

The Disney Dichotomy:  
Idealism and Cynicism in the Disney Princess Story

Marina Moses

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Princesses are one of the most blatant--one might even say pure--symbols of modern idealism. They represent innocence, uncomplicated beauty, dreams, and especially dreams come true. An alternate view sees these myths as completely false. Princess are evaluated from a cynical standpoint as passive, supporting patriarchal domination, and in general promoting female subjugation and misery. A possible third perspective exists, however, in the cynical interpretation of children playing at being princesses.

In 2001, Disney began marketing princesses. They did not focus on any particular princess as an individual, but on a group of characters all grouped under one "princess" category. The characters range from classic Snow White, the completely passive heroine of the very first Disney feature-length animated film in 1937, to Mulan, warrior heroine of the 1998 movie of the same name. Disney has created everything from ice skating shows to dolls to, of course, clothes. The product line of dresses, crowns, and anything pink and sparkly has taken off like crazy. According to Peggy Orenstein (2006) in her New York Times article "What's Wrong With Cinderella?", Disney made \$300 million on Princess items in their first year and \$3 billion in 2006. The princesses include Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Jasmine from *Aladdin*, and occasionally Mulan, Pocahontas, and Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan*. I will be focusing on the first six characters as that is where most of the marketing and all of the pretty dresses have been focused.

The message is clear: little girls love princesses. Little girls love Cinderella and Ariel the mermaid, no matter how much their feminist mothers and sisters despise them. And despise them they do. For at least thirty years, feminists have been criticizing Disney movies for portraying and encouraging passive females who only existed to marry princes, supporting a dominant patriarchal paradigm, and promoting pastel colors. Disney princesses are never active. They never forcefully take what they want, never quite manage to defend themselves from the villain, and never quite manage solo. The constant theme of love and marriage overcoming all obstacles is unrealistic and only leads to fantasies which are bound to be disappointed. Regardless of their individual story, all the princesses move in male-dominated spheres. One could consider the princesses passive cynics, slaves to cultural expectations to such a degree that they are not even aware that they are enslaved. Their stories are classic splits: they have hobbies, interests, passions, lives, but they willingly give it all up for marriage. All their action is directed towards the simple goal of participating in a patriarchal family-centered society. Disney's princesses encourage girls not to be bitches, as opposed to Diogenes, who believed that we should live like dogs.

It is undeniable that cynicism surrounds the idealist princesses, both within their fictional narratives and without, in the form of feminist critics. The question remains, however, about the cause and reason for the cynicism. Does the cynicism reside only in the feminists and academics, or does Disney itself breed cynics by giving little girls a fantasy that they will eventually realize is false? Even beyond this, though, I wonder whether there is another viewpoint in the dichotomy. Is there a place for cynicism in the the Princess phenomenon?

In the movies themselves, the conflict template is idealism vs. cynicism. The constant idealism fulfills a fundamentalist counterpoint to cynicism. The Disney idealism is an idealism that does not just hope for a better future, but believes in it through anything, without pause. Love *always* conquers; the template can be applied to any situation. This is played out between the idealist princesses and the cynical villains, of course, but also between secondary characters.

In *Cinderella*, for example, Cinderella endures her stepfamily's cynical manipulation with a firm belief that someday her dreams will come true, while her animal friends play out the same template. The mice sing, "We can help our Cinderelly!" and face every setback with fortitude. The cat, their nemesis, takes a swipe at the goofy dog and, when he barks, feigns innocence. Throughout the movie, the most interesting sequences are the ongoing battles between the brave mice and the sneaky cat. The mice, of course, always win, and so does Cinderella.

I find it interesting that the animals have as much screen time as Cinderella, and possibly more. Their sequences are almost wordless, depending on physicality for communication. Cinderella has the magical-seeming power of being able to communicate with animals, and the audience is drawn to identify with her when we, as well, can make out what the mice are squeaking.

In *The Little Mermaid*, the battle between idealism and cynicism continues. Ariel's father is certain that humans are evil through and through, without a hope of redemption. In response, Ariel says, "I don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad." She is enchanted with everything in the human world. She trades her voice to the evil sea witch Ursula for human legs, sure that everything will turn out

fine. Her nemesis, Ursula the octopus witch, has a marvelously burlesque cynical song in which she convinces Ariel to make the deal. When Ariel asks how she's supposed to win the prince without being able to talk to him, Ursula responds, "You have your looks! Your pretty face!" She sings, "On land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word. [...] It's she who holds her tongue who gets her man." When Ariel actually comes close to kissing the prince, Ursula calls her a tramp. She sees nothing but artifice in love.

As in *Cinderella*, the dichotomy between idealism and cynicism is also played out between secondary characters. Ariel's friends Flounder the fish and Scuttle the seagull are not brave or smart, but are willing to do anything to help Ariel. Sebastian the crab is sent to watch over Ariel by her father. He is something of a doomsayer, and although he is eventually won over and helps Ariel, he has as little confidence in love all on its own and helps by orchestrating a musical romantic mood. Sebastian is won over to idealism, and helps convince Ariel's cynical father that Ariel's idealism is right in the end.

In *Aladdin*, the most recent of the six main princess movies, the battle between idealism and cynicism is more blatant in the direct battle between the cynical villain and the idealist sultan, princess and genie. It is also more subtle in Aladdin's inner battle. Aladdin is a homeless "street rat" who steals "only what I can't afford, and that's everything." But he also seeks out a beautiful view of the palace and wishes everyone could see that "there's so much more to me." Aladdin lives a life that encourages cynicism. As Sloterdijk (1987) says, "Mistrust is the intelligence of the disadvantaged" (p. 143). Given three wishes by the genie, his first thought is to manipulate the genie into giving him one thing without technically wishing for it. But more and more as the movie goes on, he embodies the hero and idealist as well. At the end of the film, after the cynic

villain has been imprisoned, Aladdin gives up being a prince to free the genie. As always, idealism firmly wins.

*Aladdin* is unique among the princess movies in that the princess is not in the title role. In spite of that, Princess Jasmine is firmly in a position of power and even subtle revolution. She refuses unwanted suitors by having her pet tiger literally bite their pants off. When her father refuses to give up sending suitors, she runs away from the palace into a marketplace she's never been to before. When Aladdin pole-vaults across rooftops, she vaults after him before he can lay out a walkway for her, saying, "I catch on quick." She doesn't hesitate to verbally and physically defy the villain. She stands up for herself. It is when looking at her relationships with the other characters, though, that her power really shows. Both the sultan and Aladdin end up dependent on her for their royal stature: the king because without her consent the royal line will not continue, and Aladdin because while the genie temporarily makes him a prince, he cannot remain one solely through magic. It is up to Jasmine to confirm his transformation into a real prince.

In terms of revolution, Jasmine is where the true spirit of the movie lies. Aladdin is a street rat who wants to become a prince, but never entertains the notion of changing the system. He merely wants to change his place within it. Jasmine bluntly tells her father, "The law is wrong," and acts outside it. It is through her desire and influence that the status quo is changed. Jasmine is the most physically and socially active of the Disney princesses.

Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* is perhaps the most passive. For the most part she does exactly what her guardians, three fairies, tell her to do. Even when the fairies tell her she can't marry the man she fell in love with, she simply cries for a bit, then obeys

them. During the climactic moments of the movie, she's asleep. However, she is still the trigger and focal point of the whole narrative. The villain chooses to target the kingdom and the ruling patriarchy through her. Everyone must fall asleep and wake up according to when Aurora does.

The characters with the most power in *Sleeping Beauty's* world are not the kings or the prince, but the elderly fairy guardians. Do Rosario (2004) says, "the elderly fairies are the actual rescuers of the princess, simply working through the prince." Prince Phillip is imprisoned until freed by the fairies, who protect him on the way to rescue the princess. He tries to kill a dragon, but fails until the fairies enchant his sword. "In effect, Philip is simply the vessel of their magic" (Do Rosario, 2004). The mature female fairies are the only ones with both the power and the will to make change.

Although Disney princesses have their share of passivity, they are more active than another constant character: the Prince. Princesses may be limited to being sweet, but princes are just plain uninteresting. Princesses have limited character traits; princes have none. The more passive the princesses is, the more passive the prince is: Snow White's prince doesn't even have a name, while Cinderella's prince is limited to a wimpy adjective: Charming. When Cinderella waves to her friends out the window of her wedding coach, the prince cannot even be seen inside. Her goals of freedom, power and love may have been accomplished by marrying the prince, but in the end the prince as an individual is inconsequential.

Even when the princess is more active, the prince is still relatively powerless. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the Beast as beast is interesting and has a personality, but when he becomes a prince at the end that personality is eradicated and his job is reduced to

dancing with Belle and looking handsome. Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid* seems to have no goals or ambitions besides playing with his dog and finding love that will hit him “bam, like lightning.” *Aladdin* is the exception, the only princess movie not named after the princess, but Jasmine is still the key to Aladdin’s power. Although the genie turns Aladdin into a prince, the magic can easily be undone. It is up to Jasmine to make Aladdin a prince in more than fantasy.

Kings are almost as powerless. The king is drawn almost exactly the same in *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Aladdin*: short, round, with a white mustache and more interest in the marriages of their children than any matters of state. This king is a figure of humor, as round and bouncy as a ball, with no power to break your nose even if he hits you in the face. King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* is muscular and has a magical triton that spews lightning, but when faced with a threat to Ariel from Ursula, the most he can do is take her place. Do Rosario (2004) sees kings as “powerless, almost irrelevant.” The story remains focused on the princess.

The mother is almost completely absent from the films, besides a brief appearance in *Sleeping Beauty*. This absence has been widely critiqued as setting up femininity in a villain/heroine or whore/Madonna split. However, Do Rosario (2004) notes that one family member is even more absent, and goes completely unremarked: the brother. “Not one Disney father wishes for a son or remarks on the absence, implicitly condoning the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter” (Do Rosario, 2004). She sees this absence as signifying that the narrative is about the daughter displacing the father, the woman displacing patriarchy. “If the Disney kingdom, and, indeed, fairytale in general, supported the natural privilege of patriarchy, presumably the princess would always have a brother

or other male relative poised to succeed her father. But she doesn't" (Do Rosario, 2004). Patriarchy requires the line of father to son. The princess, by her very existence, disrupts that line and requires change.

Regardless of the narrative elements of idealism and cynicism, feminism and patriarchy, the real question is not just what is portrayed but what is received. As Fiske and the Birmingham School believe, the audience of any communication have at least as much of an effect on its meaning as what the creators intended. For Fiske (1990), the message is only partially about the text in and of itself, and more about the negotiated interaction between the text and the audience. Historically, feminist interpretations may have seen princesses in a cynical light, but it is still possible for the young girls who love the movies to see it in a more cynical light.

Disney's princesses may be completely caught up in the dichotomy between idealism and cynicism, but I believe it is possible for the audience they most affect to receive their message in a cynical sense of play and fantasy. Little girls can use the fantasy princess world not to make themselves more passive, but to shift the institutions and rituals of their daily life. Wearing a crown to school and sleeping in a frilly dress is not dutifully complying with the expectations presented in every-day life. The element of the princess the child is claiming is not the passivity, but the creation of the whole world as a support for their story. Playing at Sleeping Beauty, the passive princess who spends most of the story asleep in a tall tower, can let a small girl be untouchable, while a girl playing Jasmine can work to change the law of her own family.

Girls dressing as princesses can embody the spirit of carnival. According to Sloterdijk (1987), "The old carnival was a substitute revolution for the poor" (p. 117).

The poorest could be king and the king could be poor. Actions that were not allowed normally could occur. “In this inverted world, the poor and the decent brought their dreams to life, as costumed oafs and bacchanals, forgetting themselves to the point of truth” (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 117). For a child who feels themselves at the bottom of the totem pole, the princess character can be a source of power and inversion of every-day social structures. Princesses can be a method of escapism, but I believe they can also serve as a cynical critique of a dry, every-day, cynical world. The cynic knows the world is drab, but the girl in a princess costume is finding her own way of saying it can be, instead, pink and sparkly.

Different interpretations of Disney’s princess stories can certainly be made, but for a generation of feminists who grow up with female lawyers, doctors, CEOs, teachers, and single working mothers, not to mention female presidential candidates and a female Speaker of the House, I believe it is likely that the passivity of the princess is not the most interesting message for the audience. Offered a choice between fundamentalism and cynicism, some girls are able to choose cynicism in their fantasy play. And as Disney tells us, dreams can come true. Girls have the option of carrying cynicism from their princess play into an adult revolution.

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