

Eastern Illinois University

From the Selected Works of Melissa R. Ames

2016

Chapter 1 - How Pop Culture Shapes - Full Chapter.pdf

Melissa R. Ames

Sarah Burcon



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC_BY-NC-ND International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/melissa_ames/21/

How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

Melissa Ames
Eastern Illinois University, United States

and

Sarah Burcon
University of Michigan, United States



© Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon 2016

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6–10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978–1–137–56617–1

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ames, Melissa, 1978– author. | Burcon, Sarah Himsel, 1965– author.

Title: How pop culture shapes the stages of a woman's life : from toddlers-in-tiaras to cougars-on-the-prowl / Melissa Ames, Sarah Burcon.

Description: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015035336 | ISBN 9781137566171 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Women in mass media. | Mass media—Influence. | Popular culture—United States.

Classification: LCC P94.5.W652 U616 2016 | DDC 302.23082—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015035336>

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

palgrave
macmillan

1

Becoming a Girl: Pop Culture's First Stage of Gender Training

This past year, millions of little girls have likely belted out the Oscar-winning song from Disney's *Frozen*, 'Let It Go.' The catchy tune has been hailed as an anthem for individuality and girl power, with lines that encourage girls to 'test the limits and break through', to reject rules, overcome fears, and abandon dictates to be a 'good' and 'perfect girl.' The song has even been embraced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities as a subtle coming out song.¹ The film itself has found mass appeal and has been lauded as a feminist success (with feminism, in this case, having one of its rare positive connotations in pop culture). According to its supporters, Disney has created its best princess film to date: one that features two strong female protagonists and rejects the traditional fairytale ending. So, mission accomplished: we're now raising girls in a female paradise where they'll encounter only positive gendered imagery. No more feminist media critics needed, right? Well, perhaps we should re-check the cultural pulse.

For all the praise it's received, *Frozen* has still sparked quite the debate in the blogosphere about whether it has truly earned its feminist title. For many, the main complaint rests with Disney's use of its source material, Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale 'The Snow Queen'. Most consider the original tale a feminist text, which is surprising considering its time of publication and its author.² The original tale features Gerda, a young girl who embarks on a journey to save her best friend, a boy named Kai, from the Snow Queen. Kai is the only significant male character in Andersen's original story; the remaining characters are diverse females: a powerful villain, a wise witch, a clever crow, a helpful princess (who swears to only marry a prince as intelligent as her), a set of female bandits, and many more. Disney's adaptation erases this cast of female characters, replacing them with various mountain men and

leaving only a set of sisters (Gerda becomes Anna and the Snow Queen becomes her sister, Elsa). Gerda's solo journey to save a platonic male friend becomes transformed into a journey that features hints of the all-too-familiar love triangle, adding in male suitors like Hans and Kristoff.

Despite the addition of these male characters, supporters of the film have insisted that the film is revolutionary in that it does not focus primarily on a quest for romantic love and end in a way that highlights the importance of male/female partnering. However, critics have enjoyed systematically unraveling this body of praise. For example, in 'The Problem with False Feminism (or Why "Frozen" Left Me Cold)', Dani Colman compares *Frozen* to its predecessors to prove that it is not as groundbreaking as some want to claim. Other Disney princess films have provided female characters with non-romance centered goals (for example, Ariel wants to experience life as a human, Belle wants adventure, Pocahontas wants independence, Mulan wants to bring honor to her family, Jasmine wants to overcome patriarchal control, Tiana wants to run a restaurant, and Rapunzel wants to learn the secret of the glowing lights), and, in the majority of them, they are rewarded for reaching that goal – with the bonus prize of landing a prince. In *Frozen*, one of the first goals Anna vocalizes is to find 'the one', and that is what she gets, with the other results (for example, reopening the castle gates, renewing her relationship with Elsa) becoming her bonus prizes.³ Those who really want to see *Frozen* as a positive anomaly point to the fact that, despite the romantic storylines within, the film does not end in a wedding. However, nor do most Disney films. In fact, only seven of Disney's 43 animated feature films include an on-screen wedding.⁴ And while the vast majority of them have a heterosexual happily-ever-after ending (be they human or animal pairings), *Frozen* is not an outlier in this case either since the film ends with Anna and Kristoff partnered off, not with Anna as the rare single girl at the end of the movie (as is the case with Pocahontas, for example).⁵

If we just accept that romance is a staple of the princess genre, or the Disney oeuvre, then the feminist complaints about *Frozen* have to be directed elsewhere. So, many have focused on debunking the claim that the film features two strong female characters, arguing that having two female lead characters is not the same as having two *strong* female lead characters. In fact, Anna has been criticized for being self-absorbed, naïve, condescending, and unambitious; and Elsa has been described as self-repressed, pathological, and anti-social – not necessarily the staple traits we want in so-called feminist characters.⁶ And while *Frozen* has garnered the same complaints directed toward other Disney princess

films (for example, reinforcing Western/white beauty standards), it has also been read as sexualizing its young female characters. In an essay for *Slate*, Dana Stevens analyzed the climactic, trademark 'Let It Go' scene in the film as conforming to the classic makeover moment found in so many films aimed at girls. After proclaiming 'that perfect girl is gone', Elsa appears onscreen 'clad in a slinky, slit-to-the-thigh dress with a transparent snowflake-patterned train and a pair of silver-white high heels, her braid shaken loose and switched over one shoulder in what's subtly, but unmistakably, a gesture of come-hither bad-girl seduction.'⁷ It is true that this scene can be considered problematic for the reasons Stevens offers. Although Disney likely chose this approach in order to draw a distinction between the conservative, 'perfect' girl who Elsa was, and the 'new' Elsa, who 'can't hold it back anymore', a better approach might have been to show this 'new' Elsa in a different manner – for example, using strong facial expressions and/or other clothing changes and makeovers that don't involve sex-appeal.

The debate over this pop culture phenomenon crystallizes the larger media debates about representations of girls and women in popular culture. And to be clear, this is not a new debate, nor is it one new to Disney. For example, *Tangled* (2010) also received mixed reviews with regard to whether or not the film could be considered feminist. Some argued that Rapunzel was a move in the right direction, given her strength and spunk. Critic K. J. Antonia, however, puts forward questions like, 'Why does the narrator [Flynn] have to be the male lead? Why can't Rapunzel tell her own story?' and continues:

no one could call it girl-power. When Rapunzel gains strength, she doesn't use it to defy the witch and take her rightful place in the kingdom, but to offer herself as a sacrifice for the life of Flynn, whom she's come to [...] love. In the end, Flynn has to save her from herself.⁸

Similarly, a blog from *Ms. Magazine* observes:

The good news is that [...] *Tangled* is funny, fast-paced and visually stunning. The bad news is that it re-hashes the same old story: As a woman, you can either be a princess awaiting her prince or an evil stepmother/witch; as a man, you get all the action (in many senses of the word). And beauty, of course, equals white, blonde, thin and young [...] While Flynn is all masculine adventure, power and cunning, she is all long blonde locks with a hint of you-go-girl attitude to appease a 21st-century audience.⁹

Therefore, while many will say that the media has come a long way in its female representations, as is clear in the discourse surrounding *Frozen* and other films, there are still plenty of us out there waiting to point out the leaps and bounds we have yet to make.

Depictions of girlhood: the feminist backlash rises again

When it comes to the on-again, off-again love affair the media has with feminism, we often look at the cultural landscape and experience with a sense of déjà vu, feeling as if the 21st century seems all too much like the latter decades of the 20th century. In her 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi analyzes feminism in the 1980s, arguing that the decade (inundated with pop-psychology-turned-mainstream-media texts) depicted women, especially career women, as husbandless, childless, unsatisfied souls on the verge of mental collapse from their poor choice of opting for job success over personal (read familial) happiness. This anti-feminist propaganda surfaced in expected as well as unexpected venues – such as the slew of role-reversal sitcoms produced during that time period, where Mr. Moms reigned supreme and women were thrust from the domestic sphere.¹⁰ Faludi's principle argument was that the work accomplished by the women's movement inadvertently began to lead to their downfall – or their downfall as depicted by the media at the very least.

Recently, various voices have suggested that this type of overt feminist backlash has been revived. M. Gigi Durham, author of *The Lolita Effect*, suggests that the current sexualization of young women and girls could be viewed as a potential backlash against the gains made by feminists;¹¹ in *Reality Bites Back*, Jennifer Pozer studies the humiliation of women prevalent in the popular reality television genre through an anti-feminist ideological lens, arguing that the recurrent narratives of such programming suggest that female independence leads to failure and misery;¹² and Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, studying the effects of consumerism on girls in *Packaging Girlhood*, argue that what may have started out as a sincere attempt to provide girls with more choice and power 'got co-opted and turned into a marketing scheme that reinforced age-old stereotypes.'¹³ These all seem like compelling arguments, and we would have to agree that today we are facing a revitalized backlash, or more likely, an extension of a backlash that never dissipated completely.¹⁴ Further, we will argue here and in later chapters that the backlash of this 21st century is a slightly different

phenomenon: more covert, more subtle, and perhaps (because of both), more disturbing.¹⁵

A term often associated with the idea of the feminist backlash is 'postfeminism'. However, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra point out in the introduction to their collection, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, the conflation of the two is a bit too simplistic. Conceptualizing postfeminism as a uniform sentiment is also too simplistic, as Kaitlynn Mendes clearly demonstrates in her analysis of British and American newspaper reports published during the height of second-wave feminism.¹⁶ The appearance and form that such sentiments take on often 'differ cross-nationally as a result of socio-cultural contexts and the ways women's movements evolved.'¹⁷ Even definitions of postfeminism can vary quite a bit, but most define the term as referring to broad cultural assumptions that operate by conceptualizing feminism in the past tense.¹⁸ In other words, postfeminism does two things: it tells us that feminism has already been accepted as a part of our cultural fabric, and now we are living in a society that takes feminism (and all that it has afforded women since the 1960s especially) for granted. At the same time, however, postfeminism is seen as reactionary: some (often younger) women today believe that they are empowered already and no longer even need to consider women's rights. The cultural products that reinforce this ideology emphasize multiple opportunities for women, specifically those related to career and family¹⁹ (for example, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Devil Wears Prada*).²⁰ Although at a glance this does not seem to be at odds with feminist agendas, the subtle message lurking beneath all of this freedom of choice is that some choices are 'better' than others. So while postfeminist rhetoric rarely directly states that feminist politics should be rejected, it often suggests that it is no longer needed.²¹

Although she avoids the term 'postfeminism', Susan Douglas discusses the same cultural phenomenon in her study of popular culture texts from the 1990s to the present. She argues that the fantasies of girl power crafted by the media have created a cultural climate entrenched in enlightened sexism, which she defines as

a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime [... that] insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism – indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved – so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.²²

Like Tasker and Negra, Douglas points out the differences between her theorization of the moment and the traditional conceptualization of a feminist backlash, arguing that 'enlightened sexism is more nuanced and much more insidious than out-and-out backlash', the latter of which involves a more direct rejection of 'feminism as misguided and bad for women.'²³ The problem with so many girls embracing enlightened sexism or postfeminism is that such stances encourage 'ignorance is bliss' mindsets. If girls are happily buying into the notion that feminism is now a 'done deed', and the world is now theirs for the taking, then they are not likely to attend to the abundance of data that speaks to the contrary. While statistics, like those highlighted in the Introduction, clearly demonstrate that we are not living in a world of shattered glass ceilings and perfect gender equality in the workforce, research also reveals other ways in which women are not living in a modern-day feminist utopia.

Mirror, mirror on the wall: revealing broken bodies

Various surveys indicate that girls are under more pressure than ever before to meet certain beauty ideals. According to Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, an alarming number of girls in grades 1–3, nearly half who were polled, reported wanting to be thinner; 81 percent of ten-year-old girls were fearful of gaining weight; and half of the nine-year-old girls surveyed claimed to have already started dieting.²⁴ Many reports back up these figures, with some claiming that half of girls in grades 3–5 worry about their appearance²⁵ and others saying that losing weight ranks amongst the highest wishes of all girls ages 11–17 years.²⁶ Research indicates that more than half of teenage girls take extreme measures in attempts to lose weight (skipping meals, fasting, vomiting, smoking cigarettes, or taking laxatives).²⁷ These things often lead to full-fledged eating disorders, which are also on the rise. For example, recent estimates show that as many as one-fifth of all college-age women suffer from bulimia.²⁸ The American Psychological Association has determined that 'the girlie-girl culture's emphasis on beauty and play-sexiness can increase girls' vulnerability' not only to dangerous eating behaviors and disorders but also to other corresponding risk factors: distorted body image, depression, and risky sexual behavior.²⁹ Statistics prove that all of these problems are rising dramatically: between 2000 and 2006, girls worried more about their weight than they did about their schoolwork, and sadly, their suicide rates went up.³⁰

Unfortunately, these statistics aren't all that surprising, considering the fact that the toys and other merchandise marketed toward girls have gone through makeovers and diets as well. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding the product line for Disney's 2012 *Brave*, another film that has found its feminist worth debated in recent years. Merida, the main character, was written as a female character who would serve as a strong role model for young girls; however, she received a makeover prior to 'her official induction into The Disney Princess Collection, [appearing] slimmer, older and somewhat sexualized, in comparison to the teenage tomboy from [the 2012] Oscar-winning animation.'³¹ It's no surprise, then, that girls are struggling with these issues if their big-screen, 'girl-power' role models are being forced to slim down.

With 80 percent of American women and girls reporting dissatisfaction with their physical appearance, is it really a surprise that those same women and girls are spending an average of over \$40 billion on dieting and diet-related products each year?³² This points to a problematic paradox: the industry that profits from the beauty craze is the one that instills it in the first place. The reason that the majority of girls and women are dissatisfied with their bodies stems from the fact that the industry provides a very warped looking glass in terms of ideal body images. The women showcased in advertisements and popular entertainment are often not representative of the general public, as the 'average woman is 63.8" tall, weighs 166.2 pounds, and has a waist circumference of 37.5"'.³³ This is not the 'average' woman featured in magazine spreads, television programs, or Hollywood films. The fact that girls and women are more concerned with appearance than are men, added to the fact that they experience problems such as sexual violence and eating disorders at rates higher than men, has worked to resurrect gender debates about whether such 'differences' might be inherent in the sexes and whether they might contribute to the struggles each gender faces.

Gendered socialization: the nature vs. nurture debate lives on

The nature vs. nurture debate has both fascinated and been a source of contention for scholars, scientists, and society in general for many years.³⁴ Michael Gurian, a psychologist, and physician Leonard Sax, for example, have both argued that nature is responsible for the numerous issues and problems between the sexes.³⁵ John Gray in his best-selling book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* argued much the same

thing in prior years: men and women behave differently because they are, by nature, different. What is extremely problematic with this text, as scholars have since pointed out, is that the focus on differences and the acceptance of those differences reinforce the status quo and essentialist thinking. Chapter 2 of Gray's text, for example, tells readers that men's and women's values are intrinsically different,³⁶ and later chapters detail how this leads to different behavioral patterns (for example, how men and women cope with stress in different ways; how they are motivated by different sources; and how they approach intimacy differently). Sadly, pop-psychology sentiments such as these might be solidifying themselves into everyday beliefs as research indicates that messages concerning gender determinism are on the rise.³⁷

Over a decade after Gray's text became a best-seller, despite the ample criticism it faced in feminist circles, another scholar relit the gender difference torch. Leonard Sax, author of *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Difference*, began a campaign to reconsider the ways in which girls and boys may, indeed, be biologically 'different.' Unlike Gray's self-help book, Sax's study is grounded in some science. Sax criticizes the 21st-century push for gender-neutral child-rearing, claiming that there is no scientific evidence to support its benefit.³⁸ He instead provides a laundry list of studies that prove (rather convincingly in their volume), that biological differences do exist between the two sexes that should not be ignored. Sax includes studies on the hearing differences between females and males;³⁹ neurology research on the gendered differences of the recovery of stroke victims;⁴⁰ findings that male and female brain tissue are intrinsically different;⁴¹ the results of an experiment concerning musical therapy on male vs. female premature babies;⁴² and research on color discrimination by gender.⁴³ He also includes various social experiments, claiming that they reveal intrinsic gender differences that explain, for example, the ways in which women and men approach risk taking, the negotiation of salaries, fighting, and stress.⁴⁴ However, with the latter studies he fails to consider the impact that nurture surely could play on these differences as well.

The work of Lise Eliot arises as a tempered response to the work done by Gray, Sax, and others. Like Sax, Eliot draws heavily upon the work of neuroscience but reaches different conclusions. Although the title of her book, *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps – and What We Can Do About It*, may appear to herald the same claims as the others, she actually arrives at a much more nuanced middle ground. And, while Eliot does assert that boys and

girls are different in the sense that they 'have different interests, activity levels, sensory thresholds, physical strengths, emotional reactions, relational styles, attention spans and intellectual aptitudes', she also maintains that 'the differences are not huge, and, in many cases, are far smaller than the gaps that separate adult men and women.'⁴⁵ One of the main findings in Eliot's text deals with the scientific concept plasticity, which is defined as the ability of the brain to change in response to its experiences.⁴⁶ In this view, one's brain is, in essence, what one *does* with it. Every task an individual spends time on – from reading to running – reinforces certain active brain circuits at the expense of other inactive ones.⁴⁷ This theory highlights the notion that the 'differences' between the brains of the two sexes are not the *cause* of some innate difference between the sexes, but rather an *effect* of different experiences during childhood that work to mold the brain differently. If it is the case that the brains of girls and boys are molded based on their varied experiences, then this might help to explain why girls tend to gravitate toward princess culture, for example: girls are not born with an eye toward becoming a princess or marrying a prince. However, girls' childhood experiences – watching princess movies, playing with princess dolls, etc. – cause them to behave 'differently' than boys.

In exploring this theory of brain development, Eliot is careful to point out that nature and nurture are not 'distinct, warring entities'; rather 'they are intricately interwoven.'⁴⁸ Using this crucial idea as a starting point, this chapter – and this book as a whole – regards nature and nurture as interwoven rather than separate, 'warring entities.'⁴⁹ Therefore, when discussing the effect that popular culture has on girls, we want to acknowledge the fact that gender socialization is much more complicated than a simple causal formula might imply; the viewing of a certain film or the reading of a specific book does not alone create the gender performance we see at any stage of a girl or woman's life. However, the habitual, cyclical consumption of such narratives throughout a woman's lifetime likely contributes to the brain development and resulting behavioral patterns we do eventually see. And since we can't change how a brain develops over time, what we can change are the stimuli that spark such changes.

The disappearance of childhood: the sexualization and accelerated 'aging' of girls

Arguably the most destructive stimuli for girls are those that contribute to their increased focus on how their physical appearance compares to

societal beauty standards. Despite countless attempts – by psychologists, feminists, mothers, fathers, and so forth – to remove the focus from girls'/women's appearance and reallocate it to their personality or intellect, it's easy to see that society still considers beauty – and sexual appeal – important when it comes to females: the contents of toy boxes, clothing racks, magazine shelves, television stations, and Hollywood films confirm this. For example, in 2011 shoppers at Kmart were enraged when they saw a line of underwear – targeted at teenagers – with slogans like 'call me' and 'I love rich boys'. The store removed the line, but what is problematic is that the executives of this store considered it appropriate in the first place.⁵⁰ And the list continues: Victoria's Secret recently targeted middle-school girls in a new line, 'Bright Young Minds'. The underwear on display included lacy panties with words like 'Wild' or 'Feeling Lucky' adorning the back.⁵¹ And a Colorado mom was dismayed when shopping at Kids N Teen when she chanced upon some crotchless thongs.⁵² Luckily, various social media campaigns worked, and continue to work, to get such items removed from the shelves.

While many of these popular culture products are problematic in this regard, none so clearly shows society's role in planting these ideals at extremely young ages as the reality television show *Toddlers and Tiaras* (TLC, 2009–present).⁵³ One episode shows Kelli, mom to one-year-old twin daughters, Isabella and Scarlett, speaking proudly of how she has spent at least \$250,000 to date for her daughters' participation in beauty pageants.⁵⁴ Her ophthalmologist husband also seems eager to introduce his daughters into a world of sexy babies. In another episode, 'Arizona Gold Coast', viewers meet three mothers who have initiated their daughters into the beauty pageant circuit where little girls compete for a crown (in this episode, they are vying for the 'Miss Arizona Gold Coast Grand Supreme'). The prize for all of this pomp and splendor? \$1000. Viewers watch as the moms prepare their daughters. Tedi, mom to eight-year-old Danielle, waxes and re-waxes her daughter's eyebrows, telling her several times how beautiful she is (hence, it is not shocking to understand why little Danielle has become rather egocentric. When Danielle's grandmother tells her she needs to get her 'beauty sleep', she replies, 'I don't believe in that [...] because I'm always beautiful').⁵⁵ Another contender is four-year-old Makenzie, who tells her mom in a belligerent tone to 'back it off. Shoo. Shoo' immediately before the pageant.⁵⁶ Her mother, Juana, considers this behavior 'independent'.⁵⁷ During the contest, Makenzie fixes a sultry smile on her face, shakes her hips suggestively, tips her head to the side coquettishly,

and beams at the judges, even though just prior to this she was sporting a pacifier as she cried and screamed like a baby, which is, of course, exactly what she is.⁵⁸

The program at times highlights just how young these sexualized contestants are. For example, an episode during Season 5, 'Darling Divas', finds the girls bringing dolls on stage so that they can mimic them and dress in a similar way. This 'childlike' behavior (playing with dolls in a sense) is in stark contrast to their other (dictated) behavior. Diana, mom to five-year-old Keanna, tells her daughter to 'shake the hips' as Keanna prepares for the pageant.⁵⁹ During the performance, one little girl dresses like Madonna, complete with a pointed bra, which elicits hysterical laughter from the audience; another dresses as Sandra Dee, and still another dresses like Michael Jackson – grabbing her crotch to the delight of both her audience and proud parents.⁶⁰

While there is much that is troublesome with such scenes, what is especially disturbing is the fact that these girls did not choose to become contestants. Rather, their mothers made this choice for them (at least initially). Certainly, there are some 'pageant dads' out there (that is, dads who coach their daughters in pageant competitions); however, 'pageant moms' are far more prevalent. Deeply troubling here is the message they are sending their daughters: as they tell their daughters how beautiful they are, have their hair fixed and makeup applied so that they can look like miniature 20-somethings, they ultimately suggest that beauty is of paramount importance. Although it is true that only a small percentage of the American population participates in pageants (and as such we can't look at these girls' participation as a societal standard), this program certainly highlights the pressure put upon girls to worry about appearance. And this pressure, as is evident in a show with the word 'toddler' in its title, is occurring at earlier ages than ever before.

Now admittedly, it is not young girls who are watching this reality television show, so *Toddlers and Tiaras* is not acting as a formative tool, shaping their development during this first stage of the female life cycle. Nor could it be considered a how-to manual on how to raise young girls, as even the most avid viewer would likely argue that such parenting practices should be avoided. However, the show's popularity alone and the real-life practices it captures do cast a rather garish spotlight on the larger societal trend of sexualizing young girls. Further, with a viewing audience partially comprised of mothers (and future mothers), the show may inadvertently influence female viewers' expectations of the cultural roles their daughters will be expected to fill.

Just another girl next door? An analysis of one pop culture star

Shows actually aimed at girls themselves then become important to study. And, to be fair, they're not all bad. While *Toddlers and Tiaras* is a program whose focus is specifically on beauty, there are other programs that depict more positive role models for female youth, even if beauty is an issue that is tackled within story plotlines. One such program is *Hannah Montana* (Disney, 2006–2011). The premise of this television show is that Miley Stewart, an ordinary girl, is at the same time a famous singer, Hannah Montana. The show portrays a kind-hearted, down-to-earth young girl who doubles as a rock star, although only a select few know her secret, given her wish to maintain her ordinary-girl status. Diane Carver Sekeres argues that 'The *Hannah Montana* television shows and books all have the question of identity at their center. Being true to yourself, being honest about who you are, and valuing friendship over maintaining a false image are all recurring themes that are explored.'⁶¹ These are indeed positive themes for a franchise aimed at young girls. The notion that specific products could be purposely developed to foster the developmental needs of girls aligns with the claims made by proponents of single-sex education like Sax. But even products with the best of intentions often have hidden flaws.

For example, Sekeres points out the paradox that exists with *Hannah Montana*: the narrative implies that one needs to live a lie to succeed.⁶² But, at the same time, what is commendable about Miley/Hannah is that such a character also points to the conflicting feelings a young girl may feel as she grows up in a world of ambivalent value systems. On the one hand, she wants to be the 'ordinary' girl, while on the other, she is thrust into a world in which beauty is important, and therefore, she is forced to navigate the two.

So, *Hannah Montana* is a good influence on girls. Let's applaud it and move on. End of story, right? Wrong. As is so often the case with even the most benign pop culture products aimed at girls, they often have an unexpected afterlife that undoes some of the good they did. Given that Miley Cyrus's fame was predicated on her good girl behavior, it came as a shock to many to see a photo of her, bare backed, on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2008. Many fans and parents were outraged that she posed for this photograph. But Germaine Greer contends that Cyrus's behavior is nothing short of what is, in a sense, expected in our culture today:

We train female children to be manipulative and to exploit their sex. From the time she is tiny, a girl in our society is taught to flirt. She

is usually dressed like a mini-whore in pink and tinsel, short skirt, matching knickers, baby-doll pyjamas, long hair falling over her face [...] Cyrus saw nothing amiss in clutching a satin sheet to her apparently naked bosom, and looking at the camera over her shoulder. Girls are taught to look at the world in that sidelong fashion from the time they come to consciousness.⁶³

Paradoxically, then, it is society that asks for this early sexualization of girls, and yet when it is encountered in a public forum (as in *Vanity Fair*), people are shocked.

Most would agree, however, that the picture in *Vanity Fair* pales in comparison to Miley Cyrus's performance at the Video Music Awards (VMAs) on 25 August 2013 and her subsequent video releases. During the awards ceremony, a scantily clad Cyrus began with her song, 'We Can't Stop'. But all too soon she had stripped down to a nude-colored bikini, singing 'Blurred Lines' with Robin Thicke. Throughout the performance Cyrus danced in a vulgar fashion, using a foam finger as a prop. But what was perhaps the most shocking to her audience (many of whom were likely her teen following who had grown up with her more PG-rated persona) was when she gyrated against Thicke. Not long after this performance, the video for her hit single, 'Wrecking Ball', was released. This video finds Cyrus – dressed in white cotton bikini-cut underwear and a white, semi-transparent midriff tank top for part of the runtime – rolling around suggestively at a demolition site while turning unsuspecting tools into phallic symbols. However, the video garnered most of its attention from the fact that she spends a large portion of the video straddling and riding the eponymous wrecking ball in the nude. While these antics are likely (effective) publicity stunts, one might also argue that such performances are extreme examples of how postfeminism can manifest itself in popular culture. Cyrus is but one in a long line of prominent female celebrities (for example, Britney Spears and Paris Hilton), who projects the idea that they – and by extension their female fans – are in complete control of their sexuality; that, in fact, they are empowered by being seen as sexual subjects.⁶⁴ These high-profile figures ultimately contribute to the cultural 'behavioral' training that girls constantly encounter, sending messages that girls can further solidify their supposed gender equality by performing sexualized roles rather than resisting them. Such public stunts suggest that girls can achieve more by casting a sidelong seductive glance than by casting an actual political ballot.

When I grow up I can be a princess or a mommy: socialization through toys

While various flesh and blood icons have sometimes been targeted as poor role models for young girls, their plastic counterparts have arguably set some equally problematic standards for even younger audiences. Much has already been written on how Barbie, Bratz dolls, and other such 'girls' toys work to perpetuate gender stereotypes, reinforce Western beauty standards,⁶⁵ and indoctrinate girls into the uber-sexy girly-girl culture.⁶⁶ However, not all toys (or even dolls) have been created to encourage female beautification and/or sexuality. One new addition to the market, in fact, focuses on the female body in a completely different way. Recently introduced to the American public was Breast Milk Baby (originally marketed as *Bebé Glotón* in France), and along with this toy came, as one might expect, controversy. Breast Milk Baby is a very special doll: she suckles at the breast of her tiny 'mommy'. The girl who breastfeeds this baby is equipped with a halter top, complete with daisies that stand in for nipples. This doll has provoked both positive and negative responses. Those in favor of the doll, largely promoting the breastfeeding mantra 'breast is best', argue that the doll should be embraced by the public because of the positive message it sends.⁶⁷ While many might agree with the health benefits of breastfeeding, and support any cultural artifact that encourages this (while possibly even lessening the taboo against breastfeeding in public), one might ask why a toy is needed to accomplish these goals? Arguably, cultivating a culture where girls learn that this is socially acceptable (or even desirable) behavior would be ideal. For example, mothers could easily model this behavior by allowing their children to watch them breastfeed. Additionally, one might argue, demonstrating to children at a young age that breasts are not simply made for sexual pleasure is a plus. But then the question becomes: why should young girls be used to initiate this campaign to desexualize female breasts?⁶⁸ A potential negative consequence of this venture may be that giving a breastfeeding doll to a girl who is herself practically a baby herself only further conditions her to believe that becoming a mother, and more so, a breastfeeding mother, is her only option in life. Dr. Manny Alvarez, managing health editor of FOXNews.com, comments that *Bebé Glotón* might accelerate maternal urges in young girls. Also, he reflects, 'Pregnancy has to entail maturity and understanding. It's like introducing sex education in first grade instead of seventh or eighth grade.'⁶⁹

The breastfeeding doll may not yet be a mainstream addition to most toy chests, but other 'dolls' certainly are. While *Bebé Glotón*

encourages domesticity through its promotion of motherhood, these other popular figures are encouraging domesticity through their mythologies of a 'happily ever after' that ends in marital bliss. We are, of course, referring to the relatively new line of princess products that have become quite the obsession among female toddlers and early grade schoolers. Girls are often referred to as princesses; they pretend to be princesses; they read about princesses; they watch programs about princesses; and they play with princess dolls. Orenstein goes into great depth about our present inundation with princesses, commenting that, although she is not aware of studies showing that pretending to be princesses causes self-esteem issues in girls, at the same time, there is 'ample evidence that the more mainstream media girls consume, the more importance they place on being pretty and sexy.'⁷⁰ The history of this preoccupation with the Disney princesses (as a group, that is) is an interesting one. Oddly enough, it wasn't until the year 2000 that former Nike executive Andy Mooney 'rode into Disney on a metaphoric white horse to rescue its ailing consumer products division' by launching this princess line.⁷¹ Mooney gambled when he marketed the Disney princesses as a group as opposed to individually, as they had been in the past:

Disney had never marketed its characters separately from a film's release, and old timers like Roy Disney considered it heresy to lump together those from different stories. That is why, these days, when the ladies appear on the same item, they never make eye contact.⁷²

And so, although there may be nothing blatantly detrimental about playing with princesses, it does seem as though the princess mania is a step in the wrong direction: instead of urging little girls to think of beauty as simply an attribute that is not all that important, we are essentially placing a great deal of importance on it. And, more importantly, despite some efforts made by Disney to make princesses more active, as discussed earlier, the storylines still largely depict women in need of rescue, women who long for the perfect mate, or women who leave their friends and family to ride off into the sunset with their princes. These princesses have little agency and are ultimately valued for their beauty and their stories that end in heterosexual romance and bliss. Of course, before these tales make it to the Hollywood screen, they've survived countless tellings and retellings, and so it's worth retreating into the distant past to unearth (as much as is possible) how some of these Disney tales had their beginnings.

The dark side of fairytales: from moral instruction to gender training

Fairytales, by definition, are fictitious stories for children that often deal with magic or incredible circumstances. They also contain a moral, and their original purpose was always (in part) to do the work of cultural training. Such tales, which are continuously revised and repackaged for different generations, reveal much about both history and the contemporary time period they are being repurposed to serve. As discussed earlier, a great many of the princess-themed fairytales have been adapted for modern audiences, and the effects of their heteronormative storylines are even greater than the market they create for play gowns, glass slippers, tiaras, and magic wands. But even the princess-free fairytales can reveal some startling cultural views of gender. For example, Jack Zipes's focus in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* was to show how the literary fairytale originally had to do with male fantasies concerning 'women and sexuality'.⁷³ More specific was his aim to demonstrate how fairytale writers Perrault and the Grimms changed an oral folk tale (in this case, 'Little Red Riding Hood') 'about the social initiation of a young woman into a narrative about rape in which the heroine is obliged to bear the responsibility for sexual violation'.⁷⁴ Hence, early fairytales, such as 'Red Riding Hood', often worked to police young girls' sexuality. So, while maybe not as iconic as Cinderella – our little girls are not as likely to don the red cape and play with wolf figurines as they would be likely to sport a glass slipper and steer a pumpkin-shaped carriage – this fairytale, which continues to be adapted for contemporary audiences, is an interesting one to analyze; it shows that the mixed messages we see about girlhood sexuality in shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* or media controversies over the antics of Miley Cyrus (or her predecessors) have a history that dates back to the didactic oral and print tales intended to mold the behaviors of young girls.

This motif of policing young women's sexuality (which is not the same as *not advocating* for their safety) can be traced back to 'The Story of Grandmother', an early version of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The beginning of the story is similar to our modern version. However, when the girl arrives at the cottage, readers encounter the following conversation between the girl and the wolf:

'Undress yourself, my child,' the werewolf said, 'and come lie down beside me.'

'Where should I put my apron?'

'Throw it into the fire, my child, you won't be needing it anymore.' And each time she asked where she should put all her other clothes – the bodice, the dress, the petticoat, and the long stockings – the wolf responded:

'Throw them into the fire, my child, you won't be needing them anymore.'⁷⁵

After this comes the portion that is again familiar to a 21st-century audience: the little girl notices that Granny does not look like herself ('How hairy you are!', 'What big nails you have!', etc.). But, unlike our present version, when the wolf finally gets to the point where he is about to eat her, she saves herself by telling the wolf that she needs 'to go' (that is, she needs to use the toilet facilities outside); he reluctantly agrees to this, and she escapes – without help from anyone.

Perrault made several changes to the story to make it suitable for his Christian audience. The most obvious change is his choice to have her wear a 'red hat, a *chaperon*, making her into a type of bourgeois girl tainted with sin since red [...] recalls the devil and heresy'.⁷⁶ Perrault made other changes as well, the most important of which is that, unlike the preceding story, Red does not escape; rather, she is eaten – or perhaps raped.⁷⁷ The Grimms, in a more compassionate version, allowed both Red and Granny to be saved by a (male) woodcutter.

What all three of these early tales have in common is that they deal with sexuality (overtly or metaphorically). In 'The Story of Grandmother', the girl saves herself from being raped; in Perrault's version, she is not saved because the moral of the story is never talk to strange men (wolves); and in the Grimms' version, as Zipes says, 'only a strong male figure can rescue a girl from herself and her lustful desires'.⁷⁸ However, all three can be cautionary tales to keep young girls from talking to strangers, and men especially, given the fact that men 'are natural victims of temptation'.⁷⁹

The sexual motif is prevalent in contemporary revisions of the tale as well. Catherine Hardwicke's 2011 film *Red Riding Hood* is a story about a village trying to rid itself of a wolf that has begun murdering townspeople during the full moon.⁸⁰ The narrative follows two star-crossed lovers, Valerie (Amanda Seyfried) and Peter (Shiloh Fernandez). Valerie's parents, Cesaire (Billy Burke) and Suzette (Virginia Madsen), along with the wealthy blacksmith Adrian Lazar (Michael Shanks), have arranged Valerie's marriage to Henry (Max Irons), Max's son. As the story progresses, both Adrian and Valerie's sister, Lucie (Alexandria Maillot), are killed by the wolf. The audience soon learns that Adrian

is actually Lucie's father, and this revelation sparks the killing spree (as Cesaire, the wronged husband, is the wolf whose jealous rage motivates the bloodshed). As was the case with so many of the older versions of 'Red Riding Hood', in this adaptation, too, violence is meted out as punishment for those who are guilty of sexual promiscuity. Suzette, in particular, is punished for her affair because she loses both her daughter and her ex-lover.⁸¹

The notion that young girls are to be blamed for their own sexuality has surfaced in cultural texts throughout the centuries (for example, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*). But the fact that some of these texts (as is the case with the various versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood') are aimed specifically at girls – girls often too young to fully understand sexuality – is troubling. This thematic policing of female sexuality becomes even more evident in the texts aimed at females in later stages of their lives. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the message that girls must be sexually attractive without being sexually active appears in two of the most popular 21st-century young adult series marketed to teenage girls: Stephenie Meyer's 'The Twilight Saga' and Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games' trilogy.

Exploring the cultural moment: the effects of the post-9/11 climate on girls

Although it might be easy to look to the current moment as the worst ever for girls, the truth of the matter is that previous eras have had their moments of harmful influence on gender formation as well. In fact, periods often come in waves and influence children's development (especially eras heavily influenced by conservative agendas). While the amount of imagery children are exposed to today is greater than ever before, the motivations and influences behind propaganda-like items are not new. What is important is to question what sparked this recent spiral toward the return to traditionalism, domesticity, and uber-femininity. Unsurprisingly, many scholars point to 9/11, the obvious historical moment of the 21st century, as a possible turning point.

In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, Faludi convincingly showcases how feminism was attacked in the aftermath of 9/11 as one of the supposed reasons for the vulnerability of the United States.⁸² She is clear to note that 9/11 did not cause the sentiments that gave rise to the renewed feminist backlash, but that it revealed cultural conflicts that were already brewing underneath the surface. Faludi documents an array of strange reactions to the terrorist attacks:

'the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls', arguing that together they reveal 'a national fantasy in which we are all deeply invested.'⁸³ In the days following 9/11, Faludi herself was bombarded by calls from various journalists who wanted her opinion on how '9/11 pushed feminism off the map' or sounded its 'death knell.'⁸⁴ Reporters asked for her opinion on so-called phenomena such as 'the return of the manly man' and the trend of women becoming 'more feminine' after 9/11 (and, therefore, in their opinions, less feminist).⁸⁵ There was an oddly celebratory nature to some journalistic articles that predicted the death of feminism after the attacks. For example, in a piece titled 'Hooray for Men', Mona Charen wrote: 'Perhaps the new climate of danger – danger from evil men – will quiet the anti-male agitation we've endured for so long.'⁸⁶ And, in an attack on specific feminists, such as Susan Sontag, articles like Ann Coulter's 'Women We'd Like to See ... in Burkas' went to press, which certainly did not mask their animosity toward the women's movement.⁸⁷

And, in the weeks and months after 9/11, it was not just self-identified feminists who felt the effects of this cultural shift. Faludi notes that 'soon after the World Trade Center vaporized into two biblical plumes of smoke, another vanishing act occurred on television sets and newspaper pages across the country. Women began disappearing.'⁸⁸ For example, the number of opinion pieces written by female writers at *The New York Times* dropped from 22 percent to 9 percent.⁸⁹ Across mediated divides on television, The Feminist White House Project noted that during this timeframe women's representation on Sunday news talk shows plummeted, decreasing by nearly 40 percent.⁹⁰ When women were featured in the media, it was not the strong women of before being showcased. Women who garnered the most attention needed to fit the script of the moment; they needed to be vulnerable and in need of (male) protection. The 9/11 widows fit well into this narrative and, therefore, became the focus of the media frenzy. These women were desirable, Faludi suggests, because 'they weren't ambitious careerists trading commodities on the eighty-fourth floor [of the World Trade Center]. They were at home that day tending to the hearth, models of all-American housewifery.'⁹¹ Also rising in popularity during this time period was First Lady Laura Bush, who seemed to encapsulate the values of this 'new' time period. As Kati Marton stated in *Newsweek*, 'the woman who helped her husband quit drinking and settle down so long ago (was) indispensable in reminding Americans that the "normal" things in life matter(ed): children, family, and church.'⁹² And so, even in the wake of

9/11, women were being instructed on how to respond to such a tragic moment in the nation's history.⁹³

Entering the historical echo chamber: how the contemporary moment mirrors moments of the past

Children subtly rose to the focus of American concern in the time following 9/11. There was a national desire, at least in terms of what the media focused on, to protect the children as the future of the United States. It was a time period that touted a 'return to innocence' and family values. In many ways, then, it is not surprising that many of the media and marketing trends discussed earlier in this chapter followed closely on the heels of 9/11. Take, for example, the previously mentioned launch of the Disney Princess merchandise. As Orenstein notes, these consumer goldmines took off shortly after the terrorist attacks, suggesting that innocent children, particularly innocent *female* children, were needed 'not only for consumerist' reasons 'but for *spiritual* redemption' as well.⁹⁴ It is not necessarily a rarity to see such marketing trends align with the cultural climate or governmental agendas of a particular time period. For example, a century earlier, at the turn of the 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt – a leader often depicted in ways that mirror President George W. Bush (a 'manly man' or 'cowboy' figure) – directly influenced the marketing of various toys to assist in his socio-political agenda. Inspired by the declining birth rates among white women, Roosevelt (a supporter of the eugenics movement) 'began waging a campaign against "race suicide".'⁹⁵ He reportedly believed that women were becoming fearful of motherhood and that because of this, the entire country 'trembled on the brink of doom'.⁹⁶ During his administration, an unlikely ally was called upon to undo this unfounded 'fear' of motherhood and its corresponding detrimental effect on family values: the baby doll. Orenstein notes that 'baby dolls were seen as a way to revive the flagging maternal instinct of white girls, to remind them of their patriotic duty to conceive', and soon after, 'miniature brooms, dustpans, and stoves tutored those same young ladies in the skills of homemaking.'⁹⁷ This use of toys to bolster support for the naturalness of motherhood is, of course, as mentioned earlier, not a one-time incident. The release of the breastfeeding baby doll in the 21st century operates with a similar agenda to instill in young girls the desire not only to be mothers, but to be mothers who choose the 'best' most 'natural' way to care for their children. That this doll was launched during a time period witnessing a hugely conservative swing (*à la* the Tea Party), is no surprise.

While politics oftentimes influences the socialization of children, the economic climate can also play a large role. Besides being a time of global disruption and war, the early 21st century was also plagued by an economic recession that may have inadvertently influenced the gendered development of American youth. Returning again to the previous discussion of the princess craze, it's undeniable that the 21st century has been dominated by fairytale narratives. Although the traditional fairytale stories, films, and merchandise were directly marketed to children, portions of the fairytale motif (romantic love, male superiority, etc.) infiltrated popular culture on a larger scale, as the wave of dating reality shows targeted at young adult women clearly shows. As with all fairytales, these narratives of female vulnerability contained a component common to traditional fairytales: they doubled as morality tales cautioning female children and young women alike on the dangers of strong-willed independence. And with their recycled tales of damsels in distress and heroic male saviors, they reinforced resurrected notions about traditional gender norms. While these narratives did reflect the cultural times, they also provided a sense of escapism, focusing on lush settings, rich castle backdrops, and endless prosperity in a time when much of the country was struggling financially and unemployment rates consistently hovered around the 10 percent mark. Coming into renewed popularity after the terrorist attacks and during a time of financial instability, this period in many ways is reminiscent of when 'the original European fairy tales rose from a medieval culture' that likewise 'faced all manner of economic and social upheaval.'⁹⁸ So, quite clearly, the post-9/11 period is not unique in the ways it has turned to the socialization of children in the hope of turning cultural tides. In fact, it simply shows how cyclical these waves really are when looked at through a wide historical lens.

Exit girls, enter tweens: advancing to the next stage of media socialization

Counteracting the complicated messages young girls receive as they are indoctrinated into 'girl culture' – be they repurposed messages that linger from previous decades or new messages shaped by current cultural sentiments – is extremely important as these formative years set the stage for the media socialization that will follow. The media narratives introduced during this first stage of socialization, girlhood, often act as powerful forces as these girls mature and become targets of the next stage of media socialization, which will be discussed in the following chapter: the tween years.