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# **The Graceful and Gritty Princess**

## Managing Notions of Girlhood from the New Nation to the New Millennium

MIRIAM FORMAN-BRUNELL AND JULIE EATON

The authors investigate the nearly ubiquitous cultural icon for girls' play, the princess. They survey historical instances of princess play from the beginning of the American republic to the New Millennium, look at the literature concerning princesses in various periods, and discuss the individual recollections about princess play of a number of women. The authors argue that the figure of the princess, by absorbing a range of girlhood ideals, aids in reconciling the contradictory notions about what it means to be a girl in contemporary society.

LILI IS A TYPICAL American girl. At age four, she has princess coloring books and storybooks, princess sneakers and sandals, and a princess bike. She eats princess snacks. Lili was toilet trained on a padded princess potty seat.<sup>1</sup> Recently lots of little girls bejeweled and bedecked in things princess have been intensely engaged in a highly commercialized, commodified, and controversial form of fantasy play. Dressed in glistening gowns and sporting glittering tiaras, preschool and elementary-school girls caught in the princess craze don the identities of fairy-tale princesses. Reenacting plots from their favorite fairy tales, girls participate in beauty rituals with friends as well as heated battles with foes. Like other parents, Lili's are at a loss to understand the princess's astounding cultural reign. What explains the princess's power is girls' identification with the mixed messages embodied in the figure whose identity has been broadly constructed beyond a single conventional standard. In this essay, we argue that by absorbing a range of girlhood ideals the princess manages contradictory notions about what it means to be a girl in the New Millennium.

The princess also is playing a leading role in a battle being waged among adults—some see her as a blessing and others as a curse to American girlhood. Many traditional moralists remain convinced that fantasizing about being a princess is not only perfectly normal for girls but also a natural method of feminine socialization. Among second-wave feminists such as Peggy Orenstein—a

writer on girls' issues and a mother of a princess—the iconic female figure is a poor role model for twenty-first century daughters like hers.<sup>2</sup> Developmental psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Sharon Lamb, coauthors of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*,<sup>3</sup> also believe that the commercialized princess contributes to the erosion of girls' self-esteem. Over the last forty years, folklorists and feminist theorists have meticulously documented how the figure of the princess was historically shaped by patriarchal literary and cultural practices.<sup>4</sup> Yet observers and activists influenced by a third-wave feminist position that tends to find strength in female stereotypes argue instead that princess power can provide girls with useful skills in a sexist world.<sup>5</sup>

These diverse perspectives are more than just the customary review of the scholarly literature: they represent the range of a debate over girlhood that has been embodied in the figure of the princess for the last two hundred years. Our study seeks to ground the debate about the current princess craze in the history of girls' culture: the princess was an occasional rather than an everyday figure in girls' lives until recently—despite claims that girls' princess play is natural and timeless. We draw upon current analyses and move beyond their scope in order to consider the relationship between adult ideals and girlhood inspiration to pretend play. Expanding the age range, extending the time frame, and examining princess texts, artifacts, and girls' play anecdotes reveal that whenever the princess appeared, she functioned within larger discussions about girls' pursuit of personal autonomy and authority. The many versions of fairy-tale princesses brought into play by cultural producers from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first elucidate a long history of ideological tensions about the acquiescence and empowerment of girls.

While the canonical texts in which the iconic figure appeared are assumed to be universal and transcendent, the figure of the princess has been neither uniform nor immutable. Instead, the princess has often absorbed contradictory conceptions of girlhood that vied for dominance and shifted over time. Competing ideals about what a girl should be found expression in the princess, who has been continuously redrawn and recast by numerous toy marketers, story-book authors, and moviemakers over many generations. Many of the princesses they created figured as unambiguous exemplars of femininity because of their evident chastity, obedience, and helplessness. Yet many also blended feminine characteristics and saucy assertiveness.<sup>6</sup> By embodying a continuum of feminine characteristics that spanned from the docile to the daring, the princess was able to reach the broadest audience of girls who could relate to the gender contradic-

tions they themselves experience. In constructing the princess's identity broadly, she also assuaged grown-ups' misgivings about disquieting girlhood notions in conflict with their own beliefs.

The princess is a figure of discourse that has played an important role in the production of knowledge and the construction of truths about girls, the definition of girls' social relations, the constitution of girls' subjectivities, and the establishment of social power over girls. Yet this does not necessarily mean that girls are accepting recipients of the ideals, beliefs, and behaviors encoded in the princess. Generations of playful girls suggest that as active agents rather than passive players, those who played with the multivocal princess who embodied and elicited multiple meanings were often able to maneuver between gendered expectations and more daring identities.<sup>7</sup>

Though the figure of the princess had a long history that predated her appearance in Charles Perrault's eighteenth-century folktale collections, girls were unlikely to engage in princess play in colonial America where Puritan orthodoxy, pre-enlightenment fears about fantasy, and the pressures of a subsistence economy curtailed children's play and reading materials. In fact, well into the nineteenth century, antebellum advisors, writers, and others who championed new notions of childhood based on enlightenment ideals, continued to prefer didactic works that edified more than they entertained. They dismissed the Old World fairy tales deemed unacceptable for children of the New Nation who, they believed, needed stories that promoted reason, rationality, rectitude, industry, and invention in order to sustain the democracy.<sup>8</sup>

In order to develop a spirit of independence and self-sufficiency in girls in the New Nation, antebellum adults began to redefine girlhood as a time of relative freedom.<sup>9</sup> Growing up in Concord, Massachusetts, Louisa May Alcott—the future author of *Little Women*—spent her girlhood playing outdoors along with other girls in the Northeast. With her sisters, Anna and Lizzie, she pretended “we were fairies, and made gowns and paper wings.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time that many parents permitted girls to engage in unfettered play, however, they also believed that girls should be domestic, submissive, pious, and pure. The belief among the new middle class that daughters should conform to dominant-gender expectations led many parents to contain the robust play of girls and

to control their reading materials. In *The Fairy Tale* (1831), a fictionalized girl who enjoyed fairy tales was urged not to read them by her mother who found them unuseful, uncouth, and ungentle.<sup>11</sup>

Though women's rights supporter and writer Lydia Maria Child included calisthenics in *The Little Girl's Own Book*, she believed "much time should be devoted to elegant accomplishments, refined taste, and gracefulness of manner . . . as to enable daughters to fulfil [*sic*] the duties of a humble station, or to dignify and adorn the highest."<sup>12</sup> In her girl guide, lessons in femininity could be found in the instructive story, "The Palace of Beauty: A Fairy Tale," about "two little princesses"—beautiful Rose and her dark and "dwarfish" sister, Marion.<sup>13</sup> In a fit of insane jealousy, Marion cuts off Rose's golden hair. While in fairyland, the fairy queen sends Marion to complete a number of tasks that make her genteel, agreeable, and in the end, as beautiful as her sister. The story's last paragraph outlines the ideal girl Lydia Maria Child promoted: mild, pleasant, smiling, good natured, and handsome.

Although Joseph Alexander Adams, the editor of *The Fairy-Book*, shared the same prescriptive purpose with many of his contemporaries, he differed from them when it came to fairy tales. He believed that Perrault's tales and those of other French writers included in his compendium would generate "gentleness and compassion in girls."<sup>14</sup> According to feminist folktale scholars, male compilers and editors like Adams infused fairy-tale collections with passive, dependent, and helpless females and not with the capable and bold heroines who could be found in fairy tales written by women. In an analysis of the many editions of Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* (1812), Ruth Bottigheimer, a scholar of European comparative literature, noticed that female characters remained virtually mute in fairy tales. "Men could be silent but women were silenced," she wrote. "In the world of Wilhelm Grimm a talkative woman meant trouble."<sup>15</sup> The didactic princesses who appeared in edited collections like these were included to manage opposition to the patriarchal ideal of gender that they modeled for girls.

The princess who received the greatest approval for her cultural embodiment of moral character, feminine identity, and domestic usefulness was Cinderella in a tale that appeared in at least ninety children's books published between 1800 and 1899.<sup>16</sup> Versions of the fairy tale also appeared in magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, the leading women's periodical of the era that articulated its dominant gender norms.<sup>17</sup> "Fair and lovely," "sweet," and "obedient," Cinderella exemplified the ideals that were central to the construction of the middle-class

Victorian ideal of girlhood: self-sacrifice instead of selfishness, service instead of idleness.<sup>18</sup> While we do not know what accounted for Cinderella's popularity among girls, they probably read the story about the scullery maid transformed into a lady of leisure with their own relationship to the domestic economy in mind. While working-class girls and young women had limited options, daughters in middle- and upper-class families were in the process of reducing their domestic work load.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the princess appealed to many "parents of the new bourgeoisie [who] cultivated their daughters to embody the refinement and leisure that they were too busy to practice themselves."<sup>20</sup>

Along with Cinderella, Pocahontas was another princess who served as a model of rational girlhood and gendered civility fostered by middle-class parents aiming to cultivate proper feminine behavior in their daughters. Made anxious by the volatile transition from an agricultural to an industrialized society, many parents wanted their daughters to assume a secure place in the new social order as future wives and mothers. Parents looked to Pocahontas because, in stories about her, she signified the exalted "true woman."<sup>21</sup> As the daughter of the chief or emperor of the Powhatan confederacy, this rustic figure might not seem fit to be a traditional princess. But her rejection of her "barbarous" girlhood, her marriage to a white man, her conversion to Christianity, and her reception at Whitehall Palace made her into more of a storybook princess useful for the acculturation of white girls. According to children's literature specialist Laura Wasowicz, Pocahontas became a princess in the many Victorian versions of the tale because of her "intrinsic virtue, inner Christian purity, and conscious choice to seek and develop her intelligence and compassion."<sup>22</sup>

As a story about a girl who renounced her undomesticated past and assumed the mantle of stately womanhood, Pocahontas served as a model of feminine decorum and deportment especially useful for tempering high-spirited girls with their own unruly behaviors and their own beliefs about what it meant to be a girl. Many parents worried that their young daughters would not learn how to control their passions and assume their proper place as they came of age.<sup>23</sup> That concern led advice expert Catherine Sedgwick to urge girls to abandon their "rowdiness."<sup>24</sup> Many parents much preferred that their daughters attain refinement from reading about royalty in *Godey's Lady's Book* and other publications.<sup>25</sup> Ellen, the daughter of the transcendentalist philosopher, poet, and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, liked to read about Queen Victoria, the Princess Royal of England, in the weekly *Court Circular*. Yet like other adolescent girls who were quietly developing an "enhanced sense of self" through reading books

and writing in their journals, Ellen had begun to speculate about the meaning of princesses to parents: "I think of the idea of the princess tieing [*sic*] in with the vision of the daughter as the 'ornament' of the home. As there are fewer children, and the daughter becomes what the home produces, father and mother both become invested in her perfection."<sup>26</sup>

Although the princess made appearances in antebellum America, they did not dominate girls' culture. Many notions of girlhood jostled for position but not many of them vied for ascendance. More exciting and less edifying princesses began to appear more often in the American girls' culture as adults in the latter half of the century imposed fewer restrictions on girls.<sup>27</sup> Fiction writers celebrated the agency, autonomy, and imagination of child characters during this Golden Age of Anglo-American children's literature. Yet they also reflected anxieties about the wrenching social changes—economic transformation, social dislocation, unbridled materialism, political corruption, industrial exploitation, urban squalor, and the exploitation of children—that festered on both sides of the Atlantic. Troubled by the problems that affected children generally and especially the girls they romanticized, writers created fantasies about imagined places and imaginary princesses. This contrast between the harsh reality of working-class girls and the middle-class fantasy of girlhood was evident in Hans Christian Andersen's "Princess and the Pea," published for American readers in *Stories and Tales*. While real American girls labored for pennies in mills and factories, the working girl in Anderson's tale proved her finely tuned sensitivity to adverse social conditions: just a tiny pea under "twenty mattresses" and "twenty eiderdown beds" disturbed her sleep.<sup>28</sup>

As girls continued to push the boundaries of Victorian girlhood, more empowered princesses who embarked on quests and disputed the domestic ideal became familiar figures in the books they read. In addition to obscuring the challenge that the existence of so many young girls with loose family and community ties posed to the gender conventions of everyday life during the period, princesses also reflected the contending beliefs about the imagination of girls that many adults considered a threat to rational girlhood itself.<sup>29</sup> George Macdonald, one of the founding fathers of modern fantasy, wrote *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), a story about adventurous Princess Irene and Curdie, the son of a miner. In the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), a slightly older princess overthrew the corrupt ministers who were trying to poison her father, the king. *The Lost Princess* (1875) featured a princess who undertook a journey of self-discovery. The princess who was resistant to the force of gravity

in *The Light Princess* (1864) was free of burdensome social conventions. Though unable to walk, the princess who swam to the side of a drowning prince overturned gender conventions by rescuing him. That she was unwilling to take life seriously (she loved to laugh), also delayed her entrance into a more restricted womanhood. The character of the Light Princess must have appealed to real middle-class girls whose subcultural principles and practices were quietly challenging parental standards and girlhood norms.<sup>30</sup>

When she was just ten-years-old, bookish Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the future feminist author and lecturer, selected the identity of a princess when she entitled her journal, "Literary and Artistic Vurks of the Princess Charlotte."<sup>31</sup> After immigrating from the slums of Manchester, England, to the United States, teenager Frances Hodgson Burnett supported her siblings by writing. In 1888 she published "Sara Crewe or What Happened at Miss Minchin's," a story serialized in *St. Nicholas*, the leading children's magazine of the period. Fictionalized princesses figured in the works of American women writers whose life choices and literary works drew upon their own girlhoods and addressed contemporary transformations. In her work, Burnett featured a girl who represented the transition from the acquiescent Victorian ideal of the "young lady" to the imaginative and energetic "real girl."<sup>32</sup> Demonstrating girls' increasing independence from societal restraints, friends instead of family became the focus of Sara's life and peer-based culture. A pretend princess when with her friends, Sara was a well-to-do student at an all-girls' seminary. Her fantasy became a useful escape from the "acid" things said to her by the headmistress and others after she experienced what Victorians referred to as a reversal of fortune. That the novel also addressed the disparities between girlhood among the poor and the daughters of privilege with conspicuous leisure made it still relevant at the turn of the century. By then increasing immigration, intense industrialization, and rapid urbanization led to the appearance of impoverished "Little Mothers" who "minded" their younger siblings on tenement stoops. Addressing these same issues about the differences between girlhoods, Burnett revised, expanded, and published *A Little Princess* (1905), nearly two decades after it first appeared.<sup>33</sup>

While the princess helped bring contending ideas about girlhood into alignment, she also competed with other female figures for girls' attention. In fact, Burnett entitled the three-act play of her classic story, which was staged in London in 1902 and in New York City the following year, *A Little Un-fairy Princess*.<sup>34</sup> Before she became a performer upon whom the character of

the sexy female adolescent Betty Boop would be based, Helen Kane chose a queen costume for a performance at St. Anselm's in the Bronx.<sup>35</sup> While there was no princess outfit available, Kane might have chosen to dress as a fairy, a more frequent figure in girls' and women's cultures in both the United States and Great Britain.<sup>36</sup> Typical of girls' books of its kind was *The American Girls Handy Book* that included instructions on how to make a fairy dancer but not a princess.<sup>37</sup> Though a 1909 edition of *Paris Modes*, a woman's magazine, provided dressmaking instructions for the Ladies Princess Jumper Dress with Guimpe, the figure and dress of the American Indian woman spoke more directly to Progressive Era, New Women reformers. The figure of the female Indian better symbolized the health and well-being of the active New Girl ideal they championed.<sup>38</sup> Girl Scout leaders and other reformers who established summer camps to combat the deleterious effects of industrialism and urbanization on children encouraged young campers to dress up as Indians for plays and pageants.<sup>39</sup>

Yet the figure of the princess continued to serve as a significant symbol to authors during this period of transformation in gender norms. As a major contributor to the cultural construction of the adventurous girl type in the modern age, L. Frank Baum made Dorothy into a princess on yet another quest in the eleventh book in his canonical Oz series. In *The Lost Princess of Oz* (1917), Princess Dorothy set out to rescue Princess Ozma.<sup>40</sup> While still an adolescent, the talented poet and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay dressed up as a princess when she played the title role in her one-act play, *The Princess Marries the Page*. But Millay, no demure and powerless princess, had already begun to challenge gendered conventions and sexual mores while an undergraduate at Vassar College. She grew up to become the exemplar New Woman—well educated, politically aware, an independent thinker—who took center stage in American cultural life. Other New Women writers and artists also looked to the princess to help negotiate changing expectations for girls. Frances Marion, the prolific and renowned female screenwriter, adapted *A Little Princess* to the silent screen in 1917. Mary Pickford—who epitomized the spunky all-American girl though she was twenty-three at the time—starred as a plucky Sara Crewe.<sup>41</sup>

For little girls during the 1920s, girlhood coalesced around play with toys that largely reinforced their future role as housewives and mothers. The uniformity of the modern ideal of girlhood left little room for the princess who was not all that popular among girls. Toy manufacturers produced the Cinderella card game, Cinderella picture puzzles, and Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp paper

dolls, but while princess dolls like these were sold and children undoubtedly played with them, there was no princess craze to speak of.<sup>42</sup> Princess America competitions were held for Native American girls in the Pacific Northwest, but there were far fewer Indian princess competitions than beauty pageants in a decade noted for the liberalizing of sexual mores and a flourishing commercial culture, a culture that was, in fact, reshaping female adolescence in highly visible ways.<sup>43</sup>

To those adolescents who embraced modernity, the fairy-tale princess probably seemed as old fashioned as the Victorian matrons often lampooned in the silent movies of the Roaring Twenties.<sup>44</sup> Georgeanne Scheiner explains in *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans, 1920–1950* that

screen audiences were increasingly looking to motion pictures to make sense of what appeared to be a new social order. Teenage audiences were particularly bored by sentimental portrayals. A 1927 survey of motion picture preferences among adolescents showed that both girls and boys were impatient with films with “too much sob stuff.” Although girls in the survey liked films like *Lovey Mary* (1926), *Little Annie Rooney*, *Sparrows*, and *Ella Cinders* (1926) a bit more than boys, they were still fairly dismissive of the genre and said that they “didn’t care for fairy stories” and were critical of what they perceived as “kindergarten stuff.”<sup>45</sup>

The 1926 *Ella Cinders* was based on the comic strip character who had appeared in print the year before. Because girls and young women were in the process of forging their identity as teenagers, they liked Ella Cinders’s Dutch-bob haircut, sassy slang, comedic antics, and general distaste for housework.<sup>46</sup> Yet in the very first princess narrative created by Walt Disney, he cast the selfish stepsisters as flappers. Disney’s seven-minute *Cinderella* (1922) animation, which he produced for the Laugh-O-Grams Studio in Kansas City, revealed an anxiety about hedonistic girls and young women who were redefining what it meant to be a teenage girl during the Jazz Age.

Along with the protagonist of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s 1932 *The Princess Marries the Page: A Play in One Act*, a number of princesses also achieved greater prominence during the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> Depression-era princesses often reflected a redefinition of girlhood that resulted from the changing age and gender conventions set into motion by the collapse of the world economy. As with Disney’s

previous princess movies, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) reflected uncertainties about the expanding role of girls who—like Snow White—were forced to make do. Snow White was also part of an overall paradigmatic shift that occurred when the movie industry abandoned realism for more fantastical realms. Though movie characters suffered from social instability and rapid changes in gender norms in faraway lands—as did Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—fairy tales served to transport the downtrodden from the hardships of daily life. Fantasy distracted a generation dispirited by economic catastrophe and the disintegration of family life that often led girls in the 1930s to shoulder adult responsibilities.<sup>48</sup> Yet ambivalences about the new basis of Depression-era girlhood led to representations of girls in the movies as both helpless and helpful. The figure of the princess emerged to assist in the negotiation between girlhood ideals and personal experiences. In a revised version of *The Little Princess* (1939), Sara functioned as a model of adorable agency when her assisting adults unable to help themselves was added to the original plot. This was a role similar to those typically played by Shirley Temple, who became the personification of idealized girlhood during the Great Depression.

Girls of that era could buy the Shirley Temple “*The Little Princess*” *Coloring Book*, which was more affordable than the expensive Cinderella dress included in a line of clothing that bore the label of America’s Sweetheart.<sup>49</sup> There was also a Cinderella and the Glass Slipper Game, and in 1938 the Knickerbocker Toy Company marketed a less svelte and more sturdy Snow White after the movie came out.<sup>50</sup> Despite the presence of these movie tie-ins and their knock-offs, the sway princesses held over the play of little girls appears to have been rather limited. Teenage girls in Portland, Oregon, did compete to represent Snow White at the Grand Floral Parade in 1938. Yet June Zaccone, who was sent to live with her grandmother during the Depression, preferred to hunt for mushrooms in the woods with Granny rather than to play with paper dolls of Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret or her doll in a silk dress.<sup>51</sup> Carla Klausner loved her doll, but it was just a commoner.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the Depression and then World War II, the Madame Alexander doll company continued to produce Princess Elizabeth dolls, though other Allied toy companies retooled to make artificial limbs and other war-related goods. But many girls may simply not have noticed. Nearly half of the seventy-three girls queried in a wartime study conducted by the Barnard College gender sociologist Mirra Kamarovsky reported that they “disliked dolls.” War games preoccupied girls as they did boys, though boys were allowed greater leeway to

play them.<sup>53</sup> Parents, grandparents, even neighbors criticized girls for playing with toy soldiers instead of dolls. The values of adults clashed with those of home-front girls who were in the process of reconstructing a more autonomous and empowered girlhood for themselves. Little surprise that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Little Princess* reappeared, this time at Mrs. E'Llora Crane's School of Elocution in South Portland where it was performed by students. Once again, the princess mediated a generational and gendered conflict over changing roles for girls. In another movie, the appearance of a sexy Princess Margaret reflected the upending of adolescent girlhood by Victory Girls, who ignited a moral panic on the home front. In the Technicolor parody, *The Princess and the Pirate* (1944), Princess Margaret destabilized the eighteenth-century patriarchal convention of an arranged marriage by eloping with her true love on the high seas.<sup>54</sup>

The princess made more frequent appearances during the 1950s. As a renewed emphasis on the importance of domesticity became a central tenet of postwar femininity, in 1952 one business that produced household products also manufactured the Princess Doll, a bed or vanity display figure available by mail for fifty cents.<sup>55</sup> Companies aimed princess products squarely at girls socialized to follow in their mothers' dainty footsteps. From 1953 to 1956, the Ideal toy company produced a Princess Mary doll who exemplified the postwar cultural values of leisure and prosperity.<sup>56</sup> Indian Princess Summerfall Winterspring—a character on the popular Howdy Doody television show that ran from 1947 to 1960—could be purchased as a doll and as a cutout figure.<sup>57</sup> Within the expanding consumer culture for children, princess-themed Shirley Temple dresses again were available, as were fragile plastic pumps that cracked as easily, or so it seemed, as the glass slippers in *Cinderella* (1950). This was Disney's second animated feature, and it celebrated the return of domesticity, romance, abundance, and female submission. The movie was targeted at baby boomers whose Depression-era parents had grown relatively prosperous over the course of two turbulent decades.

The reconstitution of rigid gender roles generated numerous contradictions for American females of all ages in postwar America.<sup>58</sup> While girls were encouraged to be Susie Homemakers like their mothers, they were also allowed wide latitude in their other play activities. Although Barbara Berg had been fascinated as a girl by the television coverage of Princess Elizabeth's coronation (which led to the production of dolls of the royal family), she liked to pretend that she was instead an Indian princess who helped the pioneers (embodied in her stuffed animals and pussy cats) in her covered wagon (consisting of a

blanket on chairs) heading westward—out of Brooklyn.<sup>59</sup> As girls, Diane Eickoff and her sister liked to “rescue books from the snake-infested basement” of their farmhouse in Minnesota, and—though some of the books were about princesses—the girls never actually played princess.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, the appearance of new princesses answered a need to address the growing disparities between postwar gender ideals and the real lives of teenage girls. In both *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) Disney again reflected anxieties about threats to the social order, especially the threats coming from adolescent girls. As adult suburbanites cast aside their working-class origins and moved upward into the leisured middle class, teenage girls incorporated into their teen culture the music, fashions, dance, vernacular speech, values, attitudes (e.g., defiance, spontaneity), and other aspects of lower-class cultural practices.<sup>61</sup> Postwar girls’ culture informed the movie *Roman Holiday* (1953), which took place overseas but addressed concerns closer to home about increasingly irreverent teenage girls.<sup>62</sup> The teenpic examined the sheltered but rebellious teenage princess played by Audrey Hepburn yearning to explore her social independence and sexual desires. The movie ended with her acceptance of both convention and containment, of course, but like other princesses, she embodied the irrepressible tensions between female adolescent ideals and girls’ teen culture. In 1959 AT&T marketed Princess Phones, aiming to both capitalize on teenage girls’ culture as well as contain it. Such domestic technology connected the pampered to their peers but also tethered them to the home.<sup>63</sup>

Uncertainties about girls’ growing rejection of traditional feminine ideals—domesticity, virtue, and submission—and their pursuit of more illicit pleasures, fueled adult anxieties. Already by the early 1960s, alarm about teenage girls who drank alcohol, took drugs, and had sex found broad expression in popular books, newspaper articles, and magazine exposés.<sup>64</sup> “Little girls are too sexy too soon,” declared *The Saturday Evening Post*, one of many periodicals that condemned such sexual precocity and forecast its perilous impact.<sup>65</sup> Anxieties about the feminism that had already begun to shape girls’ lives led to the appearance of yet another princess. The comedian Carol Burnett originated the role of the boisterous and androgynous Princess Winifred (Fred) on Broadway in 1959 in *Once upon a Mattress*, a comical musical she brought to television in 1964. Preadolescent protofeminist girls like Miriam Formanek and her sister Ellen, influenced by new social changes, often imitated Burnett’s uproarious antics and comic subversions. Yodeling at the top of their lungs, they were anything but prim princesses.<sup>66</sup> Still younger girls began to recognize the conflict between the

girls they were and the women they were expected to become. Decades before Laura Wasowicz wrote her pioneering essay about Pocahontas, she recalled that while as a kindergartner she “marveled at the (seemingly unattainable) beauty of fairy tale princesses.” She disliked “their utter dependency upon men who in some cases treated them in ways that were downright cruel in order to bend the princess’ proud spirit to fit a more proper, subservient shape.” These princesses left Wasowicz feeling “secretly glad” she had “a Peter Pan haircut and absolutely no royal blood.”<sup>67</sup>

There were undoubtedly girls like Julie Eaton who basked in the conventions of girlhood that came under fire during the 1970s. Desiring to be surrounded by all that was understood to be feminine, Eaton wore dresses most of the time and wanted nothing more than a head full of curls and pearls gracing her neck. Though her life revolved around “everything girly,” the power of the princess was minor compared to the political force of feminism that gained ground during the 1970s.<sup>68</sup> Mattel produced a Princess Aurora Fairy costume for Barbie, but anything princesslike had little appeal to many girls in the process of expanding the boundaries of girlhood.<sup>69</sup> Kelly Schrum and her sister engaged in “a little princess play,” though the pair spent most of their time running around and climbing trees in their California neighborhood.<sup>70</sup> When they were girls, Leslie Paris and her sister liked to read books illustrated with Gothic castles. But when they actually played games, “We were more into being fairies who at least had special powers and could fly. Princesses didn’t do very much except dress up and dance.”<sup>71</sup> Princess play was similarly unappealing to Neva Chonin. “By age six, I was eating dirt and wanting to be a Japanese robot. I pulled my Barbie dolls apart limb by limb and reassembled them into hybrid monsters,” explained the former writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* about her girlhood.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1970s, scholars interested in the princess were generally self-identified feminists. Newly devised methods of feminist analysis led folklorists to examine fairy-tale figures from a gendered perspective. They took Bruno Bettelheim to task for his claim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* that traditional fairy tales taught children essential truths about civilization and about themselves.<sup>73</sup> Increasingly, feminist critics and theorists, examining the language, the voice, and the literary practices of fairy tales, argued that the prescriptive representations of female helplessness in canonical fairy tales perpetuated patriarchal notions and relations.<sup>74</sup> The influence of sex-role theory, which emphasized the importance of positive im-

ages in shaping desirable behaviors and values, led women writers to create adventurous fairy-tale heroines from around the world.<sup>75</sup>

Feminist ideals also informed Anne Beeler, the young wife of Robert Munsch, who encouraged him to reform the notion of the demure princess and make her a daring character in the stories he told the children in the child-care center where he worked during the 1970s.<sup>76</sup> These led to *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980), a story that appropriated and re-created the classic princess. Not only did Munsch's empowered princess save the prince from the dragon, but she also told off the snooty and ungrateful cad for ridiculing her scruffy appearance. Endorsed by the National Organization of Women and sold on NOW's Web site, the book has sold millions of copies and shaped the cultural practices of generations of girls and women, who continue to dress up as paper bag princesses. Along with Munsch's, other audacious and untraditional princess began to appear in American and British children's books in such titles as *The Wrestling Princess* and *Princess Smarty-pants*.<sup>77</sup>

Not long after her 1981 televised fairy-tale wedding, Diana, the Princess of Wales, began to vex the crown with her "unladylike" behavior. The People's Princess was joined by an entourage of other powerful princesses who appeared in popular movies and television series—She-Ra, Princess of Power, in the *Masters of the Universe* series and Princess Leia in the *Star Wars* trilogy—to negotiate between the forces of feminism and femininity.<sup>78</sup> Combining beauty with bravery, lovely Leia was tough as nails when she stood up to torture and rescued Han Solo in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). She also memorably choked Jabba the Hutt to death with her chain in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Yet as girls and young women pursued their claims to sexual, social, and cultural autonomy during the 1980s, mounting unease about the influence of feminism led antifeminist forces to mobilize. Conservatives eager to restore the innocence of girlhood brazenly mocked by young women like Madonna dismantled the legislative victories that had granted women reproductive rights during the 1970s.

The struggle over girlhood in the 1980s could be read on the bodies of the heroic princesses of popular culture. They appeared as "action figures," sexy toy princesses dressed to look more like strippers. The infamous gold bikini that the enslaved Princess Leia was made to wear in *Return of the Jedi* replaced sexual agency with sexual objectification. Still, the complex encoding of conflicting girlhood ideals enabled some girl players to make alternative meanings as they formed their own identities as empowered princesses. "When I was a child," explained Muffy Guilfoil about her girlhood in the 1980s, "I pretended

to be Princess Leia. I liked that I was a princess, had a gun, and a choice of men. I was not much into the traditional views of a princess who was saved by a prince.<sup>79</sup> Nor was Katie Walker who twirled her hair into symmetrical buns and battled side-by-side with Han Solo at Raytown Elementary.<sup>80</sup>

During the 1990s, girls and young women accelerated the reinvention of girlhood. Combining second-wave feminist ideas with Punk's anticommercial and DIY (do-it-yourself) cultural practices, the radical Riot Grrrls subculture mocked the objectification of women and girls by reappropriating and recombining misogynist stereotypes in their aggressive music and clothing styles. They also provocatively marked visible parts of their bodies with words—slut, whore, cunt—commonly used to denigrate girls and women.<sup>81</sup> Riot Grrrls prominently contributed to the rise of third-wave feminism that specifically addressed the doubly marginalized status of girls as youth and as females and the global imperative for equality, rights, and control over their bodies, identities, and sexuality. Unlike the radical and protesting second wave, which had little to say about girls, third-wave feminists also promoted the notion that power was to be gained through the new economic role played by girls in the consumer market, an idea soon seized upon by Girl Power.<sup>82</sup>

Girl Power was the name given to the mass-culture ethos that commercialized the less radical aspects of third-wave feminism and that popularized the notion girls could achieve empowerment through pleasure, style, fashion, and attitude.<sup>83</sup> That there were so many ideas about girls in circulation by the end of the twentieth century made the reappearance of princesses imperative. These new princesses combined conventional femininity with confident assertions of power. The Girl Power action heroine in *Xena, Princess Warrior* fearlessly kicked butt on television from 1995 to 2001. In addition to Xena's strapping physique, independent spirit, and sexual agency, there were her more decidedly feminine qualities. Also embodying opposite ideals was the eponymous Little Princess who has a way of reappearing during periods of instability, unrest, and conflict. In the 1995 movie version, Sara fostered girl bonding and established a model sisterhood (except for the mean girl) at Miss Minchin's single-sex institution. By significantly altering the plot, the film was able to highlight Sara's heroism—but only briefly. Her character was also changed. While in the book Sara was clever and creative, in this movie version the sweet, blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl showed scant evidence of thought or imagination.

Such had to be the case because Princess Sara served as a buffer against the escalating eroticization of girls in the popular culture, described as “girl-

poisoning” by Mary Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Critiquing the forces that were shaping girlhood in the late twentieth century, Pipher argued that the sexual exploitation of girls was seriously eroding their self-confidence.<sup>84</sup> According to Disney executives, however, what girls needed were more princesses like Ariel, the shapely aquatic creature who, as an early pioneer of Girl Power, exercised adorable authority in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The fiery redhead defied her father, King Triton, and rescued the prince. She was also very feminine. Ariel was followed in the 1990s by other ethnically diverse princesses wielding precious power in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *Aladdin* (1992). “Standing toe-to-toe with their cartoon foes,” Jasmine, Belle, and Pocahontas spoke to a vast audience of girls steeped in the ethos of empowerment and the ideology of femininity.<sup>85</sup>

While Disney princesses embraced some aspects of Girl Power, especially in regard to their athleticism (now seen as good for girls), on balance, the emphasis placed on beauty, feminine identity, and male attachments often overshadowed an authentic empowerment. “Princess Jasmine is still just Aladdin’s love interest,” observed Mary Hoffman, the children’s book author of *Beware, Princess* (1986) and *Princess Grace* (2008) and a critic of princess culture.<sup>86</sup> Falling in love, getting married, and living “happily ever after” reigned as the number one theme for these Disney princesses who leaned heavily on tradition in order to handle gender conflict. Suggesting to girls that this was how their lives should play out had a way of diminishing more feminist ideals.

Despite the proliferation of animated and cinematic princesses in the 1990s, there were girls who still did not think highly of princess play. Zoe Peavey, who was born in 1993, recalled seeing *Pretty Pretty Princess*, but the board game in which players competed for plastic jewelry struck her as “stupid.”<sup>87</sup> Madeline Guilfoil, born two years earlier, played the game only at her grandfather’s house where she was more intent on winning than on wearing the jewelry that delighted her younger male cousin.<sup>88</sup> In England, Cornish girls between the ages of nine and eleven explained that “they would not want to be a princess because it was simply too boring and restrictive,” according to Ella Westland in *Cinderella in the Classroom: Children’s Responses to Gender Roles in Fairy-Tales*. When given the opportunity to write their own fairy tales, the girls filled them with active and independent heroines.<sup>89</sup>

By the turn of the twenty-first century, girls of all ages were trying to construct their own identities as girl. Some contested mainstream gender ideals as

had Riot Grrrls, Goths, and Punks. Shaved heads, fluorescent-colored hair, and tattooed bodies soon spread to ordinary American girls. Other girls identified themselves as Pro-Anas (or Ana), those who rejected the notion that anorexia was an eating disorder and established Web sites that provided how-to advice. Then there were the high-visibility girl celebrities whose risky behavior became the focus of intense ongoing media scrutiny and sensationalism. Many adults feared that as role models, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and others in the limelight were setting new frightening standards of girlhood, especially in regard to their wanton sexuality. A widespread coalition of adults including feminists and social conservatives argued that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media was harmful to teens, tweens, even tots.<sup>90</sup> In an effort to cope with girls as well as understand, protect, and control the disruptive potential of their empowerment and autonomy, adults across a vast ideological spectrum had something to say about girlhood. Popular books devised new labels to describe girls, thereby contributing to an increasing crowd of categories. Unlike Alpha Girls, whose name reflected the group's talent, motivation, and self-confidence, Mean Girls, Party Girls, Cutters, Anorexics, Queen Bees, Wanna Bees, Teen Queens, Drama Queens, Sluts, and other girlhood labels pathologized girls.<sup>91</sup>

A vast army of princesses materialized to help control the sexual, social, cultural, and political agency of girls as well as the collision between the many contested and contradictory notions of girlhood competing for expression and ascendance. Now, with billions in purchasing power of their own, tweens could easily afford to buy chick lit, also populated by princesses, and attend chick flicks filled with screen princesses.<sup>92</sup> In *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Princess Diaries II* (2004), and *A Cinderella Story* (2004), among many others, princesses were arguably not empty vessels. In the Disney movie for television, *Princess of Thieves* (2001), Robin Hood's spirited daughter breaks all the rules in order to free her father after his capture by Prince John. Yet, according to Mary McNamara, a writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, princess movies have "slight post-feminist twists, but they still adhere to the basic princess ethos: You may think for the moment that you are a normal, powerless girl plagued by mean friends and nagging parents/stepparents, but really you are a princess, with liberation and a truly excellent wardrobe just a few plot points away."<sup>93</sup>

It was after he saw a posse of princesses in makeshift costumes at a Disney ice show that Andy Mooney, president of Disney Consumer Products, set into motion the commodification of the princess in the New Millennium. Convinced that *all* little girls yearned to be pink princesses—and determined to

make every girl into one—Disney repackaged classic princesses and recent ones into a single Princess line. Tapping the desires of some girls and stimulating anxieties in others, Disney made a fortune. Company income mushroomed from \$300 million in 2001 to \$3 billion by 2006. Soon the global sale of no less than twenty-five thousand goods in the Princess line made it Disney's fastest growing brand. "We've gone beyond the dress-up and toys, and begun to look at the brand as a lifestyle, filling out all the other things girls need in life," explained Mary Beech, director of franchise management for Disney Consumer Products.<sup>94</sup> The Disney princess merchandise that saturated girls' culture included books, kitchens, beds, comforters, dress-up costumes, cereal, toothbrushes, plastic jewelry, raincoats, underwear, nightgowns, backpacks, bicycles, tents, television sets, rocking chairs, potty seats, doggy dishes, castles, toys, games, and dolls.

Among dolls, My First Princess Barbie was dressed in full princess regalia in 1989 and 1990, and Barbie's Crystal Horse and Carriage was produced by Mattel in 1992. While Mattel had rarely explored the option of a princess makeover for Barbie, the company now recognized there was a growing market for princesses and built a merchandising empire that produced princess films and doll tie-ins. Barbie Entertainment, the division Mattel created to develop sales strategies for the Princess Barbie line, became a \$500 million brand in the course of a few years by licensing Barbie princess products to movies. Barbie starred in numerous princess movies including: *Barbie as the Princess and Pauper* (2004), *Barbie in the 12 Dancing Princesses* (2006), and *Barbie as the Island Princess* (2007).

Bratz dolls became popular princess alternatives for girls who identified with a less traditional girlhood than Barbie represented. Scantly clad in streetwise cool clothing, these sultry-eyed bad girls of the fashion-doll industry bared skin and wore attitude. Unlike Barbie, their iconic competitor, these diva dolls—with their "passion for fashion"—better personified the Girl Power notion that female liberation was obtainable through the consumption of fashion and attainable through fantasy, fun, and friendship. Bratz dolls that donned trendy belly shirts, short skirts, and hip hairstyles stepped away from the conventional femininity of the fair princess ideal. The 2006 Bratz Princess doll seemingly defied the traditional princess by impudently accessorizing a tiara with a camouflage t-shirt and short skirt. While this street princess seemed to scoff at tradition as she defined her own sassy style, in many ways she had updated the classic storybook princess. Like other princesses, these dolls reinforced gender stereotypes more than they challenged them. Though seemingly worlds apart from fairy-tale fantasies

of yore, Bratz dolls also played princess at high school events like the prom. In fact, here they openly borrowed the trappings of the traditional princess—tiaras, jewels, and heavily brocaded gowns—for this commercialized female adolescent rite of passage. Their brazen appearance notwithstanding, Bratz princesses continued to connect girls to a materialistic world that reinforced their expectations for success as modern-day princesses.

The makeover of a tomboy into a girly-girl princess in the full-length feature film *Dora's Fairytale Adventure* (2004) also captures the antithetical girlhood ideals prevalent in the twenty-first century. As the quintessential tomboy who steered clear of anything stereotypically girlish, Dora underwent an alteration from tee shirt, shorts, and short black hair to a lavish dress and a long ponytail. Yet even Dora achieved “that magical transformation through quick thinking and resourcefulness,” pointed out Christopher Healey, who felt betrayed by Princess Dora because she led his own daughter to abandon toys trucks for a trousseau. Appeased by the skillful way the princess handled matters, he recognized that “[t]o gain the mystical items that will eventually earn her a tall pointy hat, she braves a smoke-snorting dragon, tames a cranky giant, and outwits a witch, among other daunting tasks.”<sup>95</sup> Fiona, the princess character in *Shrek!* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), and *Shrek the Third* (2007) who experienced a reverse transformation from pretty to ugly, also felt the tensions between competing models of girlhood. Though initially presented as an archetypal princess, she was really “a very down-to-earth and independent woman who is a match for Shrek at burping and farting, is a loyal friend, and unlike princesses of fairy tales, an expert in hand-to-hand combat with knowledge of Chinese martial arts.”<sup>96</sup>

Companies produced Princess Fiona's floor-length green dress with puffy shoulders, golden details, belt and headpiece for toddlers, tweens, and teenagers, reinforcing the importance of appearance over character. Moreover, ogre-green garb did not share shelf space with the other pink and purple princess dresses that hung from hooks in toy sections of stores that also sold numerous princess accessories. Not all were of the typical crown and wand variety, however. Along with tiaras, glittering shoes, handbags, jewelry, vanities, and make-up cases were cell phones, walkie-talkies, and CD players. Dress-up clothes and accessories combined traditional ideals of feminine girlhood with more up-to-date artifacts that promoted female autonomy and empowerment. Also available were paper ware, decorations, and accessories such as an Opalescent Mini Gift Bag Party Favor for princess parties that became a dominant theme for birthdays and other celebrations.<sup>97</sup> Libby, a seven-year-old girl who attended a princess-party Girl Scout function in Ohio in 2008, asked her parents if she could have one

too because all princesses “MUST have a princess party for their birthday.”<sup>98</sup> At princess teas, girls recited oaths aimed at reinforcing genteel manners. Just how successful these attempts will prove remains to be seen.

In suburban malls, the chain store Club Libby Lu staged a glitzy, pink-filled dream with enough princess paraphernalia to furnish a castle. This make-over store, created by Mary Drolet in 2000, had tweens rushing to their local malls for elaborate hair and makeup sessions. Though originally founded to celebrate girls and their uniqueness, what Club Libby Lu and many other merchandising meccas created was a “multimillion-dollar industry that is trying to convince [girls] that to be a girl, you have to invest in being pretty and special and magical.”<sup>99</sup> Since 2003, when Saks bought the chain for \$12 million, the business “expanded to more than 87 outlets” and “by the year 2005, with only scant local advertising, revenues [for Club Libby Lu] hovered around the \$46 million mark, a 53 percent jump from the previous year.”<sup>100</sup> In each Libby Lu store, sunglasses, pillows, mirrors, and fur-trimmed purses sat on shelves among hundreds of other items girls could choose. Yet Libby Lu also provided girls with opportunities to be more than passive princesses: they could dress up as rock stars. Instead of turning out submissive princesses, critics complained that Libby Lu was responsible for producing self-absorbed, overly dramatic, attention-seeking drama queens.<sup>101</sup>

The many princesses who now fill every girl’s room were meant to allay the anxieties of parents who preferred a fresh-faced princess to an in-your-face teen queen. As one mother explained, “In a world where Britney goes pantyless in public and Nicole drives drunk, a little princess idolatry seems a harmless thing indeed.”<sup>102</sup> Unlike the unmanageable teenage girl who shunned abstinence-only programs and mocked the virginity pledges instituted by social conservatives with their own conservative girlhood agenda, the princess that parents liked promoted purity, sweetness, and submission. Parents traditionally took greater pleasure in seeing their little girl dressed in a gown than in sweatpants. They preferred girls who curtsied instead of climbed, who sipped tea instead of chugged beer. Parents also believed that anything that gave their daughters a sense of strength was a good thing.<sup>103</sup> Third-wave feminist Rachel Simmons, the author of *Odd Girls Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, also preferred innocents to the unsavory. “Any arena that allows [girls] access to playfulness and protects them from sexualizing themselves before they are ready, should be applauded not condemned.”<sup>104</sup> One arena where girls also reigned in princesslike regalia were Purity Balls. These genteel celebrations and gallant ceremonies were hosted by fathers, suffering from an especially nostalgic fantasy about their daughters’

imaginary girlhood, who promised to protect their daughters' virtue until they married.<sup>105</sup>

Instead of defusing the debate over girlhood, however, the princess only intensified it among adults. Many critics agreed that the figure of the princess undermined girls' identities by reinforcing an unrealistic assumption that power could only be had through magnificent clothing, fabulous wealth, and gorgeous looks. Though such critics acknowledged that the princess encouraged girls to feel good about themselves, they claimed the result was a false sense of self-confidence not grounded in genuine accomplishment. Moreover, they argued, the idealized princess figure established unrealizable beauty standards that eroded a girl's sense of self. The potential harm that the princess inflicted on girls was brought home to one mother whose six-year-old informed her that Ariel had a prettier voice than she did and that she wanted her skin to be as light as Snow White's.<sup>106</sup> In addition to fostering harmful self-scrutiny, the princess promoted a damaging competition between girls for self-adornment and material possessions. One father cringed when his little princess chanted, "Mirror . . . whose the fairest in the mall?"<sup>107</sup>

As for girls, though, many identified with the princess who embodied a range of contradictory notions about what it meant to be a girl. The princess's multivocality enabled them to make their own meanings as girls claimed the identity of their favorite princesses, traipsed around in homemade or store-bought gowns, asserted their "princess power" over their parents, and regularly performed their own variations of familiar fairy tales. Girls did assume traditional gender roles. Yet for others, the princess pose was nothing more than a gender performance: knowing that feminine behavior was expected and rewarded, girls played at being princesses without really feeling like one. Girls also reappropriated, transformed, and subverted traditional girlhood ideas—as princess players had in the past. Rejecting the notion of the damsel in distress exemplified by Princess Peach, a stereotypical princess in Nintendo's Mario Bros. video game series, one nine-year-old girl entitled her blog, "I hate Princess Peach."<sup>108</sup>

Mapping the historical realm of the princess demonstrates that there is nothing timeless, natural, universal, transcendent, or fixed about her. Over the course of

the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, princesses made only fleeting appearances in the everyday lives, the fantasy worlds, or the material culture of girls in the United States. The role of the princess in nineteenth-century American children's literature was restricted and restrained, especially compared to her proliferation in the twenty-first century. Until then, the princess contended with fairies for girls' attention and allegiance. The form of the princess and debates about her have been uniquely situated in the historical circumstances in which she appeared. When she appeared in girls' culture, it was to help negotiate shifting and conflicting conceptions of girlhood. The proxy princess brought into play by cultural producers who created her over and over again appealed to girls' fantasies of adornment and empowerment. The princess also tried to appease parents ill at ease with the state of girlhood in the twenty-first century. In the New Millennium, an abundance of princesses appeared who provided girls with opportunities to create their own meanings and to deal with the conflicts and contradictions inherent in contemporary girlhood.

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