

Rothschild, Sarah. *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*. Pp. 274. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publisher, 2013. US \$86.95. ISBN: 978-1433119521.

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As I began outlining this review of Sarah Rothschild's *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*, the cult of princess-hood appeared to have reached an all time crescendo. Previews for the live-action Disney release, *Maleficent*, featuring Angelina Jolie as the sinister fairy who curses Princess Aurora (otherwise known as Sleeping Beauty) began circulating. A month earlier, social media was dense with parent-produced viral videos of their children singing—even weeping—the lyrics to “Let it Go,” a song from Disney's *Frozen* (2013), an animated princess film which chronicles the journal of two royal sisters, one of whom is cursed to freeze everything around her. The film is loosely based upon Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. My own daughter received an invitation to a “princess party” where guests were asked to dress up in costume as their favorite Disney princess. The family that sent this invitation assumed (incorrectly, in our case) that *all* young girls must own a Disney princess gown, indirectly suggesting, perhaps, that the ownership of such garb is requisite to being an American seven-year-old girl. It might be tempting to suggest that such fantasy is the stuff of childhood, yet one of America's oldest family-owned bridal companies, Alfred Angelo, boasts a Disney Fairy Tale Bridal collection so that adults may don bridal gowns which “reflect the style and sensibility of Disney's iconic princesses,” and even The Walt Disney company itself offers an online service to assist engaged couples to plan and book “Disney Fairy Tale Weddings” as well as honeymoon experiences.

Sarah Rothschild is well aware of the enormous role that such royal fantasy plays in the lives of children and adults. As the mother of two girls, Rothschild writes that her impetus for *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* sprang from such “personal experiences with princesses” (2). “As ... mother and a feminist,” writes Rothschild, “I wrestled with this: What was I allowing American culture (and Disney in particular) to teach them? Would they outgrow this phase? Would their future life decisions be impacted by their princess play?”(2).

This series of questions introduces Rothschild's five-chapter study, which is rounded off with a short conclusion. In order to frame her project, Rothschild first identifies what constitutes a "princess story," ostensibly to make allowances for characters like Mulan or Ella of *Ella Enchanted* who are not born as princesses per se, but essentially become them over the course of their narrative arc. By Rothschild's definition, princess stories articulated in films and in books and are "different from fairy tales, meaningful in ways that intentionally send messages to girls and women" (1). The stories, according to Rothschild, instruct the audience on "how to become a princess through modeling, through commentary, and often through actual princess lessons" (2).

Rothschild's chapters progress in a roughly chronological fashion, studying the content and production of American princess stories (both in literature and film) contextualized by the three waves of feminism. The book begins with a study of Frances Hodgson Burnett, her ties to first wave feminism, and how such ideologies influence themes and decidedly feminist lessons in her novel *A Little Princess* (1905). Moving forward, chapter two traces the development of Walt Disney's first animated princess stories: *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), respectively. Chapter three recovers what Rothschild describes as "ideologically intent" princess stories, citing a number of all but forgotten stories written during the second wave of feminism which promote feminist ideologies of gender equality. Chapter four itemizes and critiques latter Disney princess stories which, according to their creators, offer messages of female empowerment but essentially fail at this task. The films studied here include *The Little Mermaid* (1989) *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995) and the aforementioned *Mulan* (1998). Chapter five has the broadest range of analyses. It is dedicated to the study of an impressive number of examples of what Rothschild determines "third wave princess stories," including mainstream films like *The Princess Diaries* (2001) and *Ella Enchanted* (2004) as well as a large number of lesser-known young adult princess books. The conclusion chapter briefly locates princesses in the genres of science-fiction and romance.

One goal of this study, according to Rothschild, who is Lead Faculty for English at the Art Institute of Washington, is "...to set out princess stories as a subgenre worthy of examination" (2). The lucidity of her focus is appreciated, yet it is relatively difficult to argue that princess stories in (film and fairy tale form) have *not* received scholarly attention. Many feminist scholars have studied such stories for decades, arguing, for example, that the ideological, phallogocentric underpinnings of Disney princess films are problematic. Kay Stone makes many important points in 1975 in her essay titled "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us" (published in *The Journal of American Folklore*). Stone argues that Disney relies upon gender stereotypes and pigeon-holes the animated princesses into roles of domesticity and passivity. Such similar conclusions about the Disney franchise of princess films are echoed in both Rothschild's second chapter ("Disney's First Princess Stories") and fourth chapter ("Disney's 'Feminist' Princess Stories.")

In chapter two, Rothschild asserts that the early Disney princess films represent patriarchal viewpoints and the characters in the films counter many of the strides made by first wave feminists. Through close readings of scenes in the films as well as through her study of Walt Disney's biography and attitudes regarding gender and women, Rothschild concludes that the early films employ chauvinistic attitudes and gender stereotypes such as depictions of docile, passive, princesses who are often relegated to domestic chores and

duties. The only women in the films who do exert agency, as Rothschild points out, are categorically evil and typically killed off. Very similar themes and content are present in later Disney princess films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989) despite being marketed as being more progressive in regards to gender. Male characters still remain at the forefront of most of these later Disney films, and a variety of anti-female themes emerge.

Such conclusions about early and later Disney princess films (and the fairy tales used as their inspiration) are academically sound and well-written, but have been previously recognized by scholars like Stone, mentioned earlier, as well as many others over the course of several decades. Marcia Lieberman, for example, offers a feminist critique of fairy tales in her 1972 essay “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale”, and two decades later in 1995, June Cummins criticizes Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* for encouraging “young viewers to believe that true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince” just as earlier Disney films suggested in previous decades (22). Others have pointed to the representation of white, middle-class values in Disney films, indicating their buttressing of normative sex and gender values, for example Clare Bradford’s chapter in *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (2012), and Jill Birnie Henke, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Nancy J. Smith’s feminist readings of five Disney films in their essay titled “Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine.” In addition to these essays and chapters, there are a number of other book-length projects which scrutinize princess culture and Disney films, notably *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture in Disney*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (1995), *Kill the Princess: Why Women Still Aren’t Free From the Quest for a Fairytale Life* by Stephanie Vermeulen (2007), and *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* by Peggy Orenstein (2012)—to name three such studies.

Because Rothschild’s call for legitimatization of the study of princess stories, then, appears to be *ex post facto* since so many others have been studying princesses, in particular Disney versions, a much more innovative site of scholarly intervention is Rothschild’s objective in the project is to “link the changes in the American princess story to those sought and brought by the three waves of feminism” (3). Rothschild’s book traces the trajectory of such princesses in American popular culture whilst attempting to connect the thematic content of such stories with ideological content. “I use the princess story to examine the dialogic nature of feminism and patriarchy, forces for progress and forces for tradition” explains Rothschild (3). Forces, which according to Rothschild are “embodied by the first, second and third wave feminist princess stories on the one hand and by the Disney Studios’ princess story on the other” (3). Rothschild’s assertion that there are, indeed, feminist princess stories is where the book offers a new vantage point for studying such cultural productions, albeit a polemic one. Though Rothschild defines these stories as methods of teaching young girls how to be princesses, a question that remains is whether we should *want* our young girls to become princesses in the first place (which is arguably a different, yet related, project).

Because of the great number of Disney-focused studies, the chapters that are most engaging and innovative in Rothschild’s book are those which are focused upon princesses *outside* of the franchise. Chapter one’s analysis of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1905 novel *A Little Princess* as well as the study of Burnett’s private and public life ultimately serves to recoup Burnett, as well as the novel, as emblematic of the first wave of

feminism. Though Burnett is not typically categorized as such—not *actively* participating in the movement—Rothschild makes a compelling argument to demonstrate Burnett’s commitment to women’s empowerment through a variety of evidence, including a detailed plot analysis of *A Little Princess* and study of biographical details of Burnett’s own complicated life. To Rothschild, *A Little Princess* demonstrates “the prototypical princess story, representing...all that a princess story can be: the story of a bright capable heroine who learns about herself and about the world around her as she assumes the identity of a princess” (52).

Chapter three’s rediscovery of feminist princess stories is also inventive and encompassing, offering textual examples from a number of fairy tales produced for and by feminists that many readers are likely unfamiliar with. Rothschild describes several projects that *Ms. magazine* brought into fruition including the *Free to Be...You and Me* recorded album of stories and the *Stories For Free Children*, a regular feature of *Ms.*, both of which presented stories with feminist messages. The goal of such texts, according to Rothschild, was “to change the stories which acculturate children in hopes of contributing to social change” (91). Most of these stories are all but forgotten for a variety of reasons including the fact that they were too narrow, too alienating, and became dated rather quickly (92).

Chapter five moves into a critique of what Rothschild calls third wave princesses, arguing that the young adult princess stories produced in the last 20 years or so “took into account feminism and the new expectations of girls and women in American society,” and as such, “this combination of new expectations and old role models produced some very interesting works, illuminating the tension between traditional expectations and newer social expectations in a culture changed by the women’s movement” (169). Chapter five is well-researched and offers an impressive number of examples of princesses who defy sexist stereotypes about gender. In many cases, this new generation of princess shoots her own arrows and saves the prince from disaster rather than the other way around. According to Rothschild, these contemporary royals do not necessarily conform to conventional standards of beauty, and they often exert agency and control in their kingdom. The third wave princess, as Rothschild argues, is far more independent than Disney’s insipid Snow White. That being said, the princess archetype still comes with thousands of years of patriarchal tradition. Though Rothschild claims that Disney made “subversive changes” (169) to the film adaptations of Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* and Gail Carson Levine’s *Ella Enchanted*, not all feminists would agree that there can be a mainstream feminist princess story. Though the princesses that Rothschild describes are more enlightened than their predecessors, they still are princesses, and it will take some time to subvert centuries of sexist representations and signifiers such as weakness and passivity that are also often associated with the title.

The conclusion of the text also leaves room for further development; it seems far too brief in comparison to the other well-developed chapters. At the end of the book, Rothschild quickly summarizes princesses in *both* science fiction and romance in a mere eleven pages (when some of the other chapters are over 40 pages long) while suggesting the trajectory of princess stories to come. (It is surprising, also, that the chapter ignores one of science fiction’s most well-known examples of princess—Princess Leia of the *Star Wars* franchise—as she consistently transgresses stereotypical images of the passive princess in the span of three films). Finally, though Rothschild opens the project by citing

the difficulties American parents may encounter negotiating a path through princess culture, one leaves the text feeling that this tension remains unresolved—that is, it is unclear how Rothschild’s daughters’ or other girls’ “future life decisions [will] be impacted by their princess play” (2). Perhaps this is a vein of study that deserves speculation.

In the end, however, the book’s accessibility and Rothschild’s engaging writing style ultimately make it an appealing text to a very broad readership, extending beyond those academics who study gender, fairy tales, romance folklore, film to a general readership.

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