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**Creating the Perfect Princess: An Examination of the Disney Princess Conglomerate**

The evolution of the Disney Princess can be most easily interpreted when it is separated into a timeline that demarcates the different generations of Disney Princesses. While there are several of these timelines in circulation, this essay will utilize Professor Carmen Fought’s rendition, which separates the Disney Princesses into the Classics Era, which holds *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, the Renaissance Era, which holds *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*, and the New Age Era, which holds *Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*.[[1]](#footnote-1) While it is rather obvious that one of the defining features for this timeline is the year in which it was created, another facet of these eras that differentiates one from the other is the nature of both the princess’s character as well as her storyline. In the Classic Era, the narrative is as follows: a girl is alone and somewhat lost, this girl is helped along by some mystical character, this girl finds a man who solves all her issues, and this girl transforms into a princess and lives happily ever after. The Renaissance Era was aired thirty years later, yet barring a few progressive changes, which included incorporating racially diverse princesses and glimpses of empowered princesses, the plot line and character development were generally consistent with the Classics Era. Significant change in terms of character and plot development came with the New Age Era of Disney Princesses after these princesses were unified into the Disney Princess conglomerate. These changes also came to fruition in the aftermath of the parental revolution against the classic Disney Princess archetype.

By examining the evolution of the Disney Princess, a discernable pattern is illuminated that ultimately presents the creation of Disney Princesses as a fluid and flexible process that responds to the demands of their buyers and thus consumer culture. In this manner, capitalism and the Disney Princesses conglomerate go hand in hand with one another. This conflation of the Disney Princess with the profit mongering capitalist system is problematized, however, when one takes into account the effect that these Disney princesses have on the formation of gender and gender identities in young children as well as children’s obsessive cooptation of Disney Princesses’ looks, personalities, and goals and dreams. In this manner, this project will explore the balancing act that is the formation of a Disney Princess in order to make the claim that Disney has embarked on a profit driven trajectory with the ultimate goal of creating a new Disney Princess that garners as much notoriety and success as the princesses in Disney’s golden-goose, *Frozen*. In essence, this project will attempt to demonstrate that the classic Disney princess archetype is currently under attack from its very creator. While *Frozen* demonstrated an almost perfect balance of princess and progress, which ultimately created a cult-like following of the newest Disney enterprise, Disney has struggled to recreate such a widely accepted and supported Disney Princess. Currently, the company, has moved away from the classic portrayal and presentation of princesses. Instead, they seek to present “empowered heroines”[[2]](#footnote-2) with androgynous representations of gender and sexuality. This essay will also argue that this was an erroneous move due to the fact that princesses and their idealistic narrative will always be profitable and desired by girls and women worldwide.

On February 4, 1938, *Snow White* was released by Walt Disney Pictures thus earning her descriptor as the first Disney Princess. With the release of *Cinderella* in 1950 and *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, the Disney Princess dynasty had begun. Now over half a century later, Disney Princesses have become a household name with Disney products grossing $3 billion annually and Disney Princess movies consistently becoming box office hits.[[3]](#footnote-3) For me, one of four girls, Disney Princesses were ***the*** household name. In fact, it is safe to say that Disney Princesses characterized my childhood. From Disney Princess birthday parties to Disney Princess Halloween costumes to binge watching Disney Princess movies with my sisters on Sundays, Disney Princesses and their idyllic narratives have been a prominent part of my entire life. I literally used to dream about finding my prince charming in a fantastically ornate gown while dancing the Waltz under the moonlight. While this dream has faded (somewhat,) my fascination for Disney Princesses remains. This fascination grew almost exponentially when I learned that the Disney Princess conglomerate was not created until 2001. Prior to this conflation, Disney princesses and their subsequent merchandise were sold in conjunction with the release of that Disney princess’s movie. The sheer magnitude and availability of this merchandise was strikingly limited, and by the beginning of the 21st century, sales of Disney consumer products were “dropping by as much as 30 percent a year.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This downfall was short lived, however, and in 2000 after attending a Disney on Ice performance full of homemade princess costumes, Andy Mooney and the rest of the Disney consumer-products division made the revolutionary decision to market the company’s Princesses and all of their princess accoutrements as a single entity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although very little marketing or research was conducted prior to the release of this princess conglomerate, the idea was a resounding success:

Within a year, sales had soared to $300 million. By 2009, they were at $4 billion dollar. Four billion dollars! There are more than twenty-six thousand Disney Princess items on the market…’Princess’ has not only become the fastest-growing brand the company has ever created, it is the largest franchise on the planet for girls ages two to six.[[6]](#footnote-6)

One need only look to the above statistic to realize that the popularity of Disney princesses grew almost exponentially in the aftermath of the creation of the Disney princess conglomerate. Almost overnight, Disney princesses became a prominent feature of almost every little girl’s childhood being featured in their bedrooms, their wardrobes, and their toys. These princesses also helped young children to understand and develop their gender as well as personal identities. The normative experience for a young girl and boy navigating the preschool scene is as follows: the girls embark on imaginative journeys through faraway lands filled with pink princesses and prince charmings, and the boys engage in sporting events and spirited reenactments of cops and robbers. In essence, these princesses flooded the market for children and their seemingly endless needs and wants. This flooding, however, soon became inundation.

With the creation of the Disney Princess conglomerate, the enterprise for “Princess merchandise” was revolutionized, and in 2015, it was estimated that there were over 40, 000 “princess products” being sold worldwide for a profit of $2.64 billion in product sales.[[7]](#footnote-7) Little girls idolized these princesses. They wanted to look like them, act like them, and find a prince charming just like them. One particularly poignant example of this obsession with princesses comes with three-year-old Juniper, a young girl living in Denver with her parents: “Every morning, Juniper asks to wear a princess dress and “loud shoes” with hard plastic heels. When she puts them on, she declares, ‘I’m becoming a woman!’”[[8]](#footnote-8) While this example does represent a rather extreme obsession with princesses, almost every parent with a young daughter was experiencing a situation similar to this one. Unlike their enamored children, however, these parents were not thrilled with their daughters’ newfound idolization of such limited and vulnerable women. Just as the market for Princess merchandise transformed overnight, parental acceptance of this transformation changed rapidly as well.

For worried parents whose daughters’ greatest dreams were to marry prince charming in a beautiful gown, resigned acceptance of their young daughters’ princess mania soon transformed into resolute rejection. Peggy Orenstein, one such parent, voiced her concerns and frustrations in an article entitled “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?” In her book, she criticizes Disney’s expansive merchandising campaigns claiming that “when one thing is so dominant, then it’s no longer a choice: it’s a mandate, cannibalizing all other forms of play.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Additionally, she brought into question the company’s unconditional promotion of women whose goals and mannerisms are grounded in an extremely narrow representation of what the female gender is and can be.[[10]](#footnote-10) This work was used and expanded upon by many other concerned parents, and soon, a hysteria of sorts had formed around young girls’ obsession with Disney princesses. In an Op-Ed article entitled “Why Aren’t We Shocked,” Bob Herbert made the claim that “in a misogynistic culture, it’s never too early to drill into the minds of girls that what really matters is their appearance and their ability to please men sexually.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In 2006, Girls Incorporated released a study entitled “The Supergirl Dilemma: Girls Grapple with the Mounting Pressure of Expectations,” which interviewed young girls across America to study how media affects girls’ self-esteem and self-confidence. It was in this study that one girl is quoted saying that “’there is way too much pressure, especially from the media, to be skinny, popular, athletic, and have a boyfriend.”[[12]](#footnote-12) It was in the wake of these alarming publications demonstrating the effects that the unrealistic and ultimately unattainable princess narrative and archetype have on children that Disney began a campaign to transform the Disney Princess. Although children were the primary target of Disney’s products, the parents paid for these toys, which meant that Disney Princesses would have to change its brand and reputation if it wanted to stay at the top of the markets surrounding children. It is in the context of this change that the New Age Era of Disney Princesses emerged, which ultimately released motion pictures such as *Princess and the Frog* and *Frozen*.

In 2009, Walt Disney Picture unveiled its newest generation of Disney Princesses inducting Princess Tiana and her movie *Princess and the Frog* into the Disney Princess conglomerate. *Princess and the Frog* represented the company’s attempt to respond to both the public as well as the intellectual community’s concerns surrounding the female role models the company was promoting to young girls everywhere. This 97-minute animated comedy attempted to pivot away from the classic princess archetype while still remaining true to the beloved princess narrative. In this manner, Princess Tiana, the main protagonist of the film, was not like any other Disney Princess in that she was black, extremely motivated and hardworking, and not entirely focused on finding “true love’s kiss.” This attempt to pivot away from the stigmatized and highly controversial princess archetype did not stop with Tiana’s character, however. The movie consistently injected Disney’s reimagined version of the princess archetype into both the script as well as the supporting characters. Just fifteen minutes into the film Princess Tiana, who, at this point in the movie, is a poor girl from Louisiana who is struggling to achieve her dream of owning her own restaurant, has a very important conversation with her mother about her future:

Mama: “And that’s all I want for you, sweetheart, to meet your Prince Charming and dance off into your happily ever after”

Tiana: “Mama! I don’t have time for dancing!” She then begins a song entitled “Almost There,” which contains the line “Look out, boys, I’m coming through!”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Although there are several other instances within the script where Princess Tiana verbally depicts a modern and progressive vision of herself, the makers of this movie also injected this progressive pivot away from the traditional princess archetype using Tiana’s supporting characters. In particular, Tiana’s foil character, Charlotte La Bouff, represents an attempt by the creators to both satirize the vapid nature of the classic princess archetype as well as underscore how different Tiana is from this archetype. In this manner, Charlotte La Bouff is a white girl from a rich family in Louisiana, i.e. Louisiana royalty, who gallivants around her gloriously large plantation-style home lamenting, almost hysterically, how her “’prince is never coming!’”[[14]](#footnote-14) She is nothing like Tiana. In fact, she is more of Chihuahua, mindless and overly hyper. Although Tiana ultimately finds her prince and lives happily ever after, she does represent a new and improved take on the classic Disney Princess archetype. While revolutionary and progressive, the new and improved princess presented in the *Princess and the Frog* was not as well received as the creators had hoped. Making only $104 million in theaters, *Princess and the Frog* is Disney’s “lowest grossing Disney movie.”[[15]](#footnote-15) It also received a slew of criticism that ranged from claims of whitewashing to racist claims that black women cannot be princesses. In one review published in the New York Times, critic Manohla Dargis writes “A frog whose green hue suggests that, if nothing else, Disney finally recognizes that every little girl, no matter her color, represents a new marketing opportunity.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In essence, Walt Disney Pictures received criticism from progressive, conservative, and flat out racist voices, which ultimately suggests that Disney had not found the correct formula for constructing a princess that everyone including parents would like. The company would have to go back to the drawing board. In the aftermath of Disney’s disappointing debut of its new princess, Tiana, the company played it very safe with its release of a reimagined version of the story of Rapunzel titled *Tangled*. Although *Tangled* was generally regarded as a box office success, the company truly struck gold when it released Frozen in 2013.

With two princesses, magical powers and creatures, and a complicated loved triangle, *Frozen* had it all in terms of plot, character development, animation technology, and most importantly catchy tunes. The true magic of Frozen, however, came with the film’s ability to place a classic character trope, the princess, into a modern, animated film with informed and realistic story lines and characters. For example, *Frozen*, just like the classic princess narrative, contains “true love’s kiss.” Unlike the classic narrative, however, this kiss is shared between two sisters whose unconditional love for one another saves a kingdom, a family, and most importantly a life, which is an empowering message that teaches young girls the importance of sisterhood and family.[[17]](#footnote-17) One might think that because “true love’s kiss” is shared by two sisters in Frozen, there is no romance in the movie. This thought, however, is erroneous. Although it does not dominate the story’s plot line, romance between Anna and Kristoff is ever present in Frozen. It is not a fickle, superficial love like the one between Hans and Anna, but a real relationship that developed out of time and companionship. They do not share the true and unconditional love that Anna and her sister Elsa share, but they have a strong foundation for a successful relationship. Just like the classic Disney Princess narrative, love remains an important feature that helps to push the plot toward both the film’s climax and happy ending. This love, however, is not limited to a man and woman just like the ending is not limited to the marriage of a prince and a princess. The ending of *Frozen* once again manages to successfully balance and intermix progressive themes within the classic princess story line. “Happily ever after” was achieved, “true love’s kiss” was shared, and a man and a woman realized their affection for one another and shared a kiss. The twist was that true love’s kiss and the man and woman kissing were different facets of the plot. In this manner, love was deconstructed to represent a fluid concept that bares many forms. Every feature of the Disney narrative was included, but in a way, that seamlessly incorporated modern themes of female empowerment, sisterhood, and free love. For this reason, the climax of the film is centered around the reunification of two estranged sisters struggling to come to terms with their identities as young, female rulers, which suggests that a man is not the only way for a princess to find “true love’s kiss” and “happily ever.” It is ultimately this nuanced and modified version of the Disney Princess archetype that catalyzed *Frozen’s* monumental success.

Winning two Oscars for best song and best animated feature, Disney’s *Frozen* “became the highest-grossing animated film of all time,”[[18]](#footnote-18) and was lauded as “a pop culture phenomenon.”[[19]](#footnote-19) It was wildly popular in all industries. *Frozen* themed backpacks, suitcases, lunchboxes, toys, bed sheets, and basically every other product soon flooded the consumer market. When asked about the success of Frozen merchandise, a member of the Consumer Products division made the claim that “’Frozen is a global phenomenon that has truly exceeded our expectation on every level.’” Frozen products could not be kept on the shelves, and even two years after its release, the movie continued to be a box office hit and family favorite. Dubbed by journalist Dorian Lynskey as “Frozen-mania,” his article in *The Guardian* ultimately makes the claim that “Elsa, Anna, and Olaf conquered the world,” [[20]](#footnote-20) which is a statement that while wildly hyperbolic does hold some truth. Additionally, *Frozen*, was a film that was applauded and supported, for the most part, by the progressive critics of mainstream media. One article in particular deemed *Frozen* to be “the most feminist Disney movie ever.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In this manner, *Frozen* can be viewed as the pinnacle of success for the Disney Princess conglomerate. Ironically, in the aftermath of *Frozen’s* extraordinary success, the demonization of the Disney Princess has once again been trending in pop culture.

In December 2016, Sarah M. Coyne, spearheaded a study entitled “Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children,” which ultimately sparked a conversation that once again placed the Disney Princess conglomerate under considerable scrutiny. While the study was small and somewhat limited, it was revolutionary in that it collected quantitative data surrounding the effect that Disney Princesses had on children’s perceptions of themselves in relation to their gender identity. The most significant finding was that fact that the study found data that “supports research showing that engagement with the Disney Princess culture can influence gender stereotypes and may contribute to a “girly girl” culture in which gendered behavior is common and highly valued.”[[22]](#footnote-22) In other words, Disney Princesses were reinforcing gender stereotypes that ultimately value a woman for her looks, her child rearing abilities, and her ability to secure and satisfy a husband. Upon the publication of this study, a slew of articles documenting this groundbreaking work were picked up by mainstream media. With headlines like “Are Disney Princesses Hurting Your Daughter’s Self Esteem?”[[23]](#footnote-23), “Why Disney Princesses and Princess Culture Are Bad for Girls,”[[24]](#footnote-24) and “Researchers Have Found a Major Problem with ‘The Little Mermaid’ and Other Disney Movies,”[[25]](#footnote-25) Disney Princesses and the Disney Corporation were once again charged with creating an unrealistic, unattainable, and wildly limited representation of what the female gender should look like, act like, and be like. Even after the unheard-of success that *Frozen* experienced due to its impressive balance of progressive and princess, Disney still could not shake the stigma surrounding the limited nature of the classic Disney Princess archetype and storyline. It was in this hyper-critical environment that Disney’s newest Princess was formed.

With Walt Disney Pictures’ release of *Moana* in 2016, Disney’s newest Princess, Moana, was unveiled, thus marking the inception of new generation of Disney Princesses with updated storylines, supporting roles, and characteristics. Moana, a young, girl living on an island in Hawaii, is torn between her family and her wants and dreams. When her grandmother dies and her tribe begins to suffer a deadly blight, Moana embarks on a quest to save her people from destitution by exploring the farthest reaches of the sea to return the goddess of life, Te Fiti’s, heart.[[26]](#footnote-26) One of the most interesting aspects of the new Disney Princess, Moana, is that aside from the fact that her father was the chief of her tribe making her a princess, her storyline and character contained almost no resemblance to the other Disney Princesses. In fact, throughout the movie, Moana adamantly rejects Maui’s insistence on calling her a princess. Over and over again she insists that she is not anything like nor will ever be like a princess.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition, there is no love interest in Moana’s story, which ultimately suggests that *Moana* represents yet another attempt to create a new generation of princesses that conforms to modern societal mores surrounding gender and identity. Using *Moana* for evidentiary support, it would appear that this new generation of Disney Princess is based on an almost complete erasure of the classic Disney Princess archetype. This omission ultimately suggests that the new Disney Princesses will likely be defined by their non-princess qualities. They will still have the technical identifier of Disney Princess so as to maintain and perpetuate the wildly profitable Disney Princess conglomerate, but their storylines and characters will ultimately subvert the classic Disney princess archetype and narrative. These princesses will push their limits, discover an inner strength that allows them to accomplish anything, and find deep and meaningful relationships full of any and all kinds of love. They will not be defined by their romantic relationships, physical appearances, nor their romantically driven goals, which ultimately have become synonymous with princesses as one study has shown.[[28]](#footnote-28) While all of these updates to the Disney Princess have produced an inspiring and empowering icon for young girls everywhere, the company has once again come under fire for straying too far from the original Disney Princess concept.[[29]](#footnote-29) In other words, some of the more traditional Disney enthusiasts believe that the company is betraying the Disney Princess brand and killing the entire concept that is the Disney Princess. These claims are corroborated by a recent study conducted that examined what feminine and masculine qualities children associated with princesses, and whether or not ‘old’ princesses, Aurora, and ‘new’ princesses, Moana, possessed these qualities. Unfortunately for Disney, the results of this study were as follows:

Results showed that whilst children recognized the largely feminine versus androgynous gendered profiles of Aurora versus Moana respectively, viewing a ‘newer’ Disney movie did not change their perception of ‘princesses’ more broadly. Moreover, a large proportion of children did not identify Moana as a princess at all.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In other words, Disney must once again transform its interpretation of a princess if it wants to remain a relevant and culturally significant product that is consumed by children worldwide.

While the obsession has ebbed and flowed over the years, young girl’s enthusiasm for the Disney Princess conglomerate, which has been in operation for almost twenty years, has never suffered any significant decreases in profit margin and relevancy, which suggests that for as long as girls continue to engage with the Disney Princess conglomerate, princesses will be immensely profitable. One need only look at the stark difference in profit made by Disney’s golden-goose, *Frozen*, and Disney’s newest Princess, Moana to see Disney’s commitment to the classic Disney Princess and her idyllic narrative. While people support Disney’s desire to fulfill the public’s calls for the creation of empowered and inspiring princess, which one Disney Executive deemed the formation of “empowered heroines,” they did not fiend for and obsess over “empowered heroines”[[31]](#footnote-31) in the same way that they did for the dynamic duo that was the Frozen Princesses. In other words, Disney, if it wants to remain a fundamental part of young girls’ lives, must recreate a *Frozen*-level of balance between progress and princess, which is a task that many believe is not a feasible reality, which could potentially explain Disney’s reticence to unveil a new Disney Princess. With live-action renditions of the classic Disney Princess tales gaining significant popularity, it seems that both Disney and the general public have resigned themselves to the fact that no Disney Princess will ever achieve the same level of success that *Frozen* achieved, which is an opinion underscored by the fact that all of Disney’s projects involving princesses in the near future are either live action remakes of Disney Princess tales or mere reinterpretations of the current Disney princesses. Even with these seemingly harmless and minute alterations, the Disney Princess conglomerate has once again come under fire for its interpretations of princesses. One need only look to significant backlash that occurred in response to Disney’s release of its *Wreck-It-Wralph 2* trailer[[32]](#footnote-32) to realize that nothing the creators of Disney Princesses do will reconcile the almost intrinsic stigmatization surrounding the classic Disney Princess tale. No matter how progressive or empowered, society cannot seem to shake the view that princesses can only be bewildered beauties whose greatest aspiration in life is “to meet [her] Prince Charming and dance off into [her] happily ever after.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Although Disney has clearly struggled to both create and emulate the success of *Frozen* and its two, princess protagonists, the Disney Princess conglomerate is still a wildly profitable product with seemingly endless marketing and brand potential, which suggests that Disney will never stop trying to recreate the perfect princesses that were Anna and Elsa of Disney’s *Frozen*.

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