be mass-produced” making “the same text available simultaneously to a large number of participants distributed widely in space.”<sup>11</sup> The many

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<sup>10</sup> Disney Auditions, “Auditions Experience,” Disney, <http://corporate.disney.go.com/auditions/experience/prepare.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge), 47.

actresses playing Cinderella wear the same wig, the same makeup, the same dress, and have similar facial features and body types. By performing the signs of a certain Princess, such as voice and body movement, the character remains standard, making the live actress another commodity for young girls with which to come in contact.

While the guidelines for character training and performance at Disney theme parks are somewhat safely guarded from public knowledge, I was able to receive some insight into the process by some former Disney Princess performers. I interviewed Kari,<sup>12</sup> who performed for two years as Cinderella and Snow White at Disney World. She worked mostly in “sets” or “meet and greets,” talking to and taking pictures with patrons in places such as the Princess Room in Toontown, Cinderella’s Royal Table, and Epcot Princess Dining. She also did special events as a Princess including Make a Wish or Give Kids the World. I also interviewed Cassie, who performed as Ariel in Ariel’s Grotto at Disneyland.

The training to be a Disney Princess also reflects an emphasis on the body presenting a particular script. Before becoming a face character, one must complete fur character training.<sup>13</sup> Kari states, “[The entertainment people] don’t want face characters to feel elitist to the fur characters so before you are a face character you have to be fully trained (and usually work) as a fur character.”<sup>14</sup> This reflects the process for becoming a Princess as being one that has to be earned. Cassie explains her Princess training included, “watching *The Little Mermaid* movie, practicing the autograph, learning to apply [my] own makeup and wig, and being introduced to

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<sup>12</sup> All interviews referenced in this chapter were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees have been changed by mutual agreement.

<sup>13</sup> Fur characters are all the characters that are fully costumed and have the actor’s face covered.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with former cast member, May 5, 2009.

[my] 'stage.'"<sup>15</sup> The original Disney movies provide the basis for an actress's research about her character.

I noticed that young girls have expectations for the actresses from the movies. When meeting the actress who plays Cinderella, one young girl asked her where the Prince and her pet mice were. The presentation of Cinderella through the costuming, appearance, and the performance of an actress invited this girl into the movie making a cartoon world more tangible and bringing things such as talking mice and Prince Charming to life. Yet, this is part of the "magic" live characters are supposed to reflect. Cassie explains:

We're also given suggestions, a bit of script, for questions that children may ask like, 'Where's Flounder?' or 'I thought your daddy turned you into a human, where are your legs?' I also had to bear in mind that anything not Disney was foreign to me so if a child was wearing a Spiderman T-shirt I should ask, 'Who's that?' and that sort of thing. And even if I or any of the other performers spoke a second language, we were discouraged from using our second language with any foreign guests because not all of the performers could speak it. If a returning foreign guest were to come back and suddenly Ariel no longer speaks Spanish that would shatter the magic a bit.<sup>16</sup>

Such a script determines a type of make believe that is embraced by both the performer and the audience who comes into contact with them. It also determines consistency for the standardized role of a certain Princess to maintain this world of make believe.

Gender is also codified by making the performance of Princess public. Butler firmly believes, "Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this 'action' is a public action... their public character is not

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<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with former cast member, May 9, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame.”<sup>17</sup> In order to maintain the accepted societal standards of gender, females need to be presented as feminine and males presented as masculine in a binary relationship. Butler further believes that identity is found in the recognition of one’s self as a coherent gendered being. Gender itself is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence”<sup>18</sup> Seeing one’s self acting in accordance with socially accepted acts of gender, identity is created based off a public acknowledgement that one fits a certain mold.

As the actresses portraying live Princesses perform for an audience, their bodies articulate a certain definition of gender identity. Similarly, girls practice and perform the same outward gestures of femaleness with their peers while waiting in line at the Princess Walk. I observed one young girl, who was having a difficult time waiting in line, be reminded by her father that “Princesses are polite and wait in line quietly. Look at that Princess, she’s being polite.” Her demeanor quickly changed and she conformed to the desirable behavior of a Princess. Exploring these types of behaviors with other girls reinforces the public expectations of females arising from the Disney Princess brand.

I also watched girls mimic certain Princess behavior and make it their own during the Princess Walk. In the film, Cinderella cleans and moves with grace, perfect posture, and flowing strides. By raising her vocal pitch when interacting with her pets, who function like children in the film, Cinderella also presents acts of being motherly or nurturing. Linguist Elissa Newport is credited with coining the term “motherese,” which refers to adjustments made in adult speech

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



when talking to children.<sup>19</sup> This type of speech is characterized by simpler, shorter utterances, higher pitch, wider vocal variation, and by using more repetition than in speech with adults.<sup>20</sup> Though the term motherese implies that this type of speech adjustment is only employed by mothers, language and literacy expert C.E. Snow demonstrates that women who do not have children adjust their speech in the same way when talking to children as well.<sup>21</sup> In many ways, those who speak to children in this manner take on the role of mother, or nurturer, as they are trying to guide a child's understanding of something using vocal techniques. When talking to "Cinderella," who addresses patrons in a high vocal register, girls often raised the pitch of their voice and copied "Cinderella's" exaggerated vocal variation associated with being a nurturer. Some girls spoke to their younger sisters similarly to help escort them to the next Princess in the Walk, adopting the Princess's style of speaking. Also when conversing with "Cinderella" I noticed most girls transformed their bodies to match the straightened stance and dance-like walk of the idealized domestic Princess. Their actions of gender were becoming public, further codifying Princess actions as being desirable female actions.

I also observed girls make Princess acts their own at Ariel's Grotto. In the film Ariel speaks her mind, talks back to her father, is defiant towards authority figures, and comes across as a sexual being. The actress portraying Ariel interprets and presents these qualities by speaking loudly and expressively. And, while the live actress wears a more modest dress than the cartoon Ariel, she is playful and boisterous as she takes autograph books from young guests

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<sup>19</sup> Newport used the term "motherese" in a paper presented at a Conference on Language Input and Acquisition in Boston in September 1974 entitled "Motherese and Its Relation to the Child's Acquisition of Language." Motherese is sometimes referred to as "parentese" and more recently as Infant Directed Talk (IDT).

<sup>20</sup> See C.E. Snow, "Mothers' Speech to Children Learning Language," *Child Development* 43 (1972): 549-565; J. R. Phillips, "Syntax and Vocabulary of Mothers' Speech to Young Children: Age and Sex Comparisons," *Child Development* 44 (1973):182-185; Robert S. Siegler, Judy S. DeLoache, Nancy Eisenberg, *How Children Develop*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005), 219-220.

<sup>21</sup> Snow, "Mothers' Speech," 549-565.

to sign. Ariel's Grotto is a place for young girls to pretend to be just like Ariel. Interacting with "Ariel," girls mimic her behavior, having recognized the actions of Ariel from the movie in the actress portraying her. Girls speak loudly with their family members in a playful manner while quoting *The Little Mermaid* and use their bodies to move around as if they were mermaids. Meeting with "Ariel" further fuels their excitement about being in a restaurant "under the sea" and acting like a boisterous mermaid.

When actresses embody the cartoon fairytale characters, they reify the gender images and ideologies found in Princess films and merchandise. Likewise, as girls put on their Disney Princess costumes they give a physical body to a character and all she represents, putting on a predetermined representation of womanhood before they have decided what that should mean for themselves. Their interaction with live Disney Princesses impacts the creation of a gender identity by maintaining certain standards of appearance, presenting stylized actions to be repeated, and by encouraging them to perform gender acts publicly.

### **Shared Community**

Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger term groups of people bound by common knowledge, activities, or beliefs as communities of practice.<sup>22</sup> Eckert and McConnell-Ginet further observe that "communities of practice emerge as groups of people respond to a mutual situation."<sup>23</sup> Sharing costumes and merchandise, a knowledge of the movies, as well as an appreciation for Princesses in general, creates a community of practice between the young girls

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57.

who participate in the Princess brand. As they enthusiastically respond in similar ways to meeting live Princesses, their shared interest allows them to find a sense of identity with their peers.

Live performances and interactions with Disney Princesses further foster this feeling of what Disney scholar Amy Davis refers to as a “Girls’ Club” that “promotes women’s solidarity.”<sup>24</sup> This idea of a club or shared community entices girls to take part in the Disney Princess brand, which bring together the Princesses from different films as friends in a type of sisterhood. At Disneyland, the live Princess discuss their other Princess friends with the girls they meet. They mention, “You know my friend Aurora? Her favorite color is pink too,” “Which of my other friends have you met?” and “Your dress is pretty like my friend’s, Cinderella.” The Princesses recognize each other as part of their special group.

The Princess community also reflects Benedict Anderson’s analysis of what he terms “imagined communities.” Anderson reflects on the spread of nationalism and looks at how feelings of community have been generated over time. He discusses how most nations embrace the notion of naturalization, allowing others to join and be “invited into” the imagined community.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Princess community invites girls to become naturalized citizens through the buying of merchandise. Young girls are further invited to be part of this shared community at Disneyland as live Princesses address them as “Princesses,” greeting groups of girls by saying, “Hello Princesses,” and remarking, “Thank you, Princesses.”

The appeal of a shared community comes alive through the process of waiting in line to meet the Princesses, as well. The Princess Walk is a place where all Disney Princess fans

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<sup>24</sup> Amy Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation* (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 227.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 145.

congregate. The line consists almost exclusively of parents with girls under the age of eight, many of whom are wearing the same Disney Princess costume as someone else in line. Several girls also carry other Disney Princess products, such as autograph books, pens, and Disney Princess Mickey Mouse ears. When I was in line, one mother pointed out another girl in costume to her daughter, “Look! There’s a Princess just like you.” Waiting to meet the Princesses, these girls almost immediately identify with each other and develop a kinship. They demonstrate a sense of belonging by talking to strangers in costume or to those with similar merchandise as them. They discuss who their favorite Princess is and who they hope to meet inside the Walk. The solidarity of the group, as well as the open invitation to join, appeals to girls and further fuels their desire to buy into the brand. By buying Princess products, girls become a part of a larger community and discover female role models for how they want to dress and conduct themselves. Consumerism becomes a marker of their female identity.

Children culture scholar Ellen Seiter discusses the sharing of costumes and products. She states, “Consumer culture provides children with a shared repository of images, characters, plots, and themes: it provides the basis for small talk and play, and it does this on a national, even global scale.”<sup>26</sup> Girls from multiple ethnicities, who live in various places across the world, possess products from the Princess brand and wait in this line to meet the Disney Princesses. Seiter continues, “outside the house children can bank on finding that nearly every other child they meet will know some of the same things—and probably *have* many of the same things—that they do.”<sup>27</sup> Possessing the outer signs of this community bridges some gaps where there are language barriers. Though Anderson outlines the basis of most communities in the past as

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<sup>26</sup> Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

including a commonality of language, he recognizes changes in society now make it “possible and practical to ‘represent’ the imagined community in ways that [do] not require linguistic uniformity.”<sup>28</sup> Girls wait in line even if they cannot speak English with the Princesses because they share the same products and costumes as everyone else in the group. Material objects replace spoken language as the binding function of community.

Another prerequisite for being in the Disney Princess community is having viewed the original Disney Princess films. Since the original films are considered Disney “classics,” in some ways they serve as a canon for children’s media. Parents and grandparents who grew up with these popular films are likely to introduce them to their children. However, now with DVDs and an increase in consumer products, girls can interact with the Princesses on a more regular and intimate basis. An initial attraction to the Princess films generates an interest in the characters, which leads to buying products and increasing their exposure with the characters. Having knowledge of the cartoon films is paramount to understanding how a particular Princess looks and acts since the movies act as primary sites where the different Princess identities originate. The films also provide storylines and present behaviors to be acted out and explored with merchandise and costumes. An appreciation and knowledge for the Disney Princess films is central to the Disney Princess brand community since the movies serve as an entry point.

The feeling of community with the Disney Princesses continually encourages girls to buy into the brand. Children with the same Disney Princess media, which Henry Jenkins terms a “brand community,” are attracted to the Walk where others can compare and contrast merchandise.<sup>29</sup> Girls demonstrate a sense of admiration (and envy) of the other girls they see in

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<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 63.

elaborate costuming. The desire for nice things is human nature, but girls also desire to remain an active part of the Princess community, which means acquiring more products. The Princess brand community gives girls a sense of identity.

Girls' loyalty to consumer goods is not limited to children. Seiter believes, "Adults as well as children invest intense feeling in objects and attribute a wealth of personal and idiosyncratic meanings in mass-produced goods."<sup>30</sup> Though parents sometimes resist purchasing Princess paraphernalia, they can still relate to their daughter's desire to possess appealing goods, fit in with their peers, and participate in a brand that is deemed appropriate for girls. Parents' nostalgia for Disney might also be the basis for their daughter's entry into the Princess shared community. Seiter reminds, "Young children cannot make purchases or watch television without adult assistance."<sup>31</sup> I observed several toddlers waiting in line to meet the Princesses who were too young to walk, talk, or make meaningful connections between the live characters and the cartoons. Yet, their parents had them dressed in full Disney Princess costuming. There was one small toddler, too young to walk, in the Royal Wardrobe whose parents were buying her a \$65 Belle gown to wear for the rest of the day. Whether these parents were trying to live vicariously through their daughter or provide what they felt was a "normal" experience for today's typical girl, they were introducing her to a brand community that defines gender in an outwardly presentational way.

However, this shared community of products seems to be exclusively for girls and creates a stark separation between boys and girls at a young age. One boy in line waiting to meet the live Princesses asked his mother for some Disney Princess Mickey Mouse ears like many of the

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<sup>30</sup> Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

girls in the group were wearing. She replied, “No. You’re a boy. You can have Mickey Mouse ears.” The boy began to cry and yell, “I want to be a Princess!” Though he desired to be a part of this group, he was excluded. The brand community has deemed such products as manifestations of femaleness and are tied to acts of gender; thus, for many parents, Princess products are inappropriate for boys. Gender is a clear marker of this shared community which emphasizes heterosocial normativity. Butler believes the separate category of woman only achieves stability in context of a “heterosexual matrix.” Butler uses the term “heterosexual matrix” throughout her writing based on the idea that “for bodies to make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchally defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.”<sup>32</sup> The overtly feminine costumes and products in the Princess brand community further promote the performance of female as being in synch with heterosexual norms.

Also, there are no products or costumes part of this community distinguishably for males. There are also no live Princes at Disneyland, at least not on the regular circuit, so a boy is limited to meeting only females from the films. The few boys that were in line to meet the Princesses seemed somewhat out of place. Most of them had sisters, but a few wanted to meet the Princesses on their own accord. Yet, unable to wear or possess the merchandise unless their parents let them, they were participating as outsiders to the group. As mentioned previously, the extent of what most young children participate in terms of merchandise and brand communities depends on parents. Additionally, parents are primary enforcers of childhood gender differences. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s research shows that “[t]his enforcement is more intensely aimed

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<sup>32</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 151.

at boys than at girls.”<sup>33</sup> It is considered more inappropriate for boys to attempt to participate in the Princess brand community than for a girl to participate in a boy’s community like Star Wars or Spiderman. This reflects the idea that male activities are “normal” and female activities are Other. Yet in the Princess community, girls find a place where they can feel like they belong.

Another perpetuation of the Disney Princess “Girls’ Club” occurs at Ariel’s Grotto. The restaurant sets up all the Disney Princesses as friends, which encourages the feeling of an exclusive club where girls are invited to join if their parents pay the high prices and get a reservation in advance. The children in the dining room are given paper crowns to wear and throughout the meal, there are “lessons” for the customers to learn the “royal” way to greet someone or give a toast. By learning these elite acts together, the customers have a chance to feel a sense of community and are brought on the same plane as the royal hosts. There is also a dance lesson where people are invited to get in the aisles and dance a simple routine with the Princesses. This resonates with Anderson’s discussion of national anthems bonding people together through physical action. Dancing a signature routine with the Princesses creates a similar “experience of simultaneity.”<sup>34</sup> People unknown to each other are bonded together as their bodies perform the same movements at the same time to the Disney Princess brand theme song “Where Dreams Begin.” Becoming active participants in the theatrical nature of the restaurant, girls are able to play the part of Princess with adult Disney Princesses modeling behaviors for them. Though the lessons are geared to teach acts of “royalty,” at a recent visit to the restaurant, I observed that only the young girls in the restaurant had a desire to participate in the aisles. The boys and parents I saw remained seated and continued eating, suggesting that

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<sup>33</sup> Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.



these acts of presenting oneself as “royal” is only for girls, further uniting the girls together in a gender specific club that males can watch from the sidelines.

This shared restaurant experience increases the camaraderie of the Princess brand and encourages spending money. When patrons enter the restaurant to be seated, they must first have their picture taken with Ariel. Later in the evening the photographer comes around with a picture package to help girls remember their evening with their Princess friends. Families are also invited to go to Disneyland and see the Princesses again at the Fantasy Faire Princess Walk, where they can once again feel part of a friendly community in near proximity to the brand products for sale. Their restaurant experience becomes commodified and encourages the buying of more merchandise.

### **The Homogenization of Young Consumers**

Interaction with live Disney Princesses also adds to a general homogenization of girlhood. In a community there are different individuals who come together with a common interest. Yet, over time the Princess brand works to erase differences and individuality by making everyone the same, or homogenizing those who buy into the brand. By joining the Princess “Girls’ Club,” and subscribing to prepackaged identities, girls narrow aspects of their individuality. There are different characters with whom girls can relate (girls may consider themselves more closely aligned to Belle or Cinderella). Yet, as children’s culture scholar Jack Zipes states, “We are all free to consume and become part of a variety package of the same products, and children are predisposed to this homogenization through the toys, clothes, games,

literature, and movies they receive from infancy through their teenage years.”<sup>35</sup> By blending the traits of different Princesses together in a single brand, the Princess products create a generalized notion of Princess and erases individuality by defining participators in generalized terms, limiting choices, and requiring a resignation of one’s body.

Girls can only be members of the Disney Princess club if they have Disney Princess brand items, possessing simple signs for people to recognize. Having also seen the movies, they know how to engage with the merchandise and perform as Princesses. Disney Princess products demonstrate Henry Giroux’s ideas relating to the idea of a market-based identity. He states that identities based on products such as the Disney Princess brand “suggests relinquishing their roles as critical subjects for the passive role of consuming subject.”<sup>36</sup> Young girls not only give into popular consumer trends, but they allow themselves to be defined in generalized terms. They are greeted as “Princesses,” a general label removing individual identity. Though a girl may desire to be special like a Princess, she is buying into a marketer’s idea of “special” just like everyone else. This follows Zipes ideas about brands repackaging the same forms over and over. Brands such as Disney Princess do not open new possibilities to girls, but rather “they invite them to repeat certain predictable and comforting experiences that they can easily and affordably buy into.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of being unique, a girl falls into a trap of being undistinguishable amongst other girls. “Princess” becomes a general label that leads to prescriptive and repetitive acts of play.

The homogenization of girlhood reflects the limitation of choices for girls when it comes to play. At Disneyland, the experience of interacting with Princesses urges girls to buy more

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<sup>35</sup> Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Zipes, *Sticks and Stones*, 6.

Princess products and costumes. If girls are educated as consumers at Disneyland, as Giroux might suggest, their choices are limited as to what is available. Certain Princess apparel is more abundant than others. It's difficult to find a Jasmine costume, but easy to find Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, who have more products on display in stores. Their abundance likely follows the trend of sales, but since choices are few for Jasmine products and non-existent for Pocahontas or Mulan, girls are again forced to buy the costumes and products that everyone else has. Choices are also limited when it comes to meeting live Princesses since it depends on the rotation of cast members. The interaction with a specific Princess also plays a factor into which products a girl is most likely attracted to after meeting them. While many girls come to Disneyland with costumes and Princess products they already own, the experience validates previous purchases since they perceive they are just like everyone else.

This homogenization also causes participants to relinquish their bodies to the general crowd. Consumer culture scholar Maura Wickstrom describes places such as Disneyland by saying, "It is not enough to encourage consumers to have commodities; they must be compelled to become them."<sup>38</sup> Wickstrom's words resonate with the environment of the gift shops at Disneyland. Girls try on costumes, tiaras, and shoes in front of mirrors with earnest zeal to see how they fit the standard Princess dress code. Once they put on the branded costume, they are bringing the commodities to life and, in turn, resigning their physical bodies to the Princess brand.

The resignation of body also implies an external appearance of gender attached to the brand, which corresponds with Butler's notions of gender performance. She states, "Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; 'the internal' is a surface signification, and

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<sup>38</sup> Maurya Wickstrom, "Making Americans: The American Girl Doll and American Girl Place," in *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 285.

gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody.”<sup>39</sup> When girls try to perform or present the feminine Princess, it is an outward manifestation of codified acts of gender. While they cannot internalize gender, by putting on the Disney label they submit to a broad notion of gender that the brand represents on a surface level. The Disney Princess girls give a consensus to align themselves with stereotypes.

In the Disneyland shops, the largest Princess dress size I could find was a size 10/12 for girls, which is the same expectation of size for the adult actors. While this relates to the fact that Disneyland only allows girls nine and under to wear full costumes in the park, it also assumes that girls that age will fit into the sizes available. The stores are molding what their crowd and participants look like. Still, the costumes are impractically designed for young girls to wear. A large majority of the girls I observed at Disneyland were wearing shirts under their dresses, not only because it was a chilly day, but because it seemed to help keep the dresses on the upper half of their bodies. Since they are designed after gowns that fit a grown woman’s figure, the Disney Princess dresses lack a simple modesty for young girls with straps and sleeves that do not fit a prepubescent body. Young girls innocently play in costumes inscribed with maturity and sexuality.

In Jane Gaines’s article “Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman’s Story,” she discusses the notion that costumes “primarily work to reinforce narrative ideas.”<sup>40</sup> As girls step into the costume, they are stepping into the role of an adult character. Gaines continues, “dress becomes somewhat more than a key or an indicator since ‘personality’ and ‘dress’ are so

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<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Gaines, “Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman’s Story,” in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog eds. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 181.

often confused that it would seem that they have become the same thing.”<sup>41</sup> Costumes are confused with the nature of one’s self. Yet, the original design of the costumes came from animators, mostly men, who were depicting women in an idealized way. The revealing nature of the costume presents the wearer as an object of sexual desire.

As many brands create a standardized notion of self, the Disney Princesses contributes to the homogenization of girlhood. Through merchandise and appealing to the desire to fit in, the Disney Princess brand attempts to make all girls “Princesses.” Participating in the Disney Princess community with peers and professionals at Disneyland erases individuality by defining participators in generalized terms, limiting choices, and requiring a resignation of one’s body.

### **Idealized World**

The sign at the entrance to the Princess Fantasy Faire reads, “Where happily ever after happens every day.” Interactions with live Princesses also suggest that by buying Disney Princess costumes and products, a preschool age girl can achieve the “perfect” life that the Princesses seem to have achieved. Fantasy and imagination are a vital part of childhood, but the Disneyland experience with live Princesses warrants careful examination in the way it presents an idealized version of life as an attainable reality. Identity is associated with the idea of a utopia, presented as Princesses being the norm, and becomes unreal in a type of hyperreality.

Disneyland is famously known for being “the happiest place on Earth.” Adults regard it as a desirable escape from their daily lives and often feel a nostalgia relating to their childhood. Yet, for children, who have very little to escape from, it becomes an idealized version of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

reality they are learning to take part in on a regular basis. The act of creating such an idealized world, or utopia, has been attempted by various political and social leaders and has been explored in literature and film. In his book *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Chris Spannos observes, “*Utopia*, the word, has its origins in Greek, meaning ‘nowhere’ suggesting that it doesn’t—and maybe cannot—exist.”<sup>42</sup> Whether or not a utopian society is possible, the word utopia has become associated with unachievable perfection. Seiter believes children are attracted to utopias seen in media because they celebrate worlds that are easily understandable and coded. They also rebel against adult restriction.<sup>43</sup> However, this means a manipulation of ideology from the adult world that children do not yet grasp. Interacting with live Princesses, whose ideologies already dominate much of their toys and media makes the world of make believe more tangible and possible. The Princesses do not exist merely in cartoons; they also now exist in physical form for children to relate to and desire to be like.

The live performances of Disney Princesses add to idealistic ideas about money and its connection to beauty and normalcy. Live Princesses wear expensive and beautiful gowns with elaborate accessory pieces. One way a girl can find a connection with the live Princesses is through material objects such as films, toys, and costume pieces. In order to look like them it necessitates spending a large sum of money on branded merchandise. Seiter believes that utopias in children’s media “portray an abundance of the things most prized by children.”<sup>44</sup> Disneyland not only portrays an abundance of toys and merchandise, but other children display their material goods throughout the park, especially when meeting Princesses. At Disneyland the

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<sup>42</sup> Chris Spannos, *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Princess is the ideal, but she is also the norm. It is perfectly acceptable for girls to wear a Princess gown or tiara and act like a Princess. These dress-up items almost act as a fantastical dress code for the idealized world of Disneyland.

There is also a sense of authenticity that arises from the amount of merchandise one owns. There are different versions of the Disney Princess costumes; some are fancier made with more expensive material, adornments, and petticoats. There is also a plethora of accessories including, but not limited to shoes, tiaras, wigs, capes, earrings, gloves, and necklaces. I noticed that girls with more expensive and extensive costumes perceive themselves as being a “better” Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty than another. Girls seemed very aware of others dressed in Princess costuming—accessing and comparing. I heard one girl dressed as Cinderella comment, “Look! She has the puffy Sleeping Beauty gown like the grown up [Sleeping Beauty].” Another girl spoke to her mother pointing out, “She has the cape” (see Figure 3.7). Girls recognize the different versions of the costumes available and what additional pieces contribute to being like a Disney Princess. If Princesses hold a standard for being beautiful, then having a more authentic Princess costume allows girls to feel closer to that standard. Owning and wearing expensive things becomes a measuring tool which girls can use to assess beauty and how successful a girl is as a Princess. The more expensive things a girl owns, the more she is like a Princess.

Additionally, The Royal Wardrobe features a salon where girls can get their faces painted with a Renaissance type design and have their hair elaborately braided. The salon is a particular destination connected to the “Princess” area of the Park. As the girls move into other areas of the Park, they advertise for the salon. The makeovers represent an outward sign of the Princess experience. The patrons become marked as participators of the idealized notion of Princess. The



**Figure 3.7** – “The Fairest Costume of Them All.” Picture taken at Disneyland, 2009. One girl admiring the elaborate costume of another girl in the Princess Walk line. Picture by author.

makeover stays in the park since it really only lasts a day. Still, as these girls demonstrate the outward signs of being a Princess at Disneyland, they demonstrate a distinguishable ideal of girlhood, which other girls point out and desire to look like since it is perceived as the standard.

This also reflects a certain relationship that girls have with each other apart from the Princess community. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet discuss girls’ social hierarchies and cliques. They believe that “women in many communities are constrained to cloak competition in the guise of cooperation.”<sup>45</sup> With wide eyes Stacy, age seven, pointed out a girl with an elaborate Princess salon hairdo. “I bet that was a real expensive hairdo,” she said with a hint of jealousy. As girls see their peers with attractive Princess makeovers, they may pay compliments to each other, but there is also a desire to have a makeover for themselves. I observed that girls with

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<sup>45</sup> Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 127.



Princess face painting or hairdos seemed to notice when other people admired their outward appearance. In turn they exhibited some superiority and satisfaction with the way they looked. Outward appearances and material objects become an important part of how girls feel about themselves within this idealized world.

The “utopian” ideal of the Princess brand is reflected in the “happily ever after” motif. The actresses themselves are only in their early twenties, representing a perfect fantasy life while still young. Feminist scholar Deborah Ross notes that Disney targets young girls with heroines such as the Princesses “in order to guide them into womanhood rather than give an appropriate age-mate model.”<sup>46</sup> The model they present is idealized where the Princesses demonstrate a more appealing view of the adult world. Grown-ups are beautiful, nicely dressed, and at the end of their problems. This sort of life seems achievable in the perfect world of the Disney Princesses, since it is brought into existence through live interaction experiences. The actresses playing the Princesses give the characters physical bodies, who then discuss their fantasy lives as if they were real. They also ask girls questions about where they are from and what grade they are in at school. By acknowledging parts of the real world in the fantasy world, the live Princesses blur the boundaries of their illusion and reality.

The loss of distinction between what is real and what is imagined resonates with Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of hyperreality, or “loss of the real.” He describes the system of signs and representation as being eroded and becoming a *simulacrum* where signs signal other signs rather than an underlying reality. There is no truth under the sign of the Disney Princess, no true essence of “Princess.” The iconic dresses worn by the actresses at Disneyland signal a cartoon

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<sup>46</sup> Deborah Ross, “Escape From Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination,” *Marvels & Tales* 18 (2004): 355.

fairytale world that does not really exist. Baudrillard states, “The problem now is that of the *satellization of the real*, the putting into orbit of an indefinable reality without common measure to the fantasies that once used to ornament it.”<sup>47</sup> Illusions become the perceived reality without the recognizable signs of fantasy. While in some ways live Disney Princesses are presented as make-believe, they still also project another “reality” where anyone can be a Princess and can do and act as they please. Like this idealized reality, identity has no truth and leads to deception about what is possible, practical, and real.

At what point do the expectations and ideologies from the idealized world start to blend into a person’s understanding of the real one? In all likelihood, children realize that Disneyland is a fantasy place and that the live Princesses are not real. Still, by giving them a visual reference of an enacted version of an idealized world, even if it is pretend, the stories and ideas of the Princess brand become a present and desirable possibility. Fantasy starts to bleed into what is normal and attainable. As Baudrillard states, “It is more and more difficult for us to imagine the real, History, the depth of time, or even three-dimensional space, just as before it was difficult, from our real world perspective, to imagine a virtual universe or the fourth dimension [*la quatrieme dimension*].”<sup>48</sup> The inability to distinguish what is real from what is imagined, leads to a false sense of identity that is associated with the idea of a utopia, where Princesses are the norm, and where the everyday becomes hyperreal.

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 142-56.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Disney World Company,” *Liberation* (March 4, 1996), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-disneyworld-company.html>.

The Disney Princess brand encompasses an easily accessible feminine identity for which preschool age girls can relate. The Princesses' appeal is undeniable—they wear beautiful clothing, are overwhelmingly sweet, and lead happy lives. Within the Princess brand, boys and girls are strictly delineated as separate groups. In fact, this separation may be part of the attraction to Princesses for young girls who are starting to discover that there are differences between the sexes. Recognizing the Disney Princesses as overtly female, they are drawn to the merchandise as a way to find gender identity in their early years. Yet live interactions of Princesses add to the spectacle and fantasy of a brand which blur the lines of reality. The live Princesses at Disneyland perform repeated and public acts that reinforce codified ideologies pertaining to the female gender. By interacting with live Princesses, the Disney Princess brand is brought to life and further adds to the impulse to consume merchandise. Young girls find meaning in consumption by adopting codified acts of gender, becoming part of a shared community, being homogenized as a consumer, and by buying into the idea of an idealized world and lifestyle.

## CHAPTER 4

### Costumes, Web sites, and DVDs: Playing Disney Princess

*In faithful imitation, the three-year old in my life flounces around with her tiara askew and her Princess gown sliding off her shoulder, looking for all the world like a London socialite after a hard night of cocaine and booze. Then she demands a poison apple and falls to the floor in a beautiful swoon.*

—Barbara Ehrenreich, “Revolt Against These Disney Princesses”

The word play has many connotations. It can refer to a structured game, joking around with a colleague, taking a break from the rigors of daily life, or simply having fun. One of the first scholars to analyze play, Johan Huizinga states, “In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.”<sup>1</sup> There is always something going on, something being acquired or explored, and something serving a purpose during play. Scholars concur that play holds a vital role shaping individuals and societies. Psychologist Susan Linn believes, “The ability to play is central to our capacity to take risks, to experiment, to think critically, to act rather than react, to differentiate ourselves from our environment, and to make life meaningful.”<sup>2</sup> Play functions as a safe space for children to make sense of the world. The focus of this chapter deals mostly with children’s

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga, “The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2007), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Take Over of Childhood* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 61.

make-believe and performative play to see how the Disney Princess brand presents stereotypes of beauty, attempts to shape behavior, and limits play through interactive media demonstrating a few of the ways the brand infringes on gender exploration. It is through a type of performative play that children explore and physically enact the things they observe on a daily basis.

Performative play is characterized by taking on the role of someone else in a make-believe scenario. The things children come into contact with largely determine the scope of topics they explore as they play. The places they visit, people they encounter, and apparel they see, serve as settings, characters, and costumes for reenactment. It can be structured, planned, spontaneous, or casual. Every child approaches make-believe differently, yet it can change depending on who they are playing with and what exposure they have to different scenarios and topics. Children generally distinguish such play as being different from real life. Yet, this type of play is where children create meaning.

One area of exploration in performative play relates to the construction of a gender identity. Through observation, children discover that there are certain things attributed to males and certain things attributed to females. These understandings are made manifest in role playing games. Anthropologist Jenny Cook-Gumperz studies children's play narrative in order to gain insight into the development of a child's "gendered self."<sup>3</sup> She identifies a popular paradox that exists in the establishment of gendered identity where children perceive the mother as being in an all-powerful role, yet, "little girls still grow up into young women who publicly carry through roles, activities, and talk that allow them to be placed in a secondary position."<sup>4</sup> The mother role is the first gendered role children observe. Children often play mother to toy babies. They play

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<sup>3</sup> Jenny Cook-Gumperz, "Reproducing the Discourse of Mothering: How Gendered Talk Makes Gendered Lives," in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (New York: Routledge, 1995), 407.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 401.

the part of mother in complete authority, recreating their own observations of female roles. However, as girls get older they begin to discover that women are not always placed in power positions in the outside world. This requires a reconciliation of gender identity, which can be provided by the transitory space of play. Play situations become more complex and deviate from the woman/mother as an authority figure.

Girls may continue to notice discrepancies in their understanding of gender roles. Since Butler believes that there is no origin for gender, she observes that if gender acts are internally discontinuous, “The appearance of gender is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”<sup>5</sup> Young girls construct their identity for what it means to be female based on their continued observations of the women around them. By playing the role of woman in their make-believe play, they are practicing for adulthood and discovering what feels comfortable and normal. Through specific acts and scenarios, girls explore different possibilities. While Butler might define gender as something that is perpetually constructed in real life as opposed to something that one “plays” (except in the case of drag), by playing Princess, something already marked as “girl,” preschool age girls “play girl.” This play influences the way they continually construct their gender outside of play as well.

As discussed throughout this thesis, the body is very important in the creation of gender. Butler states, “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body.”<sup>6</sup> The way one uses the body, or performs, constitutes gender. Without the performance of the body, gender would not exist. For this reason, it is imperative that children learn to use their

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004), 187.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

bodies in the ways that they wish to define themselves. The space of performative play allows for this learning process where the idea of self can continue to develop.

Consumer culture and children's toys can impose on this space for creativity and exploration. Gender roles are especially reinforced by brands such as the Disney Princesses.

Lamb and Brown emphasize:

[P]lay is everything to a child, and girls should have the opportunity to experiment, practice, invent, and imagine anything in play. Instead, as in the magazines they read, the TV shows they watch, the clothes they buy and the lyrics of the songs they listen to, they are being sold a version of girlhood that will feel satisfying to them when they conform to it but will also limit their possibilities in the future.<sup>7</sup>

The growing role of consumer brands in the lives of children shapes their perception of self-potential. Girls are also in a peer-centered world where their friends, and the brands that present themselves as friends, begin to play a larger role in self identity.

Gender roles may be the most difficult to deviate from or experiment with. Lamb and Brown discuss the growing image of "Girl Power" as an illusion, stating that, "Whatever she chooses to do, she is told in a number of subtle ways that she needs to do it like a girl. This means doing it with attention to style, doing it with grace, doing it nicely or with a sexy, flirty air, and doing it knowing that others will see and comment on her doing it."<sup>8</sup> A girl might have more freedom to participate in "boy" activities, but she still has to follow certain guidelines afforded by society that are generally shaped by the media. The Princess brand may provide a

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<sup>7</sup> Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Gender: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers' Schemes*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 210.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

satisfying image of womanhood as a preschool age girl tries to fit in with her peers and find easily identifiable signs of femaleness.

Playing princess is a common make-believe game for young girls, but through the Disney Princess brand, the possibilities of a princess has been replaced with marketers' definition of Princess, with fewer possibilities and standardized caricatures. By buying into the Princess image of girlhood and performing as Princesses in play, girls are stylizing their bodies to fit a stereotypical and narrow version of womanhood. Through the movements and actions of their bodies as Princesses, girls are performing womanhood and creating what Butler would term, "The illusion of an abiding gendered self."<sup>9</sup> Even though there are lines drawn in play that distinguish something as "play" versus "reality," the enactment of certain traits and movements become an acceptance of an identity revealed through performative play.

### **Playing Disney Princess**

The target age of the Disney Princess brand is for young girls ages three to five, which happens to be the same age range that psychologists agree a gender identity is being established in childhood.<sup>10</sup> This is a time for girls to observe the world and make decisions about gender, decisions that are established and practiced in the performative play space. The Disney Princess brand infringes on this important space by presenting female stereotypes as desirable, using the attraction of the brand to shape actions, and by providing participatory media that directly constructs and guides play.

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<sup>9</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 187.

<sup>10</sup> Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.



In exploring girls' interaction with the Princess brand, I interviewed eight young girls and their mothers to see how the Disney Princess brand has impacted their play space.<sup>11</sup> Much of the data and examples throughout this chapter are anecdotal as drawn from these interviews. These girls come from families with average to low incomes from a variety of geographical locations in the United States. *Stacy*, age seven and *Karissa*, age five are sisters living in Las Vegas, Nevada. Together they own several Disney Princess dolls, books, DVDs, games, and costumes. *Allison*, is a three year old living in Houston, Texas. She owns several Disney Princess toys and accessories, mostly Cinderella. *Audrey*, age five and *Ellie*, age three are sisters living in Boise, Idaho. They own some small Disney Princess dolls, but no costumes or additional Disney Princess merchandise. *Angie*, age three lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. She owns a variety of Disney Princess merchandise including costumes and accessories, dolls, clothing, and movies. *Lily*, age five lives in Los Angeles, California. She owns several Disney Princess costumes and accessories, books, dolls, puzzles, and books. *Emma* is a four-year old who lives in Juneau, Alaska. She owns a set of Disney Princess furniture and some Princess movies.

### **Stereotypes: The Fairest of Them All**

One way that Disney Princesses infringe on gender exploration during performative play is by providing a stereotype of female beauty. The Princesses uphold a very Westernized standard of beauty. "Beauty" as perpetuated in American magazines, television, and film tends to glorify European facial features, skinny waistlines, and large bust sizes. Celebrities are often scrutinized and criticized when they deviate from this mold of beauty (see Figure 4.1), not only for being

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<sup>11</sup> All interviews referenced in this chapter were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees have been changed by mutual agreement.

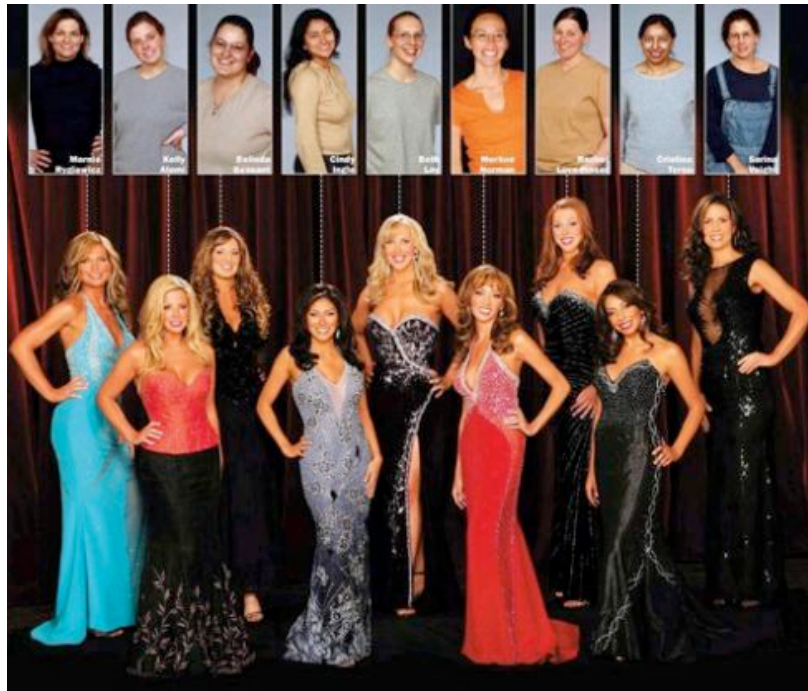


**Figure 4.1** – “Jessica’s Agony.” Cover of *Us Weekly*, 2009. Magazines often seen at the grocery store check-out scrutinizing women’s bodies. Courtesy of *US Weekly*, 731 (2009) [http://64.90.166.18/photos/see-jessica-simpsons-us-weekly-covers?slideshow\\_id=725&o=33](http://64.90.166.18/photos/see-jessica-simpsons-us-weekly-covers?slideshow_id=725&o=33); “Going to Extremes.” Cover of *People Magazine*, 2006. Courtesy of *People Magazine* (2006) [http://img.timeinc.net/people/i/2006/stylechannel/blog/061009/people\\_cover\\_300x400.jpg](http://img.timeinc.net/people/i/2006/stylechannel/blog/061009/people_cover_300x400.jpg).

“too fat,” but also for being “too thin.” Most of the women in *People Magazine*’s “100 Most Beautiful People of 2009” exemplify these notions of beauty including Halle Berry, who not only has a simultaneously slender and voluptuous physique, but exhibits European facial features. Though she is recognized as the first African American woman to win an Academy Award for Best Actress, her mother is Caucasian, giving her light skin tone and a more “European” looking face shape and nose.<sup>12</sup> “Beautiful” women of color are usually closely aligned with white features.

While most Americans do not look like celebrities, they are willing to go to extremes to

<sup>12</sup> Halle Berry won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 2001 for her role in *Monster’s Ball*.



**Figure 4.2** – “The Swan Pageant.” Image from *People Magazine*, 2004. The women on the first season of *The Swan* who competed in the pageant. With different body types and facial features, they were made-over to fit a narrow definition of beauty. Courtesy of *Skyrock*, [http://f9.img.v4.skyrock.net/f92/celebritybeauty/pics/1789437294\\_small.jpg](http://f9.img.v4.skyrock.net/f92/celebritybeauty/pics/1789437294_small.jpg).

uphold these notions of beauty seen in the entertainment industry. The 2004 Fox reality show *The Swan* (see Figure 4.2) demonstrates the way society labels people “ugly” and “beautiful.” The show, which ended after two seasons, took sixteen “ugly” women and through extensive plastic surgery made them into “beautiful” swans. The women all underwent similar procedures including liposuction, breast augmentation, nose jobs, chin implants, and face lifts. After four months recovering from surgery, dieting, and meeting with therapists to assist in an “inner beauty” transformation, half of the women were selected to compete in a beauty pageant. One woman, Tawnya Cook was excluded from moving onto the pageant because she refused a procedure to remove a bump on her nose. Despite protestation from the plastic surgeon, who believed the bump hindered her from achieving a beautiful transformation, she decided to keep the distinctive feature on her nose. She felt that the bump connected her to her family since her

daughters had the same nasal bump as well. But, another contestant of Mediterranean decent, Christina Tyree, agreed to have the bone structure of her nose, something associated with her racial heritage, changed to look more slender and European, or as she perceived it “beautiful.” Trying to conform to society’s standards of beauty can require sacrifices, erase individuality and heritage, and can also be physically painful.

According to these “Hollywoodized” standards, the Princesses are undoubtedly beautiful. For example, Cinderella’s has distinguishably Aryan features: blond hair, blue eyes, fair skin, and high cheek bones (see Figure 4.3). Ariel has long flowing hair, a large bust size, an extremely skinny waistline and a long torso (see Figure 4.3). These are only some of the features they possess that represent a narrow vision of feminine beauty. The Princesses’ beauty often serves as an initial attraction for young girls to the brand. When asked why she likes Disney Princesses, Audrey replied, “They’re beautiful. I like the way they look.”<sup>13</sup> A young girl’s



**Figure 4.3** – *Left to right*, “Princess Cinderella.” Image of Cinderella from the Disney Princess Collection. Courtesy of “Decorating a Room Disney Princess,” *Photobucket*, <http://www.squidoo.com/decoratingabedroomwithDisneyPrincess> Cinderella and Ariel; “Princess Ariel.” Image of Ariel from the Disney Princess Collection. Courtesy of “Princess Ariel, The Little Mermaid,” *Squidwho*, <http://www.squidoo.com/ariel-little-mermaid>.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with mother and daughter, February 24, 2009.

definition of beauty can become easily guided by these fictional characters and girls often play Princess in order to feel beautiful. Angie's mother says about her daughter, "Mostly she likes to dress up in the Princess dresses and prance around while we praise her and tell her how beautiful she is."<sup>14</sup> Princesses are perceived as the pinnacle of female beauty, reinforcing other images of beauty seen in the media. By dressing like a Disney Princess, Angie can perceive herself as beautiful according to similar standards.

Beauty in the Princess brand equates easily coded signs of femaleness. Though the costumes may be different colors, the standard color for the brand merchandise is an electric pink, which clearly distinguishes them as female. The glitter and frills of the products and costumes are other identifiable signs of female beauty that can be worn on the body or as accessories to the body. Butler believes, "the body is only known through its gendered appearance"<sup>15</sup> Through these outward signs of gender, the female body becomes recognizable with Princess merchandise. The appearance of the female body is also presented a certain way through the Disney Princess dresses. Adding fabric to the dress of one of her daughter's Princess dolls, Allison's mother describes, "This is Belle, who recently got a 'modesty makeover' after Allison kept on insisting on being a 'naked princess.' Mommy and Daddy wouldn't mind except it got a little out of hand. No more obsessing over being naked like Ariel, Jasmine, and Belle when she dances with the Beast."<sup>16</sup> Allison recognizes the Princesses wear clothing that reveals their bodies. Though the Princesses' bodies are not actually naked, through suggestion they are sexualized by their form fitting clothing, cleavage, and bare torsos (in Ariel and Jasmine) in their costumes. Desiring to be like a Princess, Allison wants to perform the part by mimicking the

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<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with mother and daughter, February 24, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 190.

<sup>16</sup> "Our Story," personal blog, March 19, 2009.

“naked” appearance of their bodies. While the desire to be a “naked Princess” seems innocent for a three-year old, sexuality is attached to the “nudity” she perceives.

Beauty also becomes attached to material objects. Once attracted to the glitz and glamour of the Princesses, the merchandise can form ideas about ideology and play. In order to be a beautiful and authentic Princess, one must purchase the correct merchandise. Angie becomes a beautiful Princess when she wears the Disney Princess approved costume. When asked whether or not her daughter pretends to be a specific Disney Princess when she plays, Emma’s mother said, “She doesn’t pretend to be a certain [P]rincess, yet. Although I’m sure she would if we owned some of the specific [P]rincess dresses.”<sup>17</sup> A girl is more likely to limit herself to playing a certain Princess if she has the branded costume. Though this is not always the case, owning a Cinderella dress can limit the wearer to playing “Cinderella,” following the narrative in the movie and additional media.

Yet, other Princess merchandise provides a way to perform the female gender more subtly. A girl need not be wearing her costume to perform Princess. She performs Princess every time she sleeps in her Disney Princess sheets or brushes her teeth with a Cinderella toothbrush. Such products are used by the body as it performs regular functions. Since gender is attached to the concept of beauty within the Princess brand, in many ways female identity aligns itself with consumer goods. The Princess brand provides an easy to understand definition of femaleness which is limited to a particular way of looking physically attractive and owning beautiful things.

Americans also pay credence to the notion of inner beauty. The “100 Most Beautiful People of 2009” issue of *People Magazine* recognizes certain qualities of “inner beauty”

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with mother, February 24, 2009.

featuring Christina Applegate on the cover, who underwent a double mastectomy and corrective plastic surgery after being diagnosed with breast cancer. It also includes Michelle Obama, the first African American First Lady, and a strong confident woman. By exhibiting desirable features, someone can be considered “beautiful” even if they do not meet the physical requirement. Yet, these women with “inner” beauty are still reasonably good looking individuals. Inner beauty becomes associated with outer beauty. The Disney Princesses brand similarly marks physical beauty as an outward sign of inner beauty or goodness, giving good and bad qualities to separate characters in the Princess world.

By putting on the Princess persona, a girl puts on the costume of goodness. The clearly delineated world of good and bad is helpful for young people to understand, but thwarts the reality of the real world. The Disney Princess notion of beauty teaches that outward appearances are the most important quality since it represents one’s personality. Taking on the face of a Princess, a girl can mask her behavior to some extent without damaging her appearance of being good. Lily’s mother says, “She used to act out scenes from *Sleeping Beauty* a lot but now she seems to just like to dress up like Sleeping Beauty and then do whatever she wants as the Princess.”<sup>18</sup> The Princess costume gives her power and a sense of entitlement. Girls can “play” with the notions of good and bad behavior because they already possess the signs of being good on the outside. Such an understanding of beauty relating to goodness leads to certain limitations. As children get older and learn good and bad are not so clear cut, their identity can fail them when they make their own mistakes or discover beauty itself can be untrustworthy.

Before this discovery, girls sometimes allow the Princess brand to guide them in the formation of their identity. Stacy began to form an attachment to Belle as a toddler. However,

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<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with mother, March 27, 2009.

when she was three she took the “Princess Personality Quiz,” a game featured on Disney’s *Princess Party* Volume One DVD.<sup>19</sup> The quiz draws questions from a pool of about seventeen possibilities including, “What color is your hair?” “Which idea do you believe the most?” and “If you had your very own prince, he...?” The questions are given at random and rotate each time the quiz is generated with the first question always being, “What is your favorite color to wear?” After answering seven questions, one of the fairies from *Sleeping Beauty* declares which Princess the player is most like. Taking the quiz several times could generate a different answer depending on what combination of questions is given. But, when Stacy was a preschooler, the first time she took the quiz it told her that she was most like Aurora. From that point on, Aurora replaced Belle as her favorite Princess. The Disney Princess brand helped her identify herself with Aurora, which dictated which Princess products she desired to own and which Princess she should align herself with in later play. Such arbitrary games remove choice, guide thinking, and shape the formation of identity in a limited way.

The brand further reduces agency by being so prevalent. Perusing aisles at the store, sometimes the Princess choice for toys and merchandise is the *only* choice. Lily’s mother describes how her daughter got attached to the brand, “Well, the Disney Princess stuff is everywhere and I think she just saw it a lot.”<sup>20</sup> Repeated exposure to Princess merchandise can often guide young girls to be consumers and become attached to the brand. Audrey and Ellie’s mother mentioned how her daughter’s grandmother helps fuel the girls’ appreciation of Princesses. Allison’s mother also mentions, “[The Princesses] really got pushed forward by Christmas and birthday presents from Grandmas.”<sup>21</sup> Limited by choices available to purchase

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<sup>19</sup> *Disney Princess Party*, Volume One, DVD (Walt Disney Video, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with mother, March 27, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Personal email from mother, March 19, 2009.



for gifts, people outside the immediate family add to a girl's collection of Princess paraphernalia. Princesses embedded with stereotypes about female beauty, become some of the first images girls have to associate with pertaining to womanhood.

### **Capitalizing and Shaping Behavior: "Cinderella Uses the Potty"**

In the movies, the Disney Princesses narrowly define female behavior as well as beauty. Cinderella follows the formula for being a perfect 1950s housewife, being domestic and subservient. Ariel acts like a modern Material Girl, who speaks her mind, but still conforms to traditional gender roles in the end. The Princesses are presented as the stereotype of female perfection. Despite these problematic representations of women, parents and marketers have discovered the ability to capitalize on the appeal of the Princesses to shape young girls' behavior in a certain way. By doing so, they reinforce the stereotypes of the brand and infringe on gender exploration.

In 2006 the Disney Princess brand published a book entitled *Polite as a Princess*, which is designed to teach manners. The book begins by addressing the reader with a rhetorical question followed by a direct and pointed statement, "Do you have good manners? A princess certainly does."<sup>22</sup> Not only do the first two lines set up the book as an educational guide, but it also establishes the Princesses as positive role models of good behavior. The next several pages follow a particular formula listing a Princesses' name and stating the good manners she exemplifies. Some of the behaviors are typical good manners such as, "Belle always says please when asking for something she wants," and "Jasmine says thank you when someone does

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<sup>22</sup> Melissa Lagonegro, *Polite as a Princess* (New York: Random House/Disney, 2006).

something nice for her.” Yet, as each page is accompanied with detailed and colorful illustrations resonating with the different Princess movies, it reinforces some gender stifling behavior.

One page states, “Snow White always cleans up after herself.” The sentiment itself is not stifling, but coupled with an illustration of Snow White standing next to a table covered with pies, a rolling pin, and dough while she is holding a broom, an image from the movie where she keeps house for the dwarves, alludes to a very domesticated ideal of a woman’s place in the kitchen. Likewise, another page says, “Cinderella puts away all the materials from one project before starting another.” The corresponding picture is of Cinderella in an apron putting away a sewing project, cleaning up after making clothes for her mice “children,” again reintroducing the domestic qualities of Cinderella’s generation as being ideal and essential for polite behavior. On a few pages throughout the book there are illustrations depicting a particular Princess looking directly at the reader, pointedly addressing the audience members as pupils of the desired behavior. The book ends by stating, “A princess is a polite young lady. Don’t you want to be just like a princess?” The final question reads less like an invitation and more like a command. The previous pages featuring the Disney Princesses as idolized figures, foregrounds the ending so the only response can be “yes.”

Books such as *Polite as a Princess* typify Disney Princess merchandise as marketing the brand as educational. With illustrations that look as if they could be pulled directly from a film, they present the films and merchandise as molders of good behavior and increase the validity of purchasing Princess items. Using the Princesses as markers of good manners invites girls to perform similar behaviors, and also to perform as the specific characters in daily life. Based on Butler’s thoughts, through these repeated behaviors based on stereotypes, “it is the mundane and

ritualized form of their legitimation.”<sup>23</sup> Continually reinforcing the Princesses as symbols of perfection legitimizes the inherent problems within the presentation of womanhood in the brand. Acting like a Princess, even if it means being submissive, passive, or sexualized, means acting the part of womanhood which is also legitimized by the brand as good behavior.

Parents also “play” with the popularity of the Princesses by introducing desired behaviors and attaching it to a Princess. Angie’s mother says, “[W]e use the [P]rincesses to get her to do stuff, like, ‘Let’s do your hair like a pretty princess.’ Recently we say, ‘The [P]rincesses use the potty.’ ‘Cinderella goes to the potty, Ariel goes to the potty and Snow White goes to the potty.’ It seems to make our lives easier.”<sup>24</sup> Bringing the Princesses to the forefront of daily activity may be helpful for shaping behavior at the moment, but it further idealizes the Princesses and places them on a pedestal in the eyes of children. The mother of Stacy and Karissa also uses the Princesses to reinforce good behavior, saying things such as, “[P]rincesses are polite, they clean, they don’t talk back.”<sup>25</sup> Taking the fictive world of the Princesses and likening it to the real world blur the lines of what Gregory Bateson describes as “This is play.”<sup>26</sup> Within the “this is play” framework, the participants recognize the action is not real. Yet, when the framework is broken or lines are blurred there can cause some concern. Allison’s mother recounts what she found to be a startling conversation with her daughter:

Mother: Allison, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Allison: Princess.

Mother: Which [P]rincess? (Mommy is incredulous)

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 193.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with mother, February 24, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with mother, February 26, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2007), 142.

Allison: Cinderella.

Mother: So when you get big what will you be? (Still incredulous)

Allison: Princess.<sup>27</sup>

Allison's mother was stunned that her daughter believed that Princess was something that she could aspire to. Not only did she want to be a princess, but she wanted to *be* Cinderella and adopt her identity in daily life. Caroline Morris, a parent in Atlanta asks, "[W]hat happens when our daughters get to adulthood and they realize that the world isn't a fairy tale?"<sup>28</sup> Though it's nearly impossible to say how the Disney Princesses affect girls in the long term, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell note in their book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, that college-age women are developing narcissistic traits four times that of men.<sup>29</sup> Though men in that age group are still more likely to exhibit narcissistic traits, Twenge declares, "[W]omen are catching up, fast,"<sup>30</sup> and she believes that the Princess Phenomenon is a factor, citing that these women were young when some of the most popular Disney Princess films were released. Though parents capitalize off the idea that a Princess represents good female behavior, girls may in turn develop a different type of Princess mentality based off a glamorous association with royalty, which includes entitlement and vanity.

### **Interactive Media: Standing in Front of a Virtual Mirror**

Recent Disney Princess media include interactive features that further infringe on play relating to gender identity. Marie Laure-Ryan defines interactivity as resources where "changes

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<sup>27</sup> "Our Story," personal blog, January 29, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Martha Irvine, "Princess Pedestal: How Many Girls Are On One?" *Yahoo News*, May 22, 2009 [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090522/ap\\_on\\_re\\_us/us\\_princess\\_syndrome](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090522/ap_on_re_us/us_princess_syndrome).

<sup>29</sup> Results were found analyzing surveys taken from 2002 to 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

in conditions are determined by the user's input."<sup>31</sup> As with interaction with live Princesses, this type of media invites the consumer to be less of a passive observer and more of an active player. Video games such as *Disney Princess: Enchanted Journey* (2007) available for Playstation 2, Wii, and PC allow players to interact with Princesses and enter their worlds. Many websites have games that create a virtual space for girls to play with Princesses. Additionally, interactive DVDs create a virtual play space where girls not only engage with fictional characters, but where the characters specifically tell them what to do.

I will look at the official Disney Princess website since it is free and easily accessible. The website is also the face of the Disney Princess brand on the internet and is listed on a variety of merchandise. Studies also show that sixty-one percent of children under age two use screen media (television, video, DVD) on a typical day.<sup>32</sup> As many homes own DVD players and children are watching video media beginning at a young age, I will also be looking at two different types of interactive DVDs that guide and shape play behavior: Princess Parties and Princess Sing Alongs, which each have multiple volumes available for purchase.

### *Princess Web site*

The home page of the official Disney Princess Web site features pictures of all eight cartoon Disney Princesses inviting the participator to "Select a Princess to Begin Playing."<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Marie Laure-Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor – The Case of Narrative in Digital Media," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1, no. 1 (July 2001), <http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>.

<sup>32</sup> Heather Kirkorian, Ellen Wartella, and Daniel Anderson, "Media and Young Children's Learning," *The Future of Children* 18 (2008), 45.

<sup>33</sup> As the games I examine on this Web site are not very complex or extensive, the scholarship of online girl gaming becomes an area of further insight, rather than being integral to the work at hand. See Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1998); Marsha Kinder, ed., *Kids' Media Culture (Console-Ing Passions)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Brenda Laurel, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Sonia Livingstone, *Children Online—*

Princesses are all facing forward, looking the player in the eyes. When the cursor passes a Princess, she comes to life, introducing herself and curtsying. Once a particular Princess is selected, the screen displays “Entering the World of...” while a narrator declares, “Let’s go visit Cinderella’s kingdom,” or “We’re now entering Aurora’s kingdom.”<sup>34</sup> The Princess asks the players to help them prepare for an event such as Cinderella’s Royal Parade or Ariel’s Tea Party. The Princess addresses the player and says things like, “Having your help would make this day just wonderful” or “I always look forward to seeing you” or “I’m so happy you visited me today.”

The player then selects an outfit for the Princess to wear to the special event including a hair piece, some jewelry, a dress, and a purse. The Princess states something like, “It’s important as a Princess that I look my very best.” Once the player is finished she has the option to print a picture of the Princess wearing the outfit selected. The Princess then offers a picture of a virtual friendship bracelet, which can also be printed. A friendship bracelet with eight different charms can be collected for all eight Princesses and be stored in a “Princess Charm Book” that requires logging in. The Web page recognizes, “Welcome Princess (name)!” in the corner of the screen. There are additional features on the Web site such as “Princess Paint” which allows the user to paint a picture and insert a Princess logo, “Storybook” which tells the Princess stories showing images from the films, and “Desktop Downloads” which provides a Princess image to put as the wallpaper on your computer.

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*Consumers or Citizens? Cultures of Consumption Working Paper Series, 2004, <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html>; Ellen Seiter, “The Internet Playground,” in *Toys, Games, and Media*, eds. J. Goldstein, D. Buckingham, and G. Brougere, 93-108, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).*

<sup>34</sup> The Walt Disney Corporation, “Disney Princess: The Official Princess Website,” <http://disney.go.com/princess/#/home/> (accessed May 27, 2009; site has now added Princess Tiana as the ninth Princess).

The Web page exists as a virtual space for girls to enter the worlds of the Princesses. Here the kingdoms in the movies continue to exist outside the films, but are presented in a more intimate and interactive way. By logging in and collecting “Princess Charms” girls are remembered and encouraged to return, becoming a part of the Princess world. In Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell’s article “Girls’ Web Sites: A Virtual ‘Room of One’s Own’?” the authors posit the idea that through personal Web sites, “a girl can obtain a virtual ‘room of one’s own,’ no matter how cramped her physical living conditions may be.”<sup>35</sup> Building off of Virginia Woolf’s famous essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, which discusses the success of women in history relating to having access to a separate and private space of their own, they believe internet sites allow girls to have such a space even if their living conditions are cramped.

Though Reid-Walsh and Mitchell discuss this space existing in terms of girls establishing their own Web sites, in many ways, the Disney Princess home page serves as a substitute home page for girls too young to create their own Web site. Girls are allowed to engage with the Princess characters alone as the games are designed for individuals rather than multiple players. While young girls may need adult assistance to play the games, they are still in a position to make choices about what Princess world they want to enter, what they want the Princess to wear, and what other games they want to engage with. These choices allow them the freedom to express their likes and dislikes and, to a certain extent, explore the femininity presented on the Web site.

Still, the site becomes a problematic “space of their own” as images of the female gender are presented in limited ways. The focus of the site is on being glamorous and “look[ing] [one’s] very best.” Beauty is related to fancy clothing and possessions as girls choose between one ball

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<sup>35</sup> Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell, “Girls’ Web Sites: A Virtual ‘Room of One’s Own’?” in *All About the Girl*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 174.

gown and another and are working to obtain charms for their bracelets. The characterization of the Princesses continue to reflect their personas in the films, which most girls already have a familiarity with when they approach the Web site. In Bronwyn Davies' book *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*, she discusses how girls find their feminine identities by engaging with the characters in fictional stories. She says, "In imaginatively bringing the characters to life they bring the detail, the thread, the emotions of their own experience to bear on the words on the page and so make the characters live. The text then seems real, the ... storylines are the storylines of life – the way life is."<sup>36</sup>

The Web site resurrects the text of the Princess films in a different venue for young viewers/players to experience. Visiting the Disney Princess Web site allows girls to further engage with the female characters which present narrow versions of femininity. For example, Cinderella is concerned with looking her best for the Royal Parade since it is part of her role as a Princess, which correlates with maintaining a perfect exterior and appearing flawless in many aspects of her character. Ariel also continues to portray a Material Girl on the Web site by playing coyishly with her hair and speaking in a somewhat immature and less formal manner ("Please, please help me").

Being given the option to print the Princess pictures or friendship bracelets gives players a tangible validation of their interactions in the Princess world. The images are finalized by ink on the printed page, further ingraining limited versions of the female gender. Davies additionally says, "The battle between the characters in the stories and the characters reading the story are impossible to unthread from each other."<sup>37</sup> Such printed reminders of the stories explored on the

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<sup>36</sup> Bronwyn Davies, *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 174.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



Web page, which focus on beauty, physical appearance, and material goods serve as a text that can be read over and over making the Princess world and the real world less distinguishable from each other.

### *Princess Parties*

The Disney Princess brand released two DVDs specifically designed to host Princess themed parties for young girls. *Princess Party* Volume One was released in 2004 and *Princess Party* Volume Two was released in 2005. These DVDs feature animated stories, play along games, activities, and party planning tips. The narrator on the disc menu and the Princesses running the games address the viewers frequently as “princess,” casting the audience in the part of Princess as they experience the DVD.

In Volume One, there is not only the previously mentioned Princess Personality Quiz which aligns a girl’s personality and looks to a particular Princess, but there is also a Princess Dress-Up Game.<sup>38</sup> In an even more arbitrary fashion, this game imposes a Princess identity based on nothing but mere chance. The game instructs a group of girls to put on particular items, such as party dresses, shoes, tiaras, and jewelry. Then, girls take turns standing in front of a picture of a virtual mirror where their reflection appears as one of the Disney Princesses. Pictures appear at random, but the magic and authority of the screen places an identity on the young viewer as if she were really in front of the mirror. Through this game she is given a body with particular gendered signs which she can accept or reject, but in the moment of revelation onscreen she *is* that Princess.

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<sup>38</sup> *Princess Party*, Volume One, DVD.

Further games and stories on both volumes of the Party DVDs are run by the voices of Disney Princesses who address the viewers as “friends,” presenting the Princesses as personable role models. For example, during Belle’s Storytime,<sup>39</sup> players choose objects on the screen and then Belle reads a story inserting those objects into an already constructed narrative. Laure-Ryan categorizes interactive games as being either internal or external. Internal is described as being cast into the game in a first person role, whereas being in external mode a user would be outside the virtual world. She also describes interactivity as being either exploratory or ontological. Exploratory mode allows the player to freely move around the database and ontological mode sends the plot in different directions on forking paths. Belle’s Storytime would be considered “external/exploratory interactivity.” By being external to the fictional world, the user in Belle’s Storytime “either plays the role of a god who controls the fictional world from above, or [s]he conceptualizes [her] activity as navigating a database.”<sup>40</sup>

Participants have certain control and choices in the game since they are choosing the objects that will be featured in the story. Yet, as the player uses the game as a database in an exploratory way, “this activity does not make history nor does it alter the plot; the user has no impact on the destiny of the virtual world.” While the player appears to be in an authorial role in Belle’s Storytime, the possibilities of the story’s outcome follows one formula and the fate of the story stays the same despite the choices available. Someone or something is sad, so someone or something throws them a type of party, and the end reveals all it takes to cheer someone up is a party with a certain object or theme. Players are also given certain boundaries in terms of the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Laure-Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor,” <http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>.

items they can select and they cannot make up their own. These restrictions impose a relinquishing of power, which is glossed over by the way Belle interacts with the players.

As Belle reads the story back she engages with the viewer as a friend saying things like, “It’s very silly, don’t you think?” or “Well that was fun, don’t you agree?” Linguists refer to such questions as “tag questions,” which are fragments of questions attached to the end of ordinary clauses. Tag questions are thought to serve a variety of functions including facilitation, softening, challenging, and seeking confirmation. Using tag questions, Belle is inviting the viewer to help appraise the game, but she also “steer[s] the conversation in a particular direction.”<sup>41</sup> By showing an interest in the players choices and asking questions set up for a “yes” answer, Belle is creating an agreeable relationship with the participants, which gives the media autonomy over the play space. The authority for gender ideology comes from the Disney Princesses since they are setting certain limits during the course of play. Running parties, the Disney Princesses create an enticing and enjoyable play space, yet they create a virtual reality where little exploration of self can be made.

Gender is not only presented in Disney Princess stereotypical ways, but it is also thrust upon viewers. Having visual images of the Princesses that attempt to converse with viewers help reinforce narrow standards of beauty and behavior. This type of media gives girls another medium that demonstrates the desirability of Princesses. Here games are set up to help girls practice mimicking Princesses and assist in the adoption of a Princess or gender identity. The *Princess Party* DVDs present images and acts of womanhood that the audience can then accept, reject, or adapt to fit their own understanding.

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<sup>41</sup> Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 168-9.

## *Princess Sing Alongs*

Another interactive type of Princess media includes three volumes of *Disney Princess Sing Along Songs*. While not all girls can read the lines on the screen and most already know the words from singing along during the films, the sing along format creates a space where viewers are invited to participate. The DVDs are specifically designed to be used in play and not be passively viewed as a film. By framing a play environment with specific Princess songs, girls play the parts of different Princesses by emoting the characters through song.

The second volume of the Sing Along Songs series is entitled *Enchanted Tea Party*. A narrator invites the viewer to a tea party for all the Princesses and asks for help deciding where to seat each Princess. Yet, the narrator answers for the viewer, who has no choice in the matter of where to seat the Princesses. The narrator says without prompt, “This would be a good place to seat Sleeping Beauty, you are right.”<sup>42</sup> The place settings are designed to introduce each song, but attempts to make the viewer a participant in the preparation of a tea party. After only a few viewings, kids will likely have the “correct” answer memorized. Most of the interaction occurs singing along with the songs. The Princess songs become a part of play, but here the songs to be sung are selected for the viewer. Additionally, if a girl wants to be part of the “tea party,” she needs to watch them all in order to catch the narration in between.

A girl also performs in front of the television and *for* the television creating a reciprocal relationship between the fictional characters on the DVD and the performer. This type of relationship can further ingrain the messages of the films from which the songs derive. W. Stephen Smith discusses in his book *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing* how singing encompasses “a complex mix of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical, and

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<sup>42</sup> *Disney Princess Sing Along Songs*, Volume Two, *Enchanted Tea Party*, DVD (Walt Disney Video, 2005).

psychological aspects.”<sup>43</sup> By singing, a girl’s body experiences a wide range of involvement with the activity of the Princess DVD. The songs reintroduce stories and ideas from the movies while using images from the films. They also allow the singer to participate at a variety of different levels.

The Disney Princess line also heavily hypes the song specifically written for the brand entitled “Where Dreams Begin.” It is advertised as “uniting all the Princesses” together in one song. The music video shows a montage of clips from Princess movies, but no new footage is added. While the song is supposed to unite all the Princesses, they all still act independently in their virtual spaces. However, the Dance Along<sup>44</sup> to the music video invites girls to enter the Princess space. A group of young girls teach the viewer dance steps for the ball. Though the pop moves are fairly complicated, participants have the opportunity to review the moves as many times as they need to before the final dance at the “ball”. This Dance Along demonstrates how a contemporary Princess might play within the brand, but the ideology is still formulaic. The girls at the ball are wearing Disney Princess gowns and the ending footage replaces the live girls with the cartoon images of the grown Princesses. The young girls are presented as trainees for the Princesses, moving their bodies in prescriptive movements and acts attributed to Princesses.

The third volume of Disney Princess Sing Along series entitled *Perfectly Princess* also creates a virtual play space for viewers. This DVD is set up to teach “Princess manners” or instruct the viewer how to be a Princess. In between each song a Princess gives a piece of advice in the form of a letter, personalizing the lesson in a friendly way. Advice ranges from Jasmine saying, “Although it’s nice to look your best on the outside, it’s what’s inside that counts the

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<sup>43</sup> W. Stephen Smith, *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Sing Along Songs*, Volume Two, DVD.

most,” to Belle declaring, “After all, everyone makes mistakes sometimes—even a princess.”<sup>45</sup>

While the Sing Along songs incite the most involvement with the DVD, the “lessons” in between place the viewers in the position of pupils. These lessons are filled with generic ideology and reinforce Princess authority. With the Princesses in a position of power, they become models of the female gender, teaching female viewers how to look, as well as how to behave in accordance with their gender.

Play is an important part of childhood. It allows creativity and expands the horizons of a young person’s understanding. Performative play additionally allows children to practice being citizens, parents, and professionals. It is also a space to explore gender and ideas about self identity. With the infringement of this space by the Disney Princess brand, girls are limiting themselves in play options and ideologies. Psychologist Susan Linn states, “Immersion in the Disney Princess brand—with its focus on glitter and acquisition—precludes playing out the more psychologically meaningful aspects of the stories that take place before the heroine becomes a princess: themes of loss, sibling rivalry, and parent-child conflict.”<sup>46</sup> Options in stores are limited by the growing number of Princess products. The allurements of the brand shapes the focus and invades the play space by presenting attractive female stereotypes, attempting to shape behavior, and sometimes controlling play through interactive media.

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<sup>45</sup> *Disney Princess Sing Along Songs*, Volume Three, *Perfectly Princess*, DVD (Walt Disney Video, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Susan Linn, *The Case for Make Believe* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 174.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Conclusion: Diminishing Princess Brand Authority**

*For a little girl, the desire to feel special is more powerful than a magic wand. She dreams of a place where clothes are spun of silk and gold, where balls are held in her honor and where princes fall in love at first sight. It is a world Disney has created—full of fantasy and romance—where a girl can feel as special as a Princess. Disney Princess—where dreams begin.*  
—Walt Disney Corporation, “Disney Consumer Products”

I began this thesis recounting an experience I had with a family member that left me questioning the impact that Disney Princesses have on children and children’s play. This led to a discussion of how the different facets of the Disney Princess brand may influence the creation of a young girl’s gendered identity. At the end of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses a need for the denaturalization of gender by reconfiguring the politics of gender identity. The aim is not necessarily to celebrate each new possibility of what would compose gender, but rather “to redescribe those possibilities that already exist.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways *The Paperbag Princess* acts as a reconfiguration of the way the female gender had been represented in fairy tales of the past. The heroine is smart, conniving, and proactive. The female saves the male and there is no marriage at the end. Years of feminism and fighting for political and cultural change enabled a princess such as Elizabeth to exist. Yet, the proliferation of the Disney Princess brand has begun to

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 148-9.

reintroduce certain ideals that were attached to females in older eras. One reason Princess Elizabeth might not seem like a “real” princess to my niece is because she looks and acts differently than the popular Princesses who embrace traditional models of femininity. New possibilities for Princesses and femaleness are not as glamorous and may not have appealing merchandise.

My thesis attempts to reconcile a discomfort I have long felt about how the Disney Princess brand presents a commodified version of femaleness as it capitalizes on a young girls’ desire to feel special. The overwhelming presence of Disney Princess merchandise surrounds young girls at a vulnerable time when they are playing with different images of self and are forming their own identities. This resonates with a discussion raised by Henry Giroux where he says:

How children learn and what they learn, in a society in which power is increasingly held by megacorporations, raises serious concerns about what noncommodified public spheres exist to safeguard children from the ravages of a market logic that provides neither a context for moral consideration nor a language for defending vital social institutions and policies as a public good.<sup>2</sup>

There is a need for a space to exist free from commodified packages of reality in order for children to come to terms with the world in which they live. A troubling feature of the Disney Princess brand is that it is so closely tied to the female gender. It puts forth images and acts of womanhood in a repeated fashion that Butler identifies as being part of the creation of gender. The Princess brand makes it difficult to embrace Butler’s call “to *displace* the very gender norms

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 20.



that enable the repetition itself.”<sup>3</sup> As the Princesses become the norm for young girls’ play, being beautiful, accepted, and normal is tied to material goods and a narrow definition of femaleness.

The flood of 1980s and 1990s journal articles and the book *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells address some of the problems with female representation in Disney movies through a feminist lens. Still, not much has been written in light of the recent Disney Princess brand, which revives the Princess characters, unites them, and presents certain images of femininity beyond the films. This thesis not only looks at the films, but also analyzes the way the Princess brand represents gender in other media and merchandise. Through each of my research sites I attempt to show how the Disney Princess brand presents acts of gender and infringes on play. Chapter two looks at two popular Princesses: Cinderella and Ariel. Not only looking at the original films, but also at new representations in the Princess brand, it becomes apparent that old gender ideologies are reintroduced in the play space for young girls to wrestle with.

Chapter three analyzes how interaction with live Disney Princesses further presents gender and infringes on play in a different medium. Focusing my discussion on interaction with Princess characters at Disneyland, I was able to use my own observations as a participant to enhance my discussion. Not only did I watch young girls as they interacted with the live characters, but I was able to take part in the experience myself. The world created by the live Princesses is exciting and glamorous. I could not help but want to buy something from the gift shop so I could feel as beautiful and special as I perceived them to be. Experiencing these feelings for myself made it seem even more imperative to look at such interactions in a critical

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 148.

light. The repeated and public performance of the Disney Princess characters reinforces the narrow definition of gender that they present. The relationship with Princesses as models for young girls to emulate is fueled through this live interaction and continues to add to the desire to consume. Girls observe codified acts of gender, become part of a shared community, are homogenized as consumers, and buy into the notion of an achievable ideal.

The fourth chapter looks at play and how it serves as a space for gender exploration. The chapter examines how the Disney Princess brand presents stereotypes of beauty, attempts to shape behavior, and limits play through interactive media demonstrating a few of the ways the brand infringes on that important space. The use of case studies and interviews of different girls and their mothers enhances the conversation about how the brand invades the play space and blurs the lines between “play” and reality.

Judith Butler’s work discussing the performative nature of gender was integral to the analysis of the way the female gender is presented by the Princess Phenomenon. Looking at the different “acts” of womanhood presented by the characters in the films, by live actresses, and in new media and merchandise establishes how girls can mimic and model what they perceive to be female in play. The work of consumer culture theorists such as Ellen Seiter, Lamb and Brown, and Henry Giroux supplements the discussion of how womanhood is packaged and sold to children. Giroux refers to the Disney Corporation as an educator for today’s children. In many ways the Princess brand instructs young girls how to act as females. The societal constructs of gender are defined through the Princesses who teach how to perform the role of female. Though the Princess brand allows girls to feel beautiful, special, and more grown up, it also stifles and infringes on make believe exploration.

While the focus of this thesis seems to be looking at the Princess Phenomenon in mostly a negative light, I acknowledge that completely eliminating Disney Princess merchandise and films from a young girl's life is unnecessary and virtually impossible. Many parents recognize a need for balance when it comes to brands. Audrey and Ella's mother states, "I think most children become obsessed with [Princesses] because their parents feed it... [W]e try to find a healthy balance of [P]rincess and other things to play."<sup>4</sup> Rather than removing the Princesses from a young girl's life entirely, it is important to listen to what she likes and why. Lamb and Brown suggest, "A mother responds by acknowledging how persuasive these roles sometimes seem, how narrow and simple, not by offering up an alternative that pits good girl against bad."<sup>5</sup>

Parents need to be careful not to deem the Princesses as negative and therefore off limits, but rather allow girls to explore the Princesses as a small part of their play diet. It is not only important to find a balance for children's play and exposure to brands, but it is also important to assist them in questioning what is being presented. Though a young girl might not understand or be interesting in the concept of corporate motives, she can recognize certain limitations the Princesses present through discussion. Lamb and Brown further suggest:

[F]or ages four to seven, stay with the image and forget the producers and marketers.

This means modeling a way of seeing and talking about the different choices presented to her and helping her notice when her world is becoming smaller and more limited so she can step back and say, 'That's silly. That's a stereotype. Girls aren't really only like that.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with mother, February 24, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Gender: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers' Schemes*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

Helping girls identify stereotypes enables them to participate in the Princess brand with eyes wide open. Also, introducing other images of princesses (see Appendix) with books, film, and real life figures can diminish Princess brand authority. Presenting various alternatives to Disney Princess narratives can establish that someone such as Princess Elizabeth who seemed “weird” and not “real” to my niece could be a valid female role model.

## APPENDIX

### Suggestions for Presenting Princesses with Fewer Stereotypes

#### Books

*A Treasury of Princesses: Princess Tales From Around the World* by Shirley Climo and Ruth

Sanderson

*Cinder Edna* by Ellen Jackson and Kevin O'Malley

*Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine

*Princess Academy* by Shannon Hale

*Princess Bubble* by Susan Johnston and Kimberly Webb

*Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot

*The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert N. Munsch

*The Story of the Eldest Princess* by A.S. Byatt

#### Movies

*Ella Enchanted* (2004)

*Ever After* (1998)

*Happily N'Ever After* (2007)

*Princess Diaries* (2001)

*Roman Holiday* (1953)

*Shrek* (2001)

## Real People

Princess Diana of Wales

Princess Letzia of Spain

Princess Zara Phillips of England

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