

2024

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Recommended Citation

Croshal, Morgan; Kresse, Elizabeth; Valdez, Angelee; Figueroa-Herrera, Nelly; and Gonzales, Rylee (2024) "The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement Through the Lens of Liberal Feminism," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 12, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol12/iss1/4>

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The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement Through the Lens of Liberal Feminism

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Abstract

This study looks at how the film, *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (*The Princess Diaries*) portrays a liberal feminist view of the social structures in the made-up country of Genovia, and communicates to viewers that women are capable and respectable in leadership roles. Princess Mia, in giving her speech to parliament, effectively challenges gender expectations which convinces the men in her society to accept that she can rule independently. By enabling women in a way with a variety of rhetorical choices, the audience is to feel empowered and encouraged to move against patriarchal structures. Emphasizing the difference between men and women in this culture results in their differences being valued and seen as positive.

Key Words

liberal feminism, rhetorical choices, patriarchy, empowerment, media

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Introduction

The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement (*The Princess Diaries*) conveys a liberal feminist message that challenges the patriarchy and empowers young women. The film dismantles the typical fantastical stereotype seen in many movies about princesses of a woman marrying a man to achieve self-actualization. This is demonstrated by the principal female characters relying on their own knowledge and experiences in order to bring change to a patriarchal societal structure. The movie follows Princess Mia of Genovia and her time finding a husband after college so she can inherit the title of Queen of Genovia. Under the guidance of the queen, her grandmother, she begins to evolve into a leader of the country. Throughout the film, Mia demonstrates qualities of liberal feminism by advocating for equality while still abiding by the laws and traditions in place. Liberal feminism is the idea that both men and women should have equal opportunities to be able to reach their goals (Steeves, 2009). She implores Parliament to change the marriage law and allow her to be queen without a king. The rhetor utilizes various rhetorical devices through Mia's progression establishing credibility with Parliament, and her tactics appealing to the Genovian people and culture. Mia employs verbal and nonverbal persuasive tactics and successfully convinces Parliament to allow her to be crowned queen without the support of a man.

Princess Mia specifically seeks to accomplish this by speaking at her wedding in a full church. Rather than going through with her marriage ceremony, standing tall in her wedding dress on the church's altar, she speaks to her family, the people of Geneovia, and specifically the Genovian parliament made up exclusively of white older men to try and convince them that she does not need to be wed to be a queen. Shocked, the audience, composed mainly of wealthy and

noble citizens, began to whisper amongst themselves. Mia, with the help of the Prime Minister, does not become intimidated as she explains to Parliament that she refuses to get married.

The church adorned in pink and white wedding decorations quickly becomes grounds for voting, as the previously doubtful Parliament all agree with Princess Mia that women do not need to be married to become queen and rule Genovia.

Literature Review: Media and Leadership

Many scholars have researched the impact of *The Princess Diaries* novels rather than the movies. This series continues to demonstrate struggles with self-confidence and actualization, breaking the norms of ideal femininity, and the role model impact that this series has on young women. Similar to the books, the movie demonstrates these themes. This literature review will focus on the leadership of Princess Mia as a factor of encouragement for many through the lens of liberal feminism.

The research that has been done on *The Princess Diaries* novels recognizes that Princess Mia immediately connects with the audience due to her issues with self-confidence and self-image. However, encouragement comes from the process of Mia finding more confidence and continuing to get closer to self-actualization (Raflis & Oktaviane, 2018). At the very top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is self-actualization and throughout this series we see Mia achieving the lower needs and eventually getting closer to the top of this diagram. Additionally, although this series connects to an audience by addressing authentic issues that many girls experience, this series also focuses on the classic princess narrative, where the beautiful princess is sitting around and waiting for her Prince (Liljeqvist, 2016). Princess Mia challenges this traditional view, but even by examining the issues that the rhetor reveals with this typical narrative further relates to the audience.

Media Depictions

In *The Princess Diaries*, the dissection of the book and film in comparison to the media needs to be analyzed in order to understand how liberal feminism is being represented. Liberal feminism encompasses the idea that both men and women in pursuit of a goal should be able to have equal opportunities to be able to reach it (Steeves, 2009). However, the media often distorts this, especially concerning literature (Steeves, 2009). For example, women are commonly stereotyped by always making their “images of women” the same, and further “devaluing work” that offers encouragement to women according to societal push (Steeves, 2009, p. 100). The book series was published in the early 2000s, meaning that although feminism was already constructed, there was increased support for the defeat of patriarchy as men still held the majority of power. Furthermore, the evolution of films and feminism has also created an impact. This is a cause of the societal permission to have women in the media, such as princesses, be able to rise against the patriarchy to get equal rights whilst still being feminine (Fuentes Vera, 2020). Princess Mia in the books and movies does not conform to the patriarchal norms of the society, however, she still exudes feminine qualities in her pursuit of equality.

Feminist ideals and concepts in the media, movies, films, and television specifically, have been arising as filmmakers realize how important the portrayal of feminism is for younger audiences. Scholars have conducted research regarding this increase in feminist representations and why this has been occurring. Monaghan (2022) discusses the reworked portrayal of classic tropes conveyed within teen cinema to focus more on feminist beliefs to target these younger audiences. To switch the narratives, the movies “are directed by women and foreground young women’s experiences in stories that are traditionally associated with young men” (Monaghan, 2022, p. 3269). The current trend in teen storytelling presents a “feminist” perspective within the

teen genre and how it delves into the realm of social justice by showcasing narratives of teenage girls in settings and plots typically centered around youthful male experiences. This represents women in ways that were lacking beforehand and offers a sense of empowerment. Media scholars should find this insightful and focus their research on the rhetoric surrounding feminist qualities and appeal. Adding women into the story is crucial because “media-friendly and accessible politics of empowerment that connect to both neoliberal values of individualization and liberal feminism’s critique of gendered exclusion” (Monaghan, 2022, p. 3262). Gender exclusion has been an issue within movies that has slowly begun to be addressed and more forms of femininity have been introduced.

Femininity portrayal in the media is displayed in various ways because it doesn’t exist in one form. Blue (2012) writes about the presentation of girlhood within teen shows and films and discusses how “girls have access to power in a culture that imbues them with so much potential and fortitude while it strives to exploit their consumption and visibility” (p. 663). She brings this up to emphasize how girls are typically treated within this industry and how essential it is to take this power back. She continues to discuss the portrayal of Miley and Lilly in the Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana* and the different ways these girls perform femininity. The show contains valued messages that challenge gender expectations through Miley’s character because she can publicly address any contradictions that may come to her life and use her powerful voice (Blue, 2012). Miley’s character, similar to Princess Mia, challenges gender expectations because typically girls and women are expected to remain quiet and accept the way life goes for them. Instead of complying with these outdated gender norms, she goes against them and demonstrates feminist ideals of being able to do what men can do.

Using media as a tool to market liberal feminism to youth is seen evidently in Disney Movies. According to Gerbner (1999), “media is a key influencer of children’s understanding of gender based on the meanings, relations, and representations they portray” (p. 661). Gerbner examines feminism as seen in many children's Disney movies, like *The Princess Diaries* film series. Disney uses themes of women as heroes breaking stereotypes and achieving self-actualization.

Leadership

Women in leadership emerges as a theme in two articles discussing both Disney realms and the real world regarding liberal feminism. One article looks at the role of women in leadership positions. The article problematizes how women in leadership are understood by their male counterparts (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017). The authors specifically look at the Prime Minister of New Zealand in 2017 to emphasize their point. The researchers argue that women are expected to be held up to masculine standards but are also expected to concurrently maintain feminine ideals. For example, it is typical for “caring” to be a feminine trait, but women are supposed to show less care to appear more masculine and communicate authority. However, the researchers strive to change the idea that women need to become more masculine to lead and instead value women’s traits and abilities in their own right – and for people to stop looking at only the differences between men and women in authority. Similarly, another article criticizes Disney's romantic ideal for princesses (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). In the second article, the researchers point out that true love is viewed as an object that must be earned for a princess to lead. Garlen and Sandlin note that Disney princesses’ search and sacrifice for love become their sole purpose and create an unrealistic ideal for the audience. Thus, the true love ideal reinforces the patriarchal structure.

Analysis: Female Representation & Rhetorical Devices

Does the representation of women suggest that women are essentially the same as or different from men?

Mia Thermopolis in *The Princess Diaries* is set to be queen. The course of the movie revolves around the princess' search for a husband, as the Genovian law states she must be wed in order to ascend to the throne. The community surrounding Princess Mia suggests that women are essentially different from men. Princess Mia is subjected to essentialization, or assuming groups are essentially the same and follow a "script" (Wood, 1992, p. 5). Specifically, all women are expected to be docile, submissive, and married in order to take the throne. Princess Mia, however, attempts to break the "script" by petitioning for a law reform that allows women rule without a husband. In her speech, an underlying theme of natural rights emerged. Natural rights suggest that all men and women are created equal (Locke, 1690/1980). Based on the concept that men and women are created equal, Princess Mia asserts that women should be allowed to ascend to the throne unwed, just as a man could. In order to support her petition, Mia is told to present more masculine qualities, like intensity when she is told to "stare them [the audience] down," (Marshall, 2004). This representation of Princess Mia and the community in which she presides initially sees women as essentially different from men but shifts their view by the end of her speech.

If women are portrayed as being different from men, how are their differences valued or devalued?

Further, the movie creates a clear depiction of how women are portrayed as being different from men. Women by the standards of patriarchy are first devalued, but then become valued as they speak up for themselves. The process of being devalued begins when Princess

Mia is not allowed to rule as queen until she is wed, and is furthered when she tries to make her own decisions and is told she cannot because she is a woman. The distinction here is clear, as men would have never been discredited and would be able to rule whether with a spouse or not. This is a cause of the patriarchal hierarchy where women are seen as less in political instances and men are held to a higher standard. This then transitions into her stereotypical feminine characteristics and her portrayal of being a strong independent woman being valued. This transformation comes at the cause of men in the Parliament having a change of heart and realizing that the differences between men and women should be valued. Although Princess Mia is biologically different from men, this does not hinder her ability to think for herself and does not mean she is incapable of ruling a kingdom. This ties back into liberal feminism as men and women are equal because women just like men can "...reas[on], [are] independent, autonomous human beings," (Donovan, 1992, p. 8). Women are just as capable as men as they can think, act, and make choices according to what they believe is right.

How are the goals of assimilating women into the existing economic and socio-political structures advanced or hindered by the message?

The predominant existing economic and socio-political structures are distant and unrealistic, as the European country of Genovia was created for this storyline, and not many people grow up in line to rule a kingdom. However, many plots to stories with royalty in them are not created to cultivate a sense of connection but instead a sense of possibility. Many people can relate to each other in not being in the same circumstance as seen in this movie and yet still relating to many of the situations that Princess Mia finds herself in. By assimilating women into the existing social and economic structures of society, it can be assumed that they will further connect with each other and the ideals that are presented as both distant and relatable. Donovan

(1985) shares that natural rights indicate that “all humans, men and women of all colors and creeds are created equal” (p. 8). These natural rights are demonstrated in the structure of ruling the country of Genovia and further in the bonding of the audience of this film. By the message of equality being in the film and assuming that the many women watching this film will be influenced by this message, the assimilation of women into these socioeconomic categories further advances the meaning and intent behind the movie.

Do the representations of women perpetuate their exclusion from the mainstream economic and social systems or encourage their inclusion?

The representation of women perpetuates both their exclusion and inclusion in mainstream economic and social systems. *The Princess Diaries* consists of a plot that showcases traditional gender roles and expectations surrounding royalty and monarchy. Princess Mia is encouraged to find a husband, which reinforces the narrative that marriage is the key to success. This aspect of the storyline conveys the stereotype that a woman should find a partner while also emphasizing the traditionality of a Queen having a King by her side and that the only way a woman can be seen in the context of royalty is if she is with a man. But as the film goes on, Princess Mia is portrayed as a woman with power and influence in the country of Genovia. She is depicted as a strong, independent woman who does not need a man to be able to hold a position of royalty.

The outdated laws and regulations that Genovia had were fought against by Princess Mia. She challenges the patriarchal norm of needing to be married to hold power by claiming that she can rule with or without a husband. At this point in the film, inclusion is being perpetuated as Mia breaks the barriers and challenges the established norms within a patriarchal system. This showcases female empowerment and independence, aligning with liberal feminism which argues

that women are entitled to the same inalienable, “natural” rights as men because they are also independent, autonomous human beings. If roles were reversed, the man would not need to search for a woman to serve as head of the kingdom, but women are portrayed to need a man in order to be successful and thriving.

What Rhetorical Devices Serve Those Ends?

The Princess Diaries utilizes various devices in order to convey a liberal feminist message of including and assimilating women into economic, social, and political structures. Princess Mia establishes her credibility by demonstrating her ability to become queen and rule Genovia. She does this over time while also following the political laws put in place, which include forcing her to find a husband. She learns from her grandmother, a matriarch who ruled for decades after her husband passed. Slowly, Mia changes the patriarchal minds by proving to Parliament she can be a Queen without a King. Her actions communicate to viewers that assimilating women into existing economic and socio-political structures is not only possible but beneficial.

Princess Mia continues to progress, taking on her role as the future Queen. She appeals to the Genovian people in multiple ways while still staying true to herself. Mia walks with the local orphans and children in the parade instead of sitting in her car. This shows her people her heart and dedication to Genovia. Additionally throughout the film, Mia appeals to Genovian customs by presenting herself as properly dressed and mannered. Mia inspires women to strive to achieve their goals and spark change through her inclusion in a patriarchal structured government. At the end of the film, Mia appeals to Genovia’s political structure by asking Parliament to abolish the marriage law. She addresses the crowd with confidence, leading Parliament in the vote. She integrates herself into the male-dominated government by establishing her credibility, by

appealing to the people and Parliament over time, resulting in the abolishment of the marriage law.

Why were certain rhetorical choices made by the rhetor(s) or creator(s) of the message? How do the rhetorical choices made compare to other possible choices the rhetor(s) could have made?

The rhetor in *The Princess Diaries* chooses various rhetorical elements to convey the message of creating equality through the means of assimilating into the political structure in order to enact change. Disney purposely adds fantastical elements to keep the attention of the viewers. Although some may criticize that the legislative structure does not properly represent reality, Princess Mia's journey navigating the patriarchal political sphere encourages young women to persevere and achieve their goals despite society's patriarchal structure. She proves her credibility by following the parliamentary procedure for voting. She is purposeful with her words, commanding the audience and calling upon the men in Parliament to vote in favor of the abolishment of the marriage law.

The way in which the creator of this message presents Princess Mia before the large room of people, Parliament included, allows her to exude confidence. Her great posture demonstrates discipline and formality, and her tone is direct and eloquent, allowing the audience to attribute credibility to her. Mia's unbreaking eye contact shows assurance and further persuades other movie characters, and the audience to place trust in her. The rhetor additionally employs patterns of repetition in order to strengthen the message. When Princess Mia proposes her change to Parliament, which requires a vote, the members of Parliament each stand and one by one voice their support for this change by stating, "Aye." This pattern of repetition emphasizes the

endorsement that these men have for Princess Mia in her position of power, and echoes confidence in her ability to lead without a male figure beside her.

Interpretation and Evaluation

The Effects on the Audience

What impact might the rhetorical choices have on different audiences? Would the impact be the same for different people?

Although the rhetorical choices Princess Mia used worked to convince the Parliament, it does not mean this would work for all audiences. The fictitious kingdom of Genovia fits the standards of a Western society, being more open to women speaking and ruling. In some cultures, women are not allowed to have any credibility, regardless of what they may do.

Princess Mia's speech may have had no effect entirely due to the fact that she is a woman. Rhetorical choices such as standing with confidence, making eye contact, and speaking loudly may not impact some cultures positively. Instead, her choices could be seen as too radical and untraditional. Depending on culture, women's rights in the area where the clip is being seen, and education, Princess Mia's delivery of a speech and its success will impact people differently.

What do the rhetorical choices and patterns indicate about the audience, society, or culture in which the message sits?

The rhetorical choices and patterns in Princess Mia's speech indicate that the society in which this movie was produced values masculine traits in leadership. Princess Mia was able to shift the audience's view of herself within the movie by employing traits typically viewed as masculine. Initially, Princess Mia was seen as poised, quiet, and timid as she learned how to be part of the Genovian royal family. However, her traits were seen as feminine, and not appropriate for a strong queen who could rule by herself. By strengthening eye contact with the audience,

speaking assertively, and standing with a rigid posture she creates the image of confidence that contrasts with her initially feminine traits. Thus, Parliament votes in her favor to rule without a husband.

On another note, Princess Mia's rhetoric reveals that the culture and society in which the movie was created is beginning to value women in leadership roles. The subject of the movie and Princess Mia's speech suggests that the concept of women leading is new, but is something to be celebrated. We see the audience within the movie celebrating Princess Mia's ability to rule by clapping, smiling, and hugging one another. To the audience watching this movie, the scene is heartwarming and emphasizes how society should embrace a woman's ability to lead with joy. More specifically, the movie is rated G and directed towards young girls in particular. This leads us to believe that Disney and the filmmakers producing *The Princess Diaries* strive to encourage young girls to be strong on their own, without the help of a man or husband. Support for Princess Mia represents support for women ascending into leadership roles, which challenges the standard patriarchal structure in both the fictional country of Genovia and the American context in which the movie was created.

Effective Portrayal in The Princess Diaries

The Princess Diaries effectively portrays liberal feminist ideas that go against patriarchal views regarding royalty and women in positions of power. Princess Mia's character asserts her independence throughout the film by fighting against the societal expectation of a queen needing a man alongside her. She prioritizes the capabilities she has over holding power rather than her marital status. This message depicted in the film argues against the patriarchal norm that a woman's worth is dependent on being in a relationship with a man. Princess Mia challenges these gender expectations by refusing to conform to the expectations of marrying a man and

advocates for her ability to rule independently. Additionally, the Queen of Genovia, Mia's grandmother, currently holds the power by herself. She demonstrates being a matriarch in a typically patriarchal society. Since the Queen's husband had passed away, she was the sole leader of the kingdom of Genovia. This effectively conveys that a woman being in charge by herself is possible and not out of the ordinary.

The promotion of female empowerment is evident in *The Princess Diaries* in many aspects. Princess Mia's character is a powerful, independent woman who promotes her skills and strength without needing to rely on a man, she displays female empowerment to younger audiences to encourage them that they also can be successful on their own. Despite the movie being based in a fictitious country, it exhibits concepts that can apply to real life. The film consists of rhetorical choices such as repetition and patterns to effectively illustrate the liberal feminist view that women should have equal opportunities and the qualifications to reach them.

Conclusion

The impact that this film has on women is remarkable. It reinforces the idea that women are capable and sufficient on their own, and do not need a male figure to emphasize their ability. The rhetorical choices made in *The Princess Diaries* disregard the gender expectations that Princess Mia is not able to rule on her own and reiterate the message in many other inspirational films for young women. The ideals of self-confidence and credibility are used as values to encourage other young women in their independence and further highlight the beliefs of liberal feminism.

Ultimately, Princess Mia's rhetoric in *The Princess Diaries* can be analyzed and evaluated through a liberal feminist lens. Princess Mia advocates for women to have the same rights as men, and to be able to lead without a spouse. Her speech suggests that women are

essentially the same as men: autonomous human beings. Although her feminine traits are slightly devalued, she adheres to the traditional socio-political guidelines of her country and chooses to formally change the law in order to perpetuate her inclusion in the mainstream social and economic systems. Princess Mia acts with confidence, adapts her demeanor to appear more masculine, and ultimately establishes her credibility with both the fictional and real audiences. Her rhetorical choices lead the audiences to value women in leadership roles and be seen as equal to their male counterparts; therefore, she is effective in promoting female empowerment. Given these points, Princess Mia in *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* delivered a valuable speech through the eyes of a liberal feminist lens.

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