



“Difference That Is Actually Sameness Mass-Reproduced”: Barbie Joins the Princess Convergence

—Lisa Orr

The Disney princess line began in 1999 with the unlikely premise of lumping eight princesses together as a single brand to be marketed, despite their differences of race, centuries, and even species. Out of this disparate assortment of characters grew an even more widely varied line of merchandise. Snow White, Jasmine, Belle, Pocahontas, Mulan, Ariel, Cinderella, and Aurora can now be found, together or in select groupings, on clothing, video games, lip balm, books—altogether, more than 25,000 different products (Orenstein). Theorists of children’s culture call this convergence, and note that it is hardly accidental (Goldstein, Buckingham, and Brougere 2). Integrated marketing means that companies simultaneously release related products in multiple formats, from digital to print to collectibles. These expanded, interdependent products cannot be examined in isolation, for “every ‘text’ (including commodities such as toys) effectively draws upon and feeds into every other text” (Goldstein, Buckingham, and Brougere 2).

Like the incongruous group of princesses that began it all, the sudden explosion of princess material can best be managed as one unit, one grand text to decipher. Princess culture includes a vast array of material objects and media representations, but also marketing rhetoric and weighty expert studies of children as consumers. In addition, even the most fragile-seeming princesses carry the weight, not just of Disney’s constructions, but also of the hundreds of years prior of princess folklore, all strangely intermixed with contemporary notions of beauty, body image, and race. The princess text, then, binds together a complicated, interrelated web of texts, some of which appear to contradict each other.

When Barbie first entered princess culture, two years after the introduction of the Disney princess line, she seemed to offer a challenge to the princess narrative. The marketing language of both Disney and Barbie’s manufacturer, Mattel, encouraged this perception: Disney was the traditionalist, Barbie the

new wave, in what seemed one more expression of the culture wars. The two companies followed the decades-long marketing model of Coke versus Pepsi, wherein Coke positioned itself as the drink of family values and Santa Claus, while Pepsi celebrated youth and hipness (Pendergrast 273–74). Barbie’s variations on the princess theme made her seem more independent and modern than her Disney counterparts. In fourteen computer-generated, feature-length films released since 2001—Mattel’s answer to Disney’s long-established lock on animated princesses—Barbie refuses to marry a prince, chooses career over marriage (at least in the short term), and prefers studying science to attending balls. Mattel’s princesses pose as counters to Disney’s housekeeping, abuse-swallowing ones. Disney’s long history of filmmaking gives it some advantage, but also means that its princesses are the products of a different era. Logically, it seemed, Disney princesses must appeal to the more traditionalist consumer.

But as I examined them, I found striking similarities between the competing brands of princesses. Instead of contradictory texts, they revealed themselves as consistent, though not identical, parts of the same whole. The strange congruence between the marketing analyses made public by the companies and their researchers and the available scholarship on the princess phenomenon supports the notion of a unified princess-culture text. Though couched in different language, both seem to reach similar conclusions

on how princess culture is deployed, and how it successfully influences consumers, be they adults or children. That vastly different motives and methods can generate essentially the same understanding of princess power is both surprising and disturbing.

The discussions of the root causes of princess culture provide a case in point. Historian Miriam Forman-Brunell points out that princess worship tends to arise at times of social upheaval (qtd. in Orenstein), while marketing experts attribute the princess phenomenon to nostalgia for the simpler past. Much of Disney’s princess material is itself the product of an outdated past. Disney’s public take on this is to call it a strength: as an executive Vice President of Disney sales and marketing put it, “I think the unique thing about Disney Princesses is they tend to have multigenerational devotees—daughter, mother, and grandmother” (Emmons). This vision of a past handed down, intact, through marriage puts Disney’s marketing department close to the widely held scholarly view that Disney invites its audience “to long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms” (Zipes 40). While scholars and marketers differ in their willingness to celebrate or deplore such nostalgia, both understand that princesses harken back to an imaginary construct of the past. The 1930s, when Disney’s first princess feature film, *Snow White*, was produced, hardly counts as an era of stability and peace. Rather, the past as a whole provides a blank field for working out alternative



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Barbie herself has a past, and her fiftieth anniversary this year invites consumers to Disney-like nostalgic longings. Mattel's celebration includes issuing a "modernized version of the original 1959 doll," available for only \$3, its original price, during her "birthday week" of March 9 to 14, and the opening of a real "Dream House" on the beach in Malibu, with a "real Barbie Volkswagen New Beetle car (all pink with a motorized, pop up vanity in the trunk)" parked in the garage (Mattel, "Barbie Doll Celebrates"). These bizarrely split products (old/new doll, real/imaginary house, old/new car) represent the fine line that Barbie marketing attempts to walk between tradition and hipness. Unlike Disney, which intently invents and foregrounds its own "tradition" (defining even some of its newer princesses as "classic"), Barbie marketing attempts to update tradition without completely discarding it. Mattel's contradictory marketing fits perfectly with the doll herself.

Mattel has always promoted Barbie as new, young, and up-to-the-minute. Despite her ditzzy reputation, since her first appearance in 1959, Barbie has been an astronaut, a doctor, and, in 2004, a presidential candidate (Gibbs). In fact, according to a breathless Mattel press release, she has had more than 108 careers (Mattel, "Barbie Doll Celebrates"). Mattel executive Chuck Scothon refers to Barbie as "aspirational," meaning that she suggests that a girl could "run for President and look good while she was doing it" (qtd. in Talbot); critics have retorted that Barbie helps a girl aspire to a full closet (Thomas 157). The same press release quoted above, which, by referring to Barbie as if she were a real person, seems to be addressed to nine-year-old girls, explains that Barbie and Ken are "just friends": although she "likes wearing wedding gowns," it gushes, Barbie has "never been

married.”

Even with these credentials, Barbie has remained strongly associated with “neatly ordered patriarchal realms,” not feminism. In 2001, two researchers observing a women’s studies class were struck that “of all popular culture surrounding girls, there is a sense that playing with Barbies is a shameful act that has to be hidden, or perhaps shared only with sympathetic people” (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, “Just a Doll” 179). This may be an unanticipated by-product of the old/new positioning discussed above, but it seems unlikely that Mattel ever meant fully to align Barbie with feminism. Rather, its experiments with Barbie’s image clearly have sought to delineate how far to one side or another she may go, without alienating consumers.

Finding the proper balance of contradictions is dangerous work: some of the strongest reactions against Barbie have been prompted by Mattel’s own mixed intentions for the doll. When a talking Barbie doll incensed parents and educators by uttering, “Math class is tough!” Mattel was forced to apologize and remove the phrase from Barbie’s lexicon (“Mattel Says It Erred”). Soon afterward, activists profited from the gaffe by switching her voice box with that of Talking GI Joe. The responsible parties released a video of Barbie speaking on behalf of the Barbie Liberation Organization, describing the “corrective surgery” she and GI Joe had undergone to fight “gender-based stereotypes” (“Barbie Liberation”). Just in time for

Christmas of 1993, hundreds of Barbies in New York and California began saying “Eat lead, Cobra!” (Firestone).

Apparently, Mattel was not getting the mix right, for, by the late 1990s, Barbie was not merely the butt of jokes, but faced a declining share of the girls’ toy market. No longer was Barbie hip and up-to-date. The 2001 introduction of the highly sexualized Bratz dolls by MGA Entertainment threatened to make Barbie look like “grandma’s favorite toy” (Ault). Mattel brought in consultants and new executives in an attempt to resuscitate what was at best a tired, at worst an outdated, brand.

Robert Goodstein, who served as a consultant to Mattel in the 1990s, reports that Mattel did consider other, more enlightened methods for reinvigorating the Barbie brand name first, before ultimately making Barbie a princess. These included reducing her breast size, and developing Doctor or Lawyer Barbies to appeal to the daughters of career women (Gogoi). Note that these strategies address feminist critiques of Barbie that had become, by this point, embedded in the larger culture. It is not surprising, however, that any politically correct change that might depress sales was rejected forthwith. Mattel claims that Barbie’s figure is not subject to alteration because “being consistent is one of her biggest strengths”—another restatement of Barbie’s need to refer back to an unchanging past (“Holding Back”). In the face of the wildly successful,

sexier Bratz dolls, a breast reduction for Barbie would no doubt have seemed a risky procedure. Likewise, ensembles suitable for Lawyer or Doctor Barbie could hardly be as eye-catching to little girls as silver spangles and tiaras. Mattel's marketing decisions are evidence that sexuality and appearance, rather than career advancement, are still sold to girls as their primary means to power (Riordan 290).

According to a number of quotes from Mattel executives in the business press, by 2001, Mattel had discovered that girls were spending more time on their computers than with their dolls (Gogoi; Netherby; Ault). In Goodstein's words (and with his guidance), Mattel ultimately decided that career Barbie was "just not cool enough—there's no reason why someone cannot skateboard, or explore the world like Dora, and not become a lawyer or a doctor" (qtd. in Gogoi). "Cool enough" for modern girls came to mean interactive, like video games, or the oft-cited Dora the Explorer, a television character who asks children to answer questions aloud in order to solve problems and resolve each episode. Interactivity was the ostensible reason for making Barbie a film star. But it is not clear how watching a Barbie DVD is more interactive than trying new power suits on one's doll.

As Mattel executives struggled to make Barbie as exciting as Dora, they concluded that the secret was the "content." Each doll needed to be accompanied by a story, provided by the sold-separately DVD, and

supported by merchandise that gave the animated sets and props material form. The executives were reaching the same conclusions as the cultural theorists: in late-twentieth-century America, "cool" had come to mean "unabashed consumerism" (Cross 158). "Content" was no more than the marketing code word for increased merchandising opportunities. In practice, "providing content" meant relying less on the girls' own imaginations and more on telling them how to play with the doll. According to Tim Kilpin, senior vice-president for girls marketing at Mattel, quoted in a Brand Strategy article on "Barbie's Midlife Crisis," "What you see now are several different Barbie worlds anchored by content and storytelling. A girl can understand what role Barbie is playing, what the other characters are doing, and how they interrelate. That's a much richer level of story that leads to a richer level of play."

This is the kind of control over children's imagination that worries Susan Linn:

We've reached the bizarre point where nurturing creative play has actually become counter-cultural. The dominant culture dictates against it—in large part because it threatens corporate profits. Children who play creatively need less of the things that corporations sell. The best-selling toys—the toys that are most marketed to children—actually inhibit children's play. They are either based on media

characters, embedded with computer chips, or both. Children play less creatively with toys based on media characters like Spiderman or Elmo, and if the toys move, sing, dance, or chirp by themselves at a push of a button, they are even more useless as tools for creativity. A good toy is 90 percent child and only 10 percent toy—and that’s not what dominates the market today. (36)



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A proscribed role was the very opposite of that imagined for Barbie by her creator. Ruth Handler dreamt up Barbie after watching her daughter and friends play with grown-up paper doll figures: “They were using these dolls to project their dreams of their own futures as adult women. . . . It dawned on me that this was a basic, much needed play pattern that had never before been offered by the doll industry to little girls” (Handler and Shannon 13). This is indeed what researchers have found: though Barbies send mixed messages about gender equality, playing with the dolls does allow little girls to imagine women as agents, and to try out other roles, besides that of mother (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, “Just a Doll”).

Like Disney, then, Mattel was providing “content” that diverted children’s play into less liberating avenues. Instead of allowing girls to try out alternative roles for adult women, Barbie princess DVDs prompted girls to imagine themselves into roles that had little to do with the realities of their coming lives. The DVDs’ “interactivity” actually narrowed girls’ choices for imagining themselves as agents. Nor does the quest for “interactivity” explain why Barbie needed a crown. Mattel’s move to join the princess phenomenon was, if anything, counterintuitive. They were not locked into it, as Disney was, by a cache of films from a different era to market. They were all too aware of the feminist criticisms of Barbie. Returning to older models

of femininity would hardly seem like a logical way to mimic the success of Dora the Explorer. As Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, has noted, “Fifteen years ago, the idea of promoting princesses as role models for young girls would have been considered backward” (qtd. in Gogoi).

Yet, being a princess, with all of its accompanying paraphernalia, was “cool” in the new millennium. Sales of Barbie products in the US, led by the princess line, increased by two per cent in 2006, saving Mattel’s bottom line at a time when its worldwide share of the toy market was declining (Gogoi). Later ventures into mermaid and fairy Barbies are marketed, together with the princesses, as “fantasy brand” Barbies (“Barbie’s Midlife”). Although the entire line suffered in the economic downturn of 2008, in early 2009, Mattel’s Chairman and CEO, Bob Eckert, spoke optimistically to shareholders regarding the latest fantasy DVD, *Thumbelina*: “I think we’ll be in better shape this year on Barbie than we’ve been in a while” (Mattel, “Mattel Incorporated”).

How has princess culture become so commercially successful? Disney princesses offered the blueprint, and the fidelity with which Mattel mirrored Disney’s moves is striking. Disney had already discovered how to balance nostalgic appeal with attracting new audiences, by selling the original print of classics such as *Snow White*, but also reinventing Snow

White for a new generation through packaging choices for the DVD, the development of new Snow White merchandise, and so on (Do Rozario 36). Merchandising had proved the key to making Disney princesses “interactive.” Andy Mooney, Disney’s chair of consumer goods, based the princess line on insights born of a trip to Disney on Ice. There he observed little girls dressed in cobbled-together princess costumes, and concluded: “Clearly there was latent demand here. So the next morning I said to my team, ‘O.K., let’s . . . get as much product out there as we possibly can that allows these girls to do what they’re doing anyway: projecting themselves into the characters from the classic movies’” (qtd. in Orenstein). These “products” soon moved beyond miniature Cinderella ball gowns to pervade every aspect of a girl’s day. According to Disney’s 2008 Annual Report, “Disney Princess continues to thrive across the Company’s businesses. This evergreen animated franchise continues to connect with girls universally through an assortment of products that sprinkles Disney Princess magic into everyday activities—from waking up in a royal Princess bed to using a Princess toothbrush at night-time.”

This is the kind of coverage that marketers dream of and child development experts bemoan. Starting in the late 1990s, marketing studies revealed that children younger than three could, and did, recognize brands: the result was what marketers call “cradle-to-grave” marketing (Thomas 4–5). Expanding the licensed

products to include not only every imaginable object, but also nearly every imaginable age group (such as a line of Disney Princess wedding gowns, launched in 2007), meant that, instead of outgrowing the princess phenomenon, girls could live it well into adulthood. Princess culture could thus offer multiple subject positions, suitable to a wider array of consumers than the original target audience of preschool girls.

Other changes to the princess model also became necessary to expand the consumer base. To make it easier for girls to imagine themselves into princesses, the princess club has become more “democratic,” including more than just daughters of kings (Do Rozario 46). Later Disney princesses, such as Belle and Mulan, are not, strictly speaking, princesses at all (Do Rozario 46). Ariel is not even human. Mattel was following Disney, particularly the lesson of Ariel, when it expanded its princess line into a fantasy line: with nonhuman characters comes access to special powers and fancy wardrobes, without the prerequisite royal blood. Princess culture could thus neatly sidestep questions of class.

New movies gave Disney a chance to reposition princesses for a new generation. The most recent princesses can rescue themselves or a prince in need. Ariel rescues Eric from drowning in *The Little Mermaid*; Pocahontas saves John Smith from execution; Belle reverses the curse on the Beast to save his life. They defy fathers or father figures who wish to control

their sexuality, and insist on choosing a spouse for themselves—even one of lower social standing (Jasmine in *Aladdin*) or alien race (Pocahontas). As Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario notes, with the new princesses, “Heroism, egalitarianism and autonomy are slipped into the conventions of Disney princesshood” (47).

Still others, however, have argued convincingly that the newer Disney princesses make enough tradeoffs to offset any empowering advances. According to Lyn Mikel Brown and Sharon Lamb, “The problem is that so much of the courage and feistiness is either in pursuit of romance or later put aside for it. Beauty endures horrific abuse to change her man; Ariel gives up her voice for her man; Pocahontas’s goal is saving her man as much as preserving her homeland; Mulan’s amazing feats dissolve in the presence of romance” (69).

This is a charge that might equally well be made of the Barbie films. Here, too, the prince is a fellow adventurer, as often as not in need of rescue. And yet each film ends with a romantic resolution—an odd requirement of a product aimed at three- to five-year-olds.

This inappropriate focus on romance is at the heart of most feminist readings of princess stories. The endings of the Barbie DVDs perfectly support the argument that such stories prepare little girls for “insertion into heterosexual discourse” (Walkerdine

163). Their more disturbing lesson—that finding a prince offers a solution to all of life’s overwhelming problems (Walkerdine 163)—will not make sense for the very young child, who has yet to confront the issues that the films pretend to resolve. Yet the plotlines could serve as a character-shaping influence that might affect girls’ future life choices. Many seem to counsel obedience and reward passivity, for instance (Lieberman 185). *What Is a Princess?*, a “Disney approved” children’s book, outlines proper princess behavior: a princess is “kind,” “smart,” “caring,” “brave,” and “polite”; she “likes to dress up”; and, of course, she “always lives happily ever after!” (Weinberg). Bravery and brains seem outnumbered in this list by the kind of traits that might make today’s princess tomorrow’s dependent adult woman. Dressing up like Cinderella might have repercussions. After a study found that trying on bathing suits decreases young women’s ability to complete math problems, the American Psychological Association concluded that, for girls, “thinking about the body and comparing it to sexualized cultural ideals disrupt[s] mental capacity” (22).

Disney had already changed the princess in ways that reflected twentieth-century anxieties about the roles of women. Jack Zipes argues that, while classical fairy tales did indeed reinforce “rigid notions of sexuality and gender” (26), Disney went one step further by reducing the active role of princesses,

putting them against other women, and—Disney’s most dramatic departure from tradition—making the story really about the prince and his achievement or securing of social status, symbolized through his winning of the princess (36–38). When Mattel “updated” the princess by giving her a more active role, it unwittingly realigned Barbie with older models of the princess in folklore by foregrounding relationships between women and downplaying the importance of the prince.

Before the Victorian age, when they were repositioned as children’s stories, fairy tales addressed the difficulties of married life, rather than a sexually dormant period of courtship (Warner 222). Rather than luring young women into patriarchal relations, then, the stories originally acknowledged the dark side of marriage, and addressed it as a given, not longed-for, state. Wicked stepmothers first appear in these tales as mothers-in-law, with whom young brides were forced to share living space in medieval Europe. Marina Warner traces other fairy tales to equally charged domestic situations, such as the widow who returns to her birth family’s home, or the child transferred to the home of her equally young fiancé, or the orphan child left to the care of a second wife (210–13, 222–29). In some cases, fairy tales attempted to serve the social function of protecting the abused: in the Grimm Brothers’s version of Cinderella, for instance, the dead mother helps wreak revenge on the stepmother who



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mistreats her child (Warner 214).

When a story ends, rather than begins, with a wedding, all chance for a critique of marriage seems to be erased. But the residue of the earlier tales remains behind in the evil stepmothers, and the fathers who unaccountably marry them and who, in some cases, allow them to abuse their own children. That earlier marriage takes place off-screen, as it were, and since the fathers are typically absent or powerless in the later tales, the full blame for domestic discord in the later stories falls on the older women.

In the Disney movies, mothers, and even ghosts of mothers, are curiously missing, and so there can be no mother-daughter relationships. In their absence, the female characters work against each other, one generation competing with the next (Warner 201–40). Thus, while the real power struggle seems to be among women, in actuality, they are competing for access to power through men, who may rule kingdoms. In the classic Disney movies, the wicked, sexually mature women are in power, through the absence or weakness of men, but may be replaced at any moment by a prince and his new bride. This explains the overriding importance of who is the fairest of them all, and of the princess's approach to womanhood (Do Rozario 36–44).

In comparison, the Barbie movies displace much of the competition between mothers or mother figures and daughters. Consider one of the earliest Barbie princess movies, *The Princess and the Pauper* (2004). Here, a queen presses her daughter to marry a perfectly unobjectionable prince for the good of the kingdom, since the royal mines have shut down and the queen can no longer provide for her people. Presumably, he can fill the coffers of what is apparently a share-the-wealth kingdom. This plot development is carefully set up to foreclose any suggestion that a mother is selling off her daughter in

marriage. From the beginning, the role of a princess is shown to be circumscribed by duty. A musical number, “To Be a Princess,” stresses the imperatives to repress one’s feelings and act for the good of others that royalty apparently entails. Even the queen is subject to self-sacrifice. When the princess temporarily disappears from the plot—she has been kidnapped—the queen braces herself to marry Preminger, a hypocrite given to long, curled wigs and heel lifts, who is much less attractive than the prince she proposed for her daughter. The parallel plot makes the mother’s demand that her daughter marry for money just one more of those duties royalty must perform. It is not about older women expressing power over younger women: it is about *noblesse oblige*.

The image of the entrapped princess does double duty in easing tensions between female characters in this story. The restrictions on the princess are also necessary to the plot of cross-class friendship: the princess and the indentured seamstress become friends after deciding that they are equally trapped. This is a stretch that the musical number “You’re Just like Me” barely spans, as the princess sings to her famished double that *she* gets her egg on a silver tray every morning, but still is unhappy.

Though they do occasionally feature older women striving to limit and control the sexuality of younger women, the Barbie princess movies mainly celebrate cooperative relationships among women.

One way in which they manage generational tensions among female characters is by refocusing the plot on female friendships. Mattel’s take on *A Christmas Carol*, released in November of 2008, features a female Scrooge who sacrifices friendship, not love, on the altar of success (after the ghostly visitations, of course, she successfully reclaims that friendship). *Barbie and the Diamond Castle*, released earlier in the same year, features two Barbie actresses, best friends whose harmonious duets are pivotal to the plot. Thus, although the plots do end with weddings, the actual action of the Barbie movies often centres on friendships with other women or relationships with mothers. This is, at least, an encouraging counter, not only to Disney’s absent mothers, but also to the “mean girls” phenomenon in recent media, which portrays relationships among young girls as relentlessly backstabbing, fueled by jealousy (Brown and Lamb 75–78).

Some girls who adopt the princess role go a step further than decentering the hero and placing the princess back at the crux of the story. After considering feminist scholarship on the negative effects of the princess stereotype on young women, Alexander Bruce wondered if anything had changed, since much of the critique had been written in the 1970s and 1980s (before the current blitz of princess merchandise). Though his survey was too small to be representative, he did reach the intriguing conclusion that, while

today's little girls were very interested in being princesses, they were not much interested in securing a prince (15). Disney marketers seem to have reached a similar conclusion. A quick survey of current products reveals a paucity of prince images or dolls. Older princesses, such as Cinderella and Aurora, created under the auspices of Walt Disney himself, have been updated through their licensed products in a way that erases the prince altogether: for instance, a shirt on sale recently in the Disney Store features Cinderella, Aurora, and Belle, with the caption "All three princesses lived in their very own enchanted castle."

A prince may not only be irrelevant to little girls; he may actually get in the way. After all, little girls like being princesses, at least partly, because of power. Researchers have noticed, for instance, that young girls assume the role of princess in order to direct the play of other children (Kyratzis). A researcher in a Swedish preschool noted that girls invented stories where the princesses were in charge and, instead of waiting passively for a prince, went out and found one (Änggård 548); an American researcher found that girls rewrote storylines so that princesses rescued themselves (Wohlwend 78). Bruce's survey of seven- and eight-year-olds found that they wanted to be princesses not only because they could then "live in a castle" and "wear pretty dresses," but also because they would get to "boss people around" and "do their own thing" (13). When marketers follow little girls'

play patterns by erasing or disempowering the prince, they are removing the patriarchal authority figure that Disney worked so hard to inscribe on older folk depictions of women's life experiences.

The conservative social function of princess fantasies may be the construct of a particular time period, and not a true indication of how princess stories may have been, and may yet be, used. Still, we have not entered the realm of feminist utopia. Barbie did not resolve other issues that have shaped her reputation as an icon of sexism by becoming a princess. Well before the introduction of Barbie princesses, Barbie merchandise often carried feminist messages (for example, about Barbie's many careers and "aspirational" nature) that contradicted those conveyed by the doll itself (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, "Thank You Barbie"). But by examining where the Barbie princess line deliberately differs from its model, the Disney princess line, we can see how Mattel attempted to address well-known feminist criticisms of its brand—not through altruism, but through a deliberate attempt to woo those mothers who came of age during second-wave feminism.

Generation X mothers—those born between 1965 and 1981—are notoriously difficult for marketers to capture. Sixty per cent of these mothers are considered "restrictive," meaning they do not respond positively to brand names or other marketing strategies, such as those meant to induce impulse buying. The



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“restrictives” are, in marketing parlance, further subdivided, from least restrictive to most. Journalist and mother Susan Gregory Thomas attended a marketing analysis of restrictives, where she recorded the startling comments made by the research firm’s representative. The typical mother on the most permissive side of the restrictive spectrum was called a “bitch” by the presenter, because, although she had a “warm” relationship with her children, she also had a “low response to kid requests” when shopping (Thomas 144–45). In his frank avowal of this adversarial relationship with mothers, the presenter indicates the challenge of most Generation X mothers for marketers: these mothers do not equate buying products with showing love.

In response, marketers have figured out how to make these mothers buy. One of the most effective motivators for this generation of mothers is nostalgia for the familiar brands of their childhood (Thomas 150). Even mothers who grew up with the idea that Barbie was a suspect symbol are now buying them for their daughters (Thomas 156). In this sense, the Barbie/princess combination was a natural: it captured nostalgia on several fronts. But, unlike the Disney princess line, Barbie princesses connoted nostalgia not for the 1950s, but for an easily assimilated model of feminism. While some feminist concerns were left unaddressed when Barbie put on her tiara, those aspects of feminism that mesh best with consumer culture were retained. By adopting the old “women can have it all” mantra, films like *The Princess and the Pauper* can offer a seamstress who becomes a famous, world-travelling singer *and* marries a prince—in both cases, while wearing fabulous dresses. Erika can be self-made, well-dressed, and rescued by a man all at the same time. With an ending that suggests twice the closure of a simple marriage plot, both mothers and their daughters can be wooed. Parts of second-wave feminism, with its focus on equal access

to status and money-making, survive in the films, even though Lawyer Barbie did not.

Mattel's odd adaptation of 1970s-style feminism reflects the childhood of today's parents, even if it makes for a strange mixture of liberation and commercialism. All of the familiar criticisms of Barbie—her Aryan features, her impossible body, her sexiness—had to be addressed in some way that did not negate her peculiar nostalgia factor. She could change, but not too much. Moreover, by addressing select feminist principles, Mattel was steering the Barbie princess line even further from its model, the Disney princesses.

To be fair, Disney had done more to update its new films than just creating spunky heroines. Disney princesses no longer move with the choreographed steps of ballerinas, as they did in Disney's day, but are more athletically graceful heroines (Bell 110; Do Rozario 47). Ironically, the move from the model of the ballerina to the athlete has itself attracted criticism. Ballerina princesses provided a hidden subtext, undermining the overt messages of the films, for, while the early princesses may be passive, their movements convey "strength, discipline, and control" (Bell 112). But the newer princesses' moves are "cheesecake," comparable to the dancers in a burlesque (Bell 114–15). The emphasis on athleticism is countered by the reminder that these girls remain sexual objects.

Perhaps in response to the criticism of the newer

Disney films, Mattel's princesses have returned to the older model. Just as Disney, years before, had pioneered animation drawn over live action figures, so too Barbie films pioneered computer-generated animation based on live action in the "made-for-DVD" market, including performances by well-known companies, such as the New York City Ballet (Ault). The cachet lent by association with these dance companies, as well as with the professional orchestras (the London Symphony Orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic) that perform the classical pieces scoring Barbie DVDs, also provides a marketing boost: anything that can be touted as "enriching" or "educational" sells well to today's parents (Thomas 5–11).

The threat of female athleticism can also be offset by wardrobe changes. The newer Disney princesses wear less and show more than their predecessors (Lacroix 215). Barbie princesses, in contrast, remain chastely covered. Indeed, Barbie's figure is so celebratedly ridiculous—if she were 5-foot-6, her proportions would be 39-21-33 (Frey)—that keeping it covered seems like Mattel's best option. I can note with some satisfaction, however, that animating Barbie makes her odd proportions even more evident. In that sense, the movies become unintentional parodies of Barbie's physique.

The best evidence that Mattel needs to make some nod to mothers' concerns comes from its brief dalliance with a different role model: the Bratz dolls.



Shani proves no more
disruptive of Barbie's
world of whiteness than
Barbie princess is of the
princess industry.



These overtly sexual dolls, dressed in fishnets, midriff-baring tops, miniskirts, and “Bad Girl” T-shirts, have been the bane of parents’ groups. They were driven out of Scholastic Books catalogues by parents’ complaints (Rich). A recent report from the American Psychological Association specifically cited Bratz dolls as having a negative impact on the development of a healthy sexual identity in young girls (14). Yet Bratz dolls sell well enough to threaten Barbie, and even to bump her out of top doll position in countries such as Australia and Great Britain (Talbot). It seems that adults are buying them, despite their dismay. Marketers call this “going around moms,” and note that maternal disapproval can actually make a product more appealing to a child (Siegel, Coffey, and Livingston). Once the child is hooked, a significant number of mothers can be nagged into making the purchase.

In response to the success of Bratz, Mattel made sufficient changes to Barbie dolls, and even to Barbie’s website, to cause MGA, the maker of Bratz, to file a lawsuit. But these were very specific models—the MyScene Barbies—and they did not impinge on Barbie’s simultaneous royal career. In fact, Princess Barbies sold better than their sexier sisters. A different Barbie line, the Flavas, aimed at the same little girls who favored Bratz, died within a year (Brown and Lamb 217). Clearly, Barbie did best when she clung to her All-American, wholesome image. Instead of going around mothers, Mattel needed to appeal to them directly.

Unfortunately, the All-American image was mainly a white one. Black Barbies long were difficult to find, even for the most determined parents. African American Barbies of the past so promptly faltered that sources cite vastly different dates for their introduction: 1980 according to one source (“Barbie’s Midlife”), 1968 according to

another (Talbot). Finally, in 1991, Mattel consulted with child psychologists and brought in an African American designer to develop the Shani line (Urla and Swedlund 278). Shani has survived, and yet it remains questionable how much of an advance this represents. Ann DuCille has bemoaned Mattel's attempt to "mass market the discursively familiar—by reproducing stereotyped forms and visible signs of racial and ethnic difference" (8). Shani is made, through an illusion of design, to look as if she has broader hips and wider buttocks than her white counterpart, but she doesn't—she needed to fit into ordinary Barbie clothes (Urla and Swedlund 288). So even visible signs of difference may, in the end, mean no difference at all—just "difference that is actually sameness mass-reproduced" (DuCille 11). Shani proves no more disruptive of Barbie's world of whiteness than Barbie princess is of the princess industry.

Unlike Barbie, the Bratz line of dolls has been multi-ethnic from the beginning, in more ways than one. As Isaac Larian, CEO of MGA, explained, "When we came out with these dolls, one of the things we did not want to do was just label them. Don't call them African American. Don't call them Hispanic. Don't call them Middle Eastern. Don't call them white. Just convey difference" (qtd. in Talbot). To make their racial background even harder to nail down, Larian insisted on names for the dolls that would not be associated with a particular ethnic group. In interviews,

he discusses this as if it were a phenomenon he had nothing to do with: "I was in Brazil. . . . I asked some girls, 'Where do you think Yasmin is from?' and they said, 'Oh, she's Brazilian, she's Latin.' Then I was in Israel, and I asked, 'Where do you think Yasmin is from?' and they thought she was Middle Eastern. It's fascinating to see that, everywhere you go" (qtd. in Talbot). But the handling of Bratz dolls' racial identity is in no way accidental.

That these sexier competitors average several shades darker than Barbie is not coincidence. The stereotypes of the overly sexualized woman of colour are well-established. In the case of the Bratz dolls, their colour stands as one more signifier for sexy, a fact that many parents have noted with dismay. And yet they filled a need in the doll market. In the Bratz world, as in the real world, blondes are the minority. When MGA introduced the Bratz princess—sporting a camouflage T-shirt along with her tiara—one could almost hear the echo of the GI Joe-voiced Barbie.

Bratz dolls serve as a reminder that the princess icon is inflected for race as well as gender. Although Disney lets no heroine who might make a princess go to waste, its princess marketing focuses on Cinderella, Aurora, and Belle. Writing in the *New York Times*, Peggy Orenstein notes that princesses like Pocahontas appear less frequently in licensed materials, ostensibly because the newer princesses have different "qualities" than the older ones. Orenstein speculates that Disney's

coy term, “qualities,” translates as the tendency to wear “long, girly dresses”—hence including Belle with the classics, but not Mulan. Disney originally identified Mulan and Pocahontas as “nonroyal Disney heroines,” but insisted by 2005 that they had always been part of the princess line (Bruce 8, 19).

The true reason for the paucity of Mulan or Pocahontas merchandise may not be quite so innocuous. In one study, a researcher read children variations on Cinderella stories, and then asked them to draw the heroine of the African traditional tale *The Talking Eggs*. Nearly all of the children, no matter what colour they themselves were, drew her white. When asked why, the children had difficulty explaining their choices. One simply stated, “I imagined her dark, but I’m drawing her blonde,” while another explained that she “drew her yellow [haired] . . . because . . . she was good, so I wanted to make her pretty” (Yeoman 437, 438). After reviewing the study, Dorothy Hurley commented, with striking understatement, that “The implications that most if not all children, including children of color, see ‘White’ as good, living happily ever after, and pretty, are disturbing” (222). If we assume that less merchandise related to princesses of colour is available because it does not sell well, we might speculate that children, regardless of their own background, have difficulty imagining themselves into princesses of colour. Indeed, when it comes to African American children, there has been no black princess to

choose.

Sometimes, however, market forces can produce surprising results. After Disney’s plan for a new princess movie featuring the first African American princess (as a chambermaid whom a white prince rescues from an evil voodoo doctor) was greeted with a media outcry, Disney hastily revised the script (Setoodeh and Yabroff). The new script features Tiana, an aspiring chef, who escapes a spell with the help of a benevolent voodoo queen (Tucker). According to newspaper reports, parents in different parts of the country have applauded the move to give their daughters a princess who looks like them (Streeter; Holley-Bright).

Disney’s new relationship with Pixar also holds the possibility of changing gender models. Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden have noted that Pixar “consistently promotes a new model of masculinity,” one that rejects “alpha-male traits . . . [such as] emotional inaccessibility [and] keen competitiveness” in *Cars*, *Toy Story*, and *The Incredibles* (2). Similarly, *Shrek*’s hefty green ogre Fiona offers an alternative model for princesses, one based on wit and courage rather than looks. In the movie, Fiona is initially appalled that Shrek won’t follow the classic fairy-tale script when rescuing her—a nice twist, considering the fact that her true form is far from the classic fairy-tale princess. But all irony drops out of the merchandising. In *Shrek* merchandise, Fiona is much more likely to appear in princess than ogre form (Brown and Lamb 71–73).



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While Mattel is clearly aware of and responding to feminism's critique of Barbie, Disney has taken the further step of answering similar criticisms in its own format, and thus on its own terms. As *Enchanted* replaced the gallant but dim-witted prince with a high-earning Manhattan lawyer, we saw a move toward irony within a Disney film, but that irony does not seriously threaten commercialism. Indeed, *Enchanted's* ending is similar to the Barbie film, *The Princess and the Pauper*, that I discussed above: Giselle, *Enchanted's* princess, both achieves financial success (selling princess dresses to little girls, no less—she runs a sort of upscale Disney Store) and marries the updated prince.

At its most pessimistic, this reading of princess culture suggests that critique is irrelevant to the operations of the marketplace. Irony does not disrupt the market: a small dose of “anti-princess discourse” allows the knowing consumer to buy in with a wink (Matrix 28). Merchandising undermines whatever liberation is promised in a given princess narrative. The intertextuality of the princess text means that any single princess object may be endlessly reread in the context of its related texts, its liberatory potential constantly asserted and contradicted. While research has shown that Barbie play can be a form of “productive, feminist activity” (Rand; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, “Just a Doll” 188), the question raised by the princess convergence is just how much control of play children retain in an era of automated toys and media representations designed to be passively consumed.

In a culture where our identity is defined by what we buy (Schor 4), the very idea that we may purchase, for ourselves or our children, a liberatory identity is suspect. Barbie princess is, in marketing speak, a lifestyle choice. But the choice between Barbie princess and Disney princess is not a real choice. Like the culture wars, it may originate

in genuine political differences, but it reduces them to manageable, trite aphorisms. The culture wars comparison remains useful, however, in highlighting that both sides risk becoming irrelevant. Just as many people have asked why we are still arguing about what counts as a family when the family makeup has

already changed, a mother of a girl child might ask, why are we being sold products about princesses who have it all, when the average woman earns seventy-five cents to a man's dollar, and "more American women are living without a husband than with one"? (Roberts).

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