

Feminist Barbie: Mattel's Remakes of Classic Tales

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Arguably the most pervasive form of media marketed to pre-teen girls are the Disney princess films. In fact, it would be difficult to fully study any other media franchise aimed at that age and gender market without comparing it to Disney. The purpose of this article is to do exactly that with the Mattel Barbie film series. Both are targeted to young girls, both feature female characters, and, to provide a more narrow comparison, both use film scripts based on existing literature, often fairy or folk tales. The two have been compared previously (see Orr) but primarily from a marketing and development perspective. This study will focus more on gendered aspects of the selected stories and characters.

The classic Disney animated princess movies such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty* and the newer princess films, including *Beauty and the Beast*, *Little Mermaid*, and *Aladdin*, were all based on fairy tales, traditionally viewed as “patriarchal folklore and morality fables” (Craven 124). All featured beautiful but passive title characters who find happiness only when the dashing prince charges in with sword raised and fights off the dragon, sorcerer, wicked witch, or other villain. *Cinderella* is even so helpless that she has to be rescued by mice and birds. *Beauty and the Beast's* Belle is the sacrificial virgin who saves her father by giving herself to the beast, whom she redeems with her love and the help of enchanted household furnishings. Disney princesses are

portrayed as “dependent and innocent,” with “girls as objects of display and boys as subjects with power” (Wohlwend 65). There is significant symbolism when Arielle, title character of *The Little Mermaid*, gives up her voice to live in the same world with the man she loves. In each of the Disney princess movies, the romance is a primary focus of the story, with a prince wooing and winning a princess (even if she is disguised as a peasant girl), or, like Aladdin and Jasmine, an outsider attempting to woo and win a princess. Parents, especially mothers, worry about the impression these movies might leave on the developing female psyche (Coulter 177).

Mattel has also produced a series of animated films, many of which are based on traditional tales, although others are based on classic literary or artistic works, but with some significant differences from the Disney titles. Mattel has reinvigorated the Barbie franchise by producing and distributing the series with Barbie as a computer-generated imagery (CGI) actress. In contrast to the Disney princess films which feature a variety of characters, the Mattel series uses the same computer generated character (or actress) to play the lead in all of the films. Some of the movies are also framed with Barbie as a modern girl telling the story to a younger female relative, as well portraying as the heroine of the story itself. In this series the animated starlet is as much a draw as the stories are. In a sense it is like a series of Hannah Montana films only the digital Barbie will never grow up or old or appear in the news or on television behaving inappropriately. The down side of this is that while Disney can market individual

princesses to specific ethnic groups, Barbie can only don the occasional wig. She is forever a pale skinned, long-legged, thin blonde. Unlike the doll, though, her figure is that of a young girl, lithe, but not buxom. Regardless of the cut of her dress there is never a hint of cleavage in the films.

Many of the Mattel films revisit classic fairy tales as Disney has with its princess films, but other films represent ballets or canonical literature. Liberties, sometimes great liberties, are taken with the storylines. Some of the titles, such as *Rapunzel*, are female oriented, others, like *The Princess and the Pauper*, remake a male-dominated story, in this case Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, into a female dominated one. Rewriting literary classics to attract a younger audience is not new, for example the "Classic Comics" series of the 1940s (later *Classics Illustrated*, which was published through the 1960s). While these are examples aimed at non-reading boys and young men, Mattel aims its series specifically at girls. The company has created storylines that show a more confident, powerful Barbie. As Ricker-Wilson noted, "The concept of a heroic female as active agent with power to singularly change her material circumstances is rare and heady stuff in women's writing" (Ricker-Wilson 61) It is even more so in writing aimed at girls. The framing of some of the Barbie films adds to a feminist solidity, with an older woman (though still a teen herself) telling morality stories to a girl. No male figures are involved in the transfer of wisdom.

Starting in 2001 with *Barbie in the Nutcracker*, there are now 17 animated Barbie

movies. According to a 2007 article in *Daily Variety* the then nine DVD titles had cumulatively sold 37 million copies worldwide (Ault A11). Like the Disney stories, these films serve to introduce young girls to classic tales, mangled though they may be. Some of the films involve the same CGI character but are not based on fairy tales. An example is *The Magic of Pegasus*. While Pegasus is a mythical creature the story is invented for this film and not adapted from a pre-existing tale. Another original film in the series is *The Island Princess*, which features a friendship between two female characters. The *Thumbelina* film features Barbie in the wrap-around frame, which introduces the story and then ties the theme together at the end, but she does not appear as a character in the story itself. The series is likely to continue, as Universal Studios Home Entertainment announced in October 2009 that it would market and distribute ten more Barbie movies, though it did not mention whether any of the future titles would be based in literature or folklore (Gruenwedel 4). This paper focuses on films in the series that are based on previously published literature, primarily fairy tales, to make for a more level comparison with the Disney princess films. Those films are *The Nutcracker*, *Rapunzel*, *Swan Lake*, *Princess and the Pauper*, *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *The Christmas Carol*, and *The Three Musketeers*. To avoid confusion the Barbie character will be referred to as Barbie and not the name of the character she “plays” in each of the films. Those titles will be examined in light of gender roles and gender relationships, with some comparisons to the Disney films, but more particularly an examination of the Barbie films themselves.

The tone of the gender relationships in the Barbie movies is different from that in the Disney films. There is never any question of who is the star of the films. The male lead never appears on the DVD cover while Barbie is showcased. The cover of the Disney princess film DVDs frequently feature a dyad, similar to romance novel covers, of the male and female leads in an embrace. Barbie sometimes shares the cover with other female characters or animal friends (usually a cat) but no male characters are seen. While Kelly Sheridan has been the consistent voice of Barbie's character (except in *Christmas Carol*, where Sheridan voices Barbie in the wrap around but another actress voices the Scrooge character), the voice of the male lead has varied, even if the same CGI character is used. Mark Hildreth is the voice of the male lead in four of the films studied in this article. In printed reviews the male lead is often referred to, somewhat derisively, as Ken (Wisner 48) Barbie is no shrinking violet. In fact, she is the main engine of the film's action. The male lead is often more of a sidekick than a leading man. Barbie is definitely the brains of the operation while the male lead often provides the brawn, at Barbie's request or order. Barbie maintains traditional feminine qualities of compassion and nurturance and is sometimes the agent of change in the male lead's life by helping him regain his masculinity or repair damaged family relationships. In *Rapunzel* and *Swan Lake*, the prince prefers other pursuits, such as travel and hunting, to settling down and shouldering the responsibilities of ruling. By the end of the film they have matured into their hereditary roles. Prince Daniel in *Swan Lake* is intent on trying to defeat the evil Rothbart and end his spell over Barbie. When she points out

the dangers inherent in this, he says he does not care, but she chides him with, "What about your men?" It is Barbie who is looking at the larger world view and considering the welfare of his subjects.

In traditional romance tales, "[T]he hero must be a worthy and suitably dangerous opponent, a larger-than-life male imbued with great power and a mysterious past" (Barlow and Krentz 19). According to this definition, the Barbie films do not qualify as a romance per se. The hero is not initially mysterious or threatening. He does not set out to ensnare the heroine. Barlow describes the traditional romance as "an emotional coming-of-age story" that "teaches a woman how to reconcile the various aspects of her own psyche that may be at war with each other so that she can feel herself to be a truly integrated, competent, and emotionally whole individual who is able to perform her various functions in the world" (Barlow 46). In the Mattel films Barbie is already emotional mature; in fact she is often the most competent character in the film. Krentz says that in a romance novel, the relationship between the hero and the heroine is the story's primary focus (Krentz 108). These are not the primary plotlines in Mattel's Barbie films. The intent of the films is not to pair Barbie off, although some of the films do end in one or more weddings. They are more adventure stories, than romantic tales. In these tales the plots involve Barbie going on an adventure of some sort, usually involving dangerous circumstances, and solving a puzzle or problem. In the Mattel series the male lead is more Ned Nickerson to Barbie's Nancy Drew than he is Darcy to her Elizabeth Bennett. In *The Christmas Carol*,

there is no male lead at all, and Barbie is the sole star.

The male lead is secondary, though he is often transformed, literally in the case of *The Nutcracker* or changed for the better through exposure to Barbie or through her intervention. Transformation stories are not unusual in fairy tales, *Beauty and the Beast* is also a transformation tale. However, compare the Beast in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, who initially appears fearsome and who is tamed and transformed back into his human self by winning Belle's love, with Prince Eric in Barbie's *The Nutcracker*. Prince Eric has been turned into a wooden nutcracker. He had lost the respect of his subjects through his own reckless actions. At one point he says, "I didn't want to be the prince when I had the chance." In his wooden guise he hears his friends and subjects speak of their disappointment in him. As a symbol of this disappointment, he has lost the use of one arm, which often dangles awkwardly at his side. In one scene he even takes off the arm and uses it to rescue a fallen comrade. Barbie's goodness and intellect help him defeat the Mouse King, regain his humanity, his crown, the respect of his subjects, and, one assumes, his manhood. The characters themselves acknowledge this. When Capt. Candy says the Nutcracker should lead as he has saved their lives, Prince Eric says he should only get half the credit, indicating the importance of Barbie's role. She has helped plan their journey and execute their strategy. When the male characters are all imprisoned Barbie finds a way into the jail and, even though the men are held behind an illusionary wall so that she cannot see or hear them, uses

deductive reasoning to find and free them. At times she even takes up weapons (improvised and feminine, such as a shoe, but still weapons).

In *Rapunzel*, Barbie meets Prince Stefan when she saves his little sister who has fallen down a well. We learn that Prince Stefan has avoided becoming involved with the war his father wages against a neighboring kingdom. However, late in the film, when his father is threatened, he takes up a sword and fights to protect his loved ones, including an endangered Barbie. It is Barbie who, at the end of the film, imprisons the villainess Gothel. Stefan is not present during those action sequences. It is interesting to note that a CD-ROM computer game based on the movie had Prince Stefan in the garden, transformed into a statue, unable to move. The game player, as Rapunzel, has to search (and redecorate) all the rooms in the castle to find the hidden gems needed to return Stefan to his human self. In the game Barbie gives Stefan his humanity back.

In *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* Derek the cobbler (the male lead) can only find Barbie and her sisters, who are trapped in a fantasy world, by remembering and performing the dance she had shown him earlier. Derek's participation in the action of the film is limited. He makes shoes for Barbie and her sisters, dances, and is involved in the final fight scene. His one other role is to follow one of the villain's henchmen, exchange his horse for evidence of the villain's evildoing, and then pull his wagon back to town. Prince Louis in *The Three Musketeers* seems content to let the evil regent rule. He is more interested in his scientific experiments, especially balloon flight. Barbie saves him from being crushed by a

chandelier after the ropes holding it up were cut by the regent's men. Later, she rescues him when his balloon flies higher than expected, again due to sabotage. Thus it is Barbie who rescues, often in a physical sense, the male lead, not the other way around.

Mattel's Barbie also has, so to speak, a room of her own. Instead of waiting in drudgery or danger to be rescued in most of the movies, Barbie has a job or hobby of some sort, which is often, though not always, a traditionally feminine one. When Barbie herself is already a princess, she takes the job seriously. In *The Princess and the Pauper*, the princess is prepared to sacrifice her own happiness to marry a prince she does not know in order to save her kingdom, until she uses her knowledge of geology to recognize the value of geodes that were being thrown away at the royal mine. Nor does Barbie end up with the Prince, Dominic. She is more interested in her tutor, Julian. Dominic is drawn to the pauper, disguised as the princess. Even Erika, the pauper has a job as a seamstress, though she also sings. The sisters in *Twelve Dancing Princesses* also take their royal duties seriously. Barbie says, "Rowena [the villain] may not think we are proper princesses, but we are princesses. We don't turn our backs when things get difficult." While the Disney princesses were willing to sacrifice to win their prince, such as Ariel giving up her voice in *The Little Mermaid*, in *Princess and the Pauper*, and *The Three Musketeers*, the prince wants a relationship but the Barbie character is more interested in a career. For Erika, Barbie's pauper alter ego, this means leaving her prince to pursue a singing

career, although she returns by the end of the movie. For Barbie the musketeer, when a call to action coincides with an invitation from the prince for a balloon ride, she tells him the ride will have to wait. For Barbie, career comes first.

While most of the Barbie films follow the Disney tradition of the main character being motherless or having an uncaring or evil stepmother or guardian, there are a few stories with a loving mother / daughter relationship, such as *The Princess and the Pauper* and *The Three Musketeers*. In *The Princess and the Pauper* Barbie and her mother the widowed queen both seek to end the kingdom's economic crisis. The queen's solution is to enter a marriage of convenience with the villain Preminger, the queen's chancellor. Annalisa (Barbie), while imprisoned in a mine with her tutor Julian discovers valuable geodes. Her solution is mineralogical not matrimonial. In *The Three Musketeers*, the Barbie character lives with her mother, the widow of D'Artagnan, who sends Barbie off to the city to seek adventure. There are also other strong female role models, for example Aunt Drosselmeyer, in *Nutcracker*, is an unmarried woman who travels and has adventures. She sets the story in motion by bringing Barbie the nutcracker. At the end of the film she brings a young friend, played by the same CGI character as Prince Eric, to dinner, giving the impression that further adventures may be ahead for Barbie. The role of wizened but still fit drill sergeant / sensei in *The Three Musketeers* is played by an old, stooped maid in the castle, who teaches the four young women serious fighting skills until, inevitably, they best her. In *Swan Lake*, Prince Daniel's only evident parent is his

mother the queen, who wants him to settle down with a nice princess and take his responsibilities seriously.

Another characteristic shared with the Disney movies is the frequent appearance of a female villain. Gothel in *Rapunzel* was thwarted in youthful romance and so she kidnapped the daughter (Barbie as Rapunzel) of Wilhelm, the man she loved. At one point in the movie, when the two meet face to face she says "You loved me," and Wilhelm replies, "I never loved you." He had been, in fact, unaware of the depth of her feeling. Duchess Rowena, the king's cousin who is brought in to tame the sisters in *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, dresses them in drab gray instead of their preferred colorful clothes. She does not want them to marry and begins to slowly poison the king so that she may take the throne. *The Three Musketeers* does involve a physical fight, with Barbie and her fellow female musketeers wearing their ball gowns to knee length so they can move around more easily. In many other films, though, Barbie is content to let the villain's own weapons be their undoing. For example, in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, Rowena's magic dust is blown back to her so that her evil spell hits her and not the girls. This is similar to the defeat of Gothel in *Rapunzel*, when Gothel's own curse imprisons her in the same tower where she had imprisoned Barbie. This mirrors the defeat of the Mouse King in *The Nutcracker*. Barbie steps in front of Prince Eric to save him from the Mouse King's spell but Eric uses the shining blade of his sword to reflect the spell back on the Mouse King. Thus Barbie and Prince Eric are able to defeat the villains using the villains' own treachery as a

weapon. Thus it is not the physical strength of the hero but the strategy of the heroine that wins the day.

The most complex character in the series is in *Christmas Carol*. There is no male lead, no counterpart for Barbie in this film. Barbie herself is both the villain and the hero. At the beginning of the film, playing the Scrooge role, she is self-centered and cross. She quotes her aunt, who raised her, as saying “in a selfish world, the selfish succeed.” Yet after the visits from the three Christmas ghosts she sees the error of her ways. During the visit from the ghost of Christmas future, she comments on things that frighten her and is told that that is how we grow as people, overcoming fears. The proto-romance is between Catherine, the woman in the Bob Crachit role, and a young man in the theater company Barbie runs. Barbie is the theater company’s star, Eden, and Catherine is her costume designer. In the wrap around, the introduction of the film with the conceit of Barbie telling a story to young Kelly, Kelly says, “You usually tell me stories about nice girls.” Barbie replies “We can learn from our mistakes.”

The more central role taken by Barbie in the films should not be taken as a sign that she lives in a universe free of sexism. In *Nutcracker*, referring to having shrunk her down to his size, the evil Mouse King says, “I obviously didn’t make you small enough; your mouth is still too big.” At the beginning of *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, the 12 sisters are all active, playing croquette, walking on stilts, and bringing insects inside to show their father. The court and visiting

dignitaries are aghast. An emissary says they are not “proper princesses,” but “more like wild animals.” Their father the king fondly calls them “the wild bunch.” At the end of the film the girls promise to be “proper,” but their father says they are wonderful as they are. In *The Three Musketeers* Barbie is told outright by the head of the musketeers that, “Girls can’t be musketeers!” Yet it is clear that not only are the four young women in the film true musketeers, but also that their trainer functioned as a musketeer in her day as well. Clearly, in the Barbie films, girls rule.

In the Mattel Barbie films the female lead is the strongest character in the film. The male lead dances, learns to earn the respect of his subjects, pulls his own wagon, understands his lady’s need for her own career, and finds his courage. In the Mattel films Barbie herself is the main hero. She solves problems, rescues the prince, defeats the villain, and takes care of herself while doing so. The image presented to young viewers is of a competent, emotionally mature young woman who does not need a man but might enjoy the company of one, provided it does not interfere with her own life and plans. Using classic literature and fairy tales as the backdrop for these characters, the films are also a vehicle in the transfer of cultural literacy. While the premise of these movies may not be all that we might want as role models for our children, there is no mistaking that while staying within the stereotyped thin blonde body image and some traditional characteristics, there is fire within and Barbie is in charge.

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