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The Glass Slipper: a ‘do’ or a ‘don’t’?

When I was growing up, I loved playing with my Barbie. I would change her clothes, fix up her hair, and take her out on countless dates with Ken. Another staple of my childhood was watching hours upon hours of Disney princess movies. I would prance around the house singing “Once Upon a Dream” and I even had a Little Mermaid outfit that I loved to wear whenever the opportunity would arise. However, as I remember cutting my Barbie’s hair and rushing my parents out of the room during the Prince Charming/ Snow White kissing scene, I can’t help but wonder how these ‘girly’ activities affected who I am today, and how they continue to affect little girls across America.

Will the Cinderella story cause me to become dependent on men for happiness? Do Barbie’s outrageous proportions damage the self- esteem of the young girls who dress her? According to Peggy Orenstein’s article “Does she have to be a princess to live happily ever after?”, they do. But, then again, maybe playing with Barbies stimulates children’s creativity—that’s what Annalisa Barbieri claims in her article "Debate: Is Barbie a bad influence on our daughters?" I am on a quest to determine who is right, so that I can uncover whether the princess phenomenon is just a phase or if it is indeed a lifestyle. For the sake of women everywhere, I hope for the former.

Peggy Orenstein documents her opinions of “girlie- girl culture” through the development of her young daughter, Daisy. Orenstein’s dream was for her daughter to grow up “without a sense of limits,” so she was appropriately thrilled when Daisy, who had a love for trains, a typically ‘boyish’ toy, “transcended typecasting.” However, Daisy slowly became sucked into the princess world, demanding frilly dresses and shunning pants, much to her mother’s disdain. Orenstein immediately jumps to puts part of the blame on her “fellow mothers” who claim to be independent yet love the idea of their daughters being regarded as princesses; but, if Orenstein succumbed to purchasing a princess dress, shouldn’t she be to blame, too? Orenstein admits that every parent will “slip a little,” but is that justified when her *teeny- tiny* slip- up compromises everything she stands for? That sounds like hypocrisy to me. Although Orenstein explains that “self objectification…accounted for half the differential in girls’ reports of depression and more then two- thirds of the variance in their self esteem,” she fails to convince me that princess culture is to blame.

The study Orenstein referenced demonstrates that girls’ self esteem is dwindling, and this low self- esteem happens to be occurring as the princess industry is booming, but just because two variable correlate does not make one the cause of the other. Honestly, I am not convinced. Perhaps that’s because, in her article, Orenstein, herself, questions whether or not a plastic tiara for her daughter really is a bad thing. In essence, she contradicts herself, which causes Orenstein to lose my trust. She goes on and on about the sexualization of young girls as an awful omen, then abruptly states that perhaps “princess mania is a sign of progress.” I can understand that she may be at odds with herself—good mother versus accurate journalist—but when she questions herself her argument proves to be underdeveloped. Orenstein’s lack of a thesis also puts me on edge; while she seems to be against the ‘pretty in pink’ culture, she never outright tells her audience what problems the princess craze is causing and why. And, on top of all of that, she proposes no solutions to speak of. Ultimately, I was not persuaded by her argument because she didn’t really have one. Since I am not swayed by the idea that princesses are our downfall, maybe I will lean towards the possibility that Barbie is our savior.

Annalisa Barbieri’s article in “The Independent” provides a somewhat different viewpoint on Barbie and the girlie- girl trend. The first half of the article is incredibly pro- Barbie, the very first line stating that “she’s just a toy, and a good one at that.” Barbieri sees these versatile dolls as a venue for “a thousand story lines.” She believes that Barbie, her many talents and her bottomless wardrobe included, is a starting point for endless creativity, a way for a little girl to “go anywhere, do anything.” Frankly, to me, that kind of thinking seems like a bit of a stretch. When I played with Barbie, all I was interested in was chopping her hair off and trotting her over to the park to play with Skipper and Kelly. Sure, Barbieri admits that all of Barbie’s jobs fail to amount to much, because the real point of having a Barbie is to dress her up, not schlep her to the office. To me, that section weakens the author’s point; if Barbie is only meant to “be[] dressed and undressed a thousand times,” I am having trouble seeing the array of “wishes and dreams” that Barbieri claims are projected upon the doll.

Barbieri, like Orenstein, contradicts herself, and on more than one occasion. After dubbing Barbie as a mere plaything, she goes on to cite a study that “confirmed…that giving dolls…to little girls will condition them into thinking they are only fit for stereotypical female roles when they grow up.” Clearly, Barbieri’s article is divided into two distinct, opposite parts: the half that adores Barbie, and the half that demolishes her and snickers at her bodily proportions that will ultimately cause her to “trip over her laces and fall flat on her face.” Not only was there an obvious, abrupt divide in Barbieri’s argument, but she also throws in a sentence or two about the racism apparent in Barbie, which, to me, seemed random and out of place, totally disconnected from the rest of the article. Just as I felt after picking apart Orenstein’s argument, I still have not come close to determining whether a frilly dress is my friend or my foe.

My hunt for whether or not the notion of ‘happily ever after’ is damaging seemed to be growing futile, until I stumbled upon a collection of three videos entitled “Advice From a Cartoon Princess” by TheSecondCityNetwork. Each video featured a different classic Disney princess—The Little Mermaid, Belle, and Snow White—each who gave terrible, sarcastic advice to young girls. The advice is based on each of the princesses’ individual stories and what they ‘learned’ from their life experiences. The advice was, of course, totally absurd and sarcastic, and that advice pointed directly to Orenstein and Barbieri’s arguments, poking fun at them as well as pointing out the flaws in the fairy tales the princesses came from. Snow White illuminates the accused racism in Barbie dolls that Barbieri argues against by telling little girls that it’s important to be the “Fair, fair fairest, white, white, whitest!” Belle backs up Orenstein’s self- esteem argument by admitting, “the lesson here is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder—as long as the woman is good- looking.” Here, Belle points out the underlying problem that creeps up in many princess stories. And, The Little Mermaid, expanding on the absurdity of Barbie’s proportions explains that you should “never be comfortable with the body that you’re given. If you don’t like how you look—snip! snip!—nothing wrong with that!” Ariel giggles after she makes this comment, which is exactly what I was doing as I was watching her do so.

I admit that every single video made me laugh. Orenstein and Barbieri’s serious arguments did not speak to me, but the humor in these three videos did. The videos were the only source that generated a genuinely positive response from me, and that’s because of their lightness. And that made me realize—maybe we are all taking this princess phenomenon too seriously. Sometimes a movie is just entertainment and a doll is just a toy. I agree that these videos pointed out the huge flaws in the lessons these films are teaching young girls, but we have to remember that movies *aren’t* real, and that they are called ‘fairy tales’ for a reason. According to The Little Mermaid, “You should always find a stranger to obsess over and then genetically modify yourself for that stranger.” Yes, I can definitely see how that is a terrible lesson to teach a young, impressionable girl, but no young girl reads that much into the tail- to- legs transformation—she’s just imagining how amazing it would be to become a mermaid, being able to breathe and swim underwater like Ariel. Snow White states, “Don’t ever eat fruit. That shit is so bad for you.” But, honestly, how many girls will develop an aversion for apples after watching Snow White?

The whole point of fairy tales is to transport us to a world we can’t really live in, so what’s wrong with expressing our imaginations by singing a catchy love song or wearing a pretty dress, even though it’s pink and frilly? As long as mothers teach their daughters about reality and show them the right way to act through leading by example, their lives will fall into place as they should. I have yet to see proof that princesses cause low self- esteem, and until I see it, I refuse to worry. Sure, every girl dreams of someday becoming a princess—that’s normal. But the real problem is this: where should grown women draw the line between bitter cynicism and a romantic princess fantasy? To me, there is nothing wrong with us believing that our princes will come someday, as long as we don’t put our lives to a halt, lying in a glass coffin, to wait for Prince Charming to come save us from ourselves.

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