

Taking Back the “P-Word”: Princess Leia Feminism, an Autoethnography

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We dodged the raindrops as we exited the theater after viewing *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*; my heart hurting, my mouth hanging in a frown, and my eyes fighting the tears after watching Han Solo die at the hands of his son.

“I can’t believe he is dead,” I whined to Matt, my husband, as I settle into the car and he turns on the heat.

Kylo Ren: “I’m being torn apart. I want to be free of this pain. I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it. Will you help me?”

Han Solo: “Yes. Anything.” (*Star Wars – Episode VII: The Force Awakens*)

Then Ren takes his lightsaber, stabs Han in the stomach, and he falls over the railing down into the darkness.

I gasped. Twenty minutes later, I am still in shock.

As a child of the late ‘70s and ‘80s, I grew up with the original *Star Wars* franchise. I was told *Star Wars: A New Hope* was one of the first films I saw in the theater, but I have no memory of seeing the film or even *The Empire Strikes Back* I recall standing in front of a theater when I was waiting with my sisters, Abby and Emily, to purchase our tickets to see *Return of the Jedi*. And later in life, for at least two Christmases, my family would open presents and then unite in front of the television, watching the original three films back to back to back.

Han Solo: “This ain’t like dusting no crops, boy” (*Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope*).

There was just something about Han Solo--or even Harrison Ford--that just stuck with me.

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Han Solo: “Tell Jabba I have his money” (*Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope*).

He played the bad boy, the rebel of the rebellion and the Empire, but also demonstrated he had a heart.

“They killed Han. I can’t believe they killed Han,” I moaned as we navigated the back roads of Bangor, Maine, heading to Matt’s parents’ cabin, where we were staying for winter break. “And did you see Leia’s face? Her face alone communicated the anguish that nearly every female who loves Han Solo felt. And now I can’t talk about it because I will spoil the film for others.”

While I mourned the passing of Han Solo, I also focused on Leia, wondering how did she transform from being a “Princess” to a “General”? Sometime during the end of *Return of the Jedi*--as the surviving members of the Rebellion celebrated the demise of the second Death Star and the end of the Empire--Leia went from having the newfound knowledge of being a Jedi to becoming a General, marrying and separating from Han, and having a child, Ben, who becomes Kylo Ren.

When *The Force Awakens* was released in December 2015, a big deal was made over the new female heroine Rey, a scavenger on the nearly abandoned planet of Jakku. Garber reports that Rey was dubbed *Star Wars*’ “first feminist protagonist” (par. 2).

As a repeat viewer of the original three episodes of the *Star Wars* saga, I disagree. Bowman defines feminism as “an institution that insists upon an equal footing for both sexes” (162). While I strongly agree that the character of Rey fits this definition of feminism, I believe that Princess Leia was the first feminist in the galaxy.

The purpose of this article is to explore Princess Leia as a way of arguing that she was the first feminist character of *Star Wars*, while also developing and introducing a new type of feminism, *Leia Feminism*.

First, I examine the princess culture’s current climate. Jones, Adams, and Ellis contend that autoethnography captures “how individuals live” and highlight one’s experiences to the “culture they live in” (21, 22). I use a popular culture “princess,” specifically, Princess Leia, to juxtapose the Disney popular culture stereotype of princesses, specifically, Cinderella. I set out to define and explain **Leia Feminism** as a contrast to Battaglia, Cordes, Norris, and Banuelos concept of *Cinderella Feminism*. Battaglia et al. suggest that *Cinderella feminists* want it all: the glass slipper, the Prince, the fairy tale lifestyle, and the connection (153). I

argue that *Leia feminists* want the adventure, equal power, but also autonomy, and then love. By defining what I mean by Leia Feminism, I seek to juxtapose the Leia feminist to the Cinderella feminist.

Next, I explore the character to demonstrate how Princess Leia was the first feminist protagonist in the galaxy far, far away. Manning and Adams assert that researchers “use personal experiences to write alongside popular culture theories and texts” while criticizing, writing against, and talking back to the texts (200-01). While viewing the original three films and making notes of character development and actions, I talk back to the characters, critique Leia’s actions and the actions of others towards her, and make notes of actions that could be deemed “feminist-like behaviors.”

Finally, Batchelor views “popular culture as the connections that form between individuals and objects” (1), while Manning and Adams assert that researchers serve as the audience to popular culture (195-196). Manning also believes that autoethnographers can use popular culture texts to better understand our own journeys (58). As an avid viewer of films featuring strong princess archetypes, it wasn’t until I had to explain why I didn’t want others to use the word *princess* towards my daughters that I realized that some princesses were, or could be considered, feminist in nature. This paper delves into my struggle to overcome my disdain for the word *princess* by examining Princess Leia and why she would be an acceptable princess for my daughters to emulate.

My First Introduction

I crawl into the bed, snuggling up with my mom on July 29, 1981, to watch “the” royal wedding. We laid in her queen-size bed, waiting, watching the crowd, my head snuggled nicely on her shoulder. A roar rose from the British crowd as a horse-drawn carriage emerged. A few minutes later, Prince Charles and Princess Diana emerged from the cathedral, waving at the crowd, while Diana clutched her bouquet, her flowing, over-sized white dress train capturing the attention of the crowd and the television-viewing audience. We watched as they entered the carriage and then as the carriage made its way through the streets of London towards the palace, Diana beaming and waving the whole time.

Diana’s wedding to Prince Charles was my first memory of an introduction into the “princess culture.”

I was a victim of the 1980s version of the princess culture, which is nothing like Shuler examined for today's young female generation. The princess culture of my generation was a mixture of real-life Diana and Grace [Kelly], Linda Carter as Wonder Woman, and Disney's rereleases of their popular Disney films *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Much like the cultures described in research (Do Rozario; Henke, Umble, and Smith; O'Brien; Rowe), I became a victim of the Disney princess rhetoric. Henke, Umble, and Smith write, "Disney stories present powerful and sustained messages about gender and social relations," especially when it comes to what defines a princess and how to behave like a princess (230). Even one of the most recent Disney/Pixar releases, *Brave*, characterizes what it takes to be the perfect princess:

Queen Elinor: "A princess must be knowledgeable about her kingdom. She does not doodle. . . . A princess does not chortle, does not stuff her gob, rises early, is compassionate, patient, cautious, clean, and above all, a princess strives for...well, perfection." (*Brave*)

A princess does not get to have any fun.

Disney films portray the "perfect girl," but don't give her a voice or even provide her fewer lines than her male counterpart (Guo); the girl sacrifices her dreams (Henke, Umble, and Smith 242); and the girl has beauty but others in the village are jealous of it (Henke et al., 237). As I aged and outgrew the charm and frilliness of the Disney princesses, I grew cynical about the "prince charming" and "happily ever after." I was no longer symbolically boasting (Manning 142) with the princesses on the Disney film. I no longer dreamed of being a "princess."

Cinderella Feminism

In describing taking her daughter to her first princess party, Shuler explains that her eight-year-old daughter spent the previous five years obsessed with all things princess: Halloween costumes designed like Disney princess dresses, ice shows featuring Disney princesses, and even a new Disney baby line directed to new mothers. Like Shuler, my biggest concern is "how might they [princesses] shape their [my daughters'] ideas about what it means to be female in this world?" (463); which is why I don't want the word used to describe or compliment them.

As an academic and a realist, I know I can’t stop my daughters from being exposed to the Disney princess culture, but it doesn’t keep me from trying. One day I arrived at day care to find my oldest daughter wearing an Ariel dress over her clothes.

“Why is she in that dress?” I asked the intern, since she was the closest teacher to me.

“Oh! She saw another little girl wearing a dress and wanted to wear it.”

“Oh. I was hoping I had a few more years.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. By then, Paula, the room teacher, approached with Caroline.

“I want to keep her from getting the wrong idea about princesses; in fact, I hate the word. But since she asked to wear the dress, that’s different. She’s too young to understand the symbolic meaning behind it.”

As her mother and a feminist, how can I make sure my daughter is exposed to the right kind of princess without having her feel left out or teased by her future classmates?

Am I struggling between being an academic and a mother?

Leavy struggled with reconciling her “feminist standpoint, [her] own personal references, and [her] parenting of a preteen girl” (31). In communicating her views to her family, such as teaching her daughter to hate Barbie, Leavy received ridicule from family members. Like Leavy, I, too, received some backlash from family members, with a bright pink onesie saying, “If the Crown Fits,” arriving in the mail from one family member, a Cinderella newborn Halloween dress arriving from another family member, and a princess rocking chair arriving from yet a third.

Battaglia et al. might suggest that I want my daughter to find a balance between Cinderella fantasies and real-world expectations, but truthfully, I want my daughters to have more. Battaglia et al. define Cinderella Feminism as females that have the glass slipper, the fulfilled dream of marriage, families, and careers, but also co-exist in a “happily homeostatic state” (153). Under the concept of Cinderella Feminism, females adapt their behavior in order to conform to more mainstream heteronormative romantic paradigms. When hearing the phrase *Cinderella Feminism*, I think of Cinderella, as characterized by the Disney Corporation, and see a female in distress, unable to escape her stature, depending on a male to rescue her, with woodland creatures doing the work to make that happen. She is dependent on others in order to succeed. But Battaglia et al. assert

that the phrase captures the essence of the second wave of feminism since it builds upon Friedan's argument of females wanting it all but just not at the same time.

Can I recapture the word *princess*, provide a new meaning, and allow my daughters to dress up in hand-me-down princess dresses?

Introducing Princess Leia

In preparation for the release of *The Force Awakens*, and eventually, *Rogue One*, I decided I needed a refresh on the original *Star Wars* saga. I knew I could do without the first three episodes released in the late '90s as I could barely stand the first one. I find *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* to be classics, timeless in their messages, character development, and plot lines. Plus, there was the on-screen chemistry between Han Solo, Princess Leia, and Luke Skywalker.

In a galaxy filled with mostly male characters, Princess Leia stands out for not only being a female but for her actions and one-liners (Bowman). Bowman describes Leia as brave, having tenacity, and an overall strong female; but the argument is also made that "while Leia is awesome, she can't represent every aspect of a woman's experience" (163), much less all the aspects of feminism. Leia is tough as nails, as viewers observe in *A New Hope*, lacking the dainty qualities that many would stereotype as a princess behavior.

We are first introduced to Princess Leia at the beginning of *A New Hope*, as the Empire led by Darth Vader intercepts her ship in the hopes of retrieving the plans for the Death Star. Little did Vader know, though, that Leia placed the plans into an R2 Unit, who left the ship through an escape hatch. When Leia is brought to Vader, she argues:

Leia: "Darth Vader. Only you could be so bold. The Imperial Senate will not sit still for this. When they hear you've attacked a diplomatic--"

Vader: "Don't act so surprised, Your Highness. You weren't on any mercy mission this time. Several transmissions were beamed to this ship by rebel spies. I want to know what happened to the plans they sent you."

Leia: “I don't know what you're talking about. I am a member of the Imperial Senate on a diplomatic mission to Alderaan--”

Vader: “You are part of the Rebel Alliance and a traitor! Take her away!”
(*Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope*)

She is taken prisoner and placed in a holding cell on the Death Star; and we do not see Leia for quite some time, instead watching as Luke sees her as a hologram clothed in white, saying the phrase, “You’re my only hope.” Luke goes with Obi-Wan in the hopes of rescuing Leia, as her image portrays her as “the princess in peril” (Dominguez 115), a damsel in distress.

“Governor Tarkin, I should have expected to find you holding Vader's leash. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought on board,” Leia informs the Governor as she is marched onto the bridge of the Death Star and the audience gets to see Princess Leia again. Of course, the “foul stench” is not the only line that Leia has in the film:

Leia: “I don't know who you are or where you came from, but from now on you'll do as I tell you, okay?”. . . .

Leia: “Well somebody has to save our skins. Into the garbage, fly-boy!”. . . .

Leia: “Someone get this walking carpet out of my way.” (*Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope*)

Only Leia could be so bold with her witty but sometimes sarcastic one-liners, but as Bowman points out, Leia can be vocal because of her [princess] position.

It is through the Tarkin scene that the audience learns that this particular princess is “never a damsel in distress” (Hayes, birthmoviesdeath.com); a complete contrast to the princesses in Disney films or even how Luke perceives her earlier in the film. Hayes takes the “anti-damsel in distress” characteristic further, arguing that we understand that Leia has been on her own willful, dangerous mission to destroy the Death Star and prevent potential acts of terrorism. Leia’s commitment to a greater good comes with painful sacrifice, as her refusal to give in to the enemy results in the destruction of her home planet (birthmoviesdeath.com).

It is in the moment when Leia shrieks, “What? They are a peaceful planet!” to General Tarkin as he orders his troops to destroy the planet with the Death Star that I see the depth of Leia’s love and loyalty, especially to the people of her home planet. “You are too trusting,” Tarkin informs her. As the once peaceful planet of Alderaan is blown into a million tiny pieces, we all gasp, shocked just like Leia that the Death Star had the power to pulverize the planet.

And while she is upset, she never once sheds a tear. She stands stoic, her hands cuffed in front of her, the white garment spotless.

She places agency (Burke) in herself and for those who are unable to help themselves.

Later, Leia defies the stereotype of “damsel in distress” further. As Luke enters her cell, dressed as a Stormtrooper, the audience may expect Luke to remove his helmet and give Leia a kiss to awaken her, much like the Prince in both *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Instead, Leia awakes on her own, utters the line, “Aren’t you a little short to be a Stormtrooper,” catching Luke off guard (*Star Wars IV, A New Hope, 1977*; Dominguez). A few minutes later, she takes control of her own rescue, ordering Luke, Han, and Chewbacca into the garbage shoot. Leia’s actions clearly defy the definition of a “damsel in distress.”

As the final credit music begins to fill the air and the credits begin to roll, I realize that Leia was not introduced for a princess to find a husband or to have a male rescue her from the clutches of the Empire. Rather, Leia was the catalyst for moving the rebellion forward (Bowman 163), fighting back against the Emperor, Darth Vader, and the Evil Empire. Without Leia receiving the plans of the architecture of the Death Star, placing the plans in R2D2, and ordering him to find Obi-Wan, and Luke finding the droids and Obi-Wan, the Empire would still be in control of the universe.

Princess Leia’s Iconic Image

In the period between the release of *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One*, the *Star Wars* franchise released adult pajamas styled after iconic characters and costumes from the original three films. As I pushed Caroline, my eldest daughter, around TJ Maxx, I came across the Princess Leia outfit and then pictured Caroline wearing buns, now that her hair is long enough, and the outfit, despite it being an adult size.

The iconic image of Leia in her white sheet dress with her hair in buns has been with me my whole life, but it was only when I started analyzing why I hated the word *princess* that I went back to review the films and noticed the symbolic meaning behind the dress and the hair. For years, feminists have been fighting the sex-symbol dress of female clothing (Dow and Wood, 24), but we don’t see that in Leia in the first film. She isn’t wearing a low-cut dress like Cinderella or even a ball gown off-the-shoulders like Belle. Her hair isn’t flowing down her back, but rather is tucked up in nice, tight buns, as not to impede her even as she doesn’t realize that help is on the way.

As I progressed through the original three films, I began to note how Leia wears pants and her hair in an updo during a battle; the “sexiness feminine side” of the princess comes out when the film is portraying a time of peace or when she is “forced” to exhibit her female side. But more importantly are the accessories Leia carries. Leia yields a gun like her male counterparts, firing at will to keep the Stormtroopers from capturing her and Luke, as they race around the Death Star in the hopes of getting to the Millennium Falcon and escape.

She is a liberated princess (Wildermuth 92). She is strong, an antithesis of a damsel in distress, waiting for rescue and to be freed from some evil spell.

She is no one’s eye candy; much less, she does not see herself as a sex symbol.

Liberated, strong, and not sexually objectified. Are these three traits all it takes to be a Leia feminist? And will these characteristics continue throughout the other two films?

A Princess Icon?

A few days later when my husband and I can’t find a good football game to watch, I pop in *The Empire Strikes Back* to continue our preparation for the release of *The Force Awakens*. As the DVD heats up, I am already finding it more difficult to get sucked into the film, as *The Empire Strikes Back* is not my favorite in the series. But when the Millennium Falcon and its crew arrive at Cloud City, my attention span perks up and I pay careful attention to the action.

Leia maneuvers the hallways of the Cloud City, trying to stop Boba Fett, the bounty hunter, from taking off with the carbonized Han Solo and shooting at the

groups of Stormtroopers who pursue her. The look in her brown eyes is one of determination: to save Han, but also to escape the evil clutches of the Empire.

“Now there’s a princess I can support our daughter idolizing,” I say to Matt as we sit on the couch. (At the time of the release of *A Force Awakens*, we only had one daughter.) “Leia is a fighter.”

“Hm-mm,” he replies, not really into the film as I have now become.

I dig in the cushions, extracting the DVD remote, and hit pause as I look Matt in the eyes.

“I’m serious, but at the same time, I am worried. I have control over what I expose her to at home, but what if she learns about all those Disney princesses at day care or school? What if she comes home and says, ‘I want to be Cinderella,’ or acts like a helpless female who believes she needs a man to rescue her to live happily ever after?”

“Do you honestly believe that is going to happen?”

“Yes.”

“Sarah, think about it. With you as her mother and me as her dad, she is not going to be become Rapunzel and need rescuing from a tower.”

I contemplate Matt’s words, as I hit play and rewind back to the first few scenes at Cloud City, when Han, Leia, Chewbacca, and C3PO arrive and are greeted by the city’s administrator, Lando Calrissian.

“You are never going to get through the film if you keep hitting rewind,” Matt informs me.

“I know but I fear there are some significant lines in here about Leia. I have spent so much time analyzing her dress and actions that I feel like I am missing some lines that are directed towards her.”

“Hello, what do we have here?” Lando directs toward Leia as he approaches the crew. The six words carry a connotative meaning of Lando finding Leia attractive. I later realize that this is the first time Lando subtly refers to Leia’s appearance.

Later in the film, Leia stands in front of the window of the room where the group, Chewbacca and Han, have been assigned to when Lando enters the room.

Lando: “You look absolutely beautiful...you truly belong here with us among the clouds” (*Star Wars – Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*).

I hit pause.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“How Lando compliments Leia on her looks. I swear this is the second time since they arrived in Cloud City that he has said something about her looks.”

“Hmmp,” he grumbles back, clearly not paying as much attention as me.

We are two-thirds through *The Empire Strikes Back* and this is the second time Leia has been complimented on her looks by Lando. Is Lando trying to sexually objectify Leia, make her into a sex object? Is this part of Lando’s character, or are the producers hoping to keep young men interested in the film by using lines that portray Leia as a sex object?

In contrast, Han never says anything about her looks. In going back to review Han’s lines about Leia after their first meeting in *A New Hope*, Han says to Luke, “Wonderful girl. Either I’m going to kill her or I’m beginning to like her.” Is it Leia’s actions that Han finds attractive about her? Her intelligence? Her bitchiness?

Henke, Umble, and Smith point out “girls conflate standards of beauty and standards of goodness by learning to pay attention to their ‘looks’ and by listening to what others say about them” (231). Princesses are known for their beauty as, at one point, Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* was considered the most beautiful of the princesses, being compared to Barbie, as she epitomized the statuesque blonde (Solomon 47). In 1991, Gaston sings of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* as “the most beautiful girl in town” and “don’t I deserve the best” (Ashman and Menken). Yet when Lando makes remarks about her beauty, Leia pretty much rolls her eyes and closes the proximity between her and Han. Leia does not pay attention to her looks, nor does anyone ever say, “You’re a princess, you shouldn’t do that.” It is as if her looks are not as important to her, or even Han, as they are to Lando.

You can be a princess and not be vain. Is that what Leia is communicating?

I sigh as the beginning of the carbonite scene begins to play. As Han is led to the machine to be a test product before Vader’s planned carbonation of Luke, Chewbacca gets upset. Han calms him down by saying, “Chewie, you have to take care of the princess.”

Why does Princess Leia need taking care of?

Hasn’t she been pulling her own weight?

Did Han just relabel her as a “damsel in distress”?

Or were his words merely an indirect way of calming his friend?

The machine heats up, Leia looks Han in the eyes and says, “I love you.”

“I know.”

The anguish Leia feels floods her facial features; a glaring contrast to her facial features in *A New Hope* as she watched her planet blown apart. It is in each clip of this scene that Leia portrays the female as weak and broken-hearted, clinging to Chewbacca, hiding her face in his fur, and her emotions clearly coming across her facial features. But just as quickly as the vulnerable side of Leia comes to the surface, it is gone, as Vader orders the Stormtroopers to escort her and Chewbacca to his ship.

It is during *The Empire Strikes Back* that we begin to see Leia display more feminist as well as feminine-like qualities. She is a leader and speaks back, or even stands up, to Han, but also acts on her female side, showing emotion, saying her feelings, and seeking comfort in the arms of a Wookiee.

“In *Star Wars*, she acted a bit like a bratty teenager,” my older sister explained as we discussed whether Leia was a feminist.

“In *Empire*, she came into her own.”

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Leia demonstrates her athletic skills, continues to hone her shooting skills, and also excels at leadership qualities. She also does not use her “princess” title as much when questioning Han’s decisions. She sees herself, and others see her, as an equal. Therefore, Leia Feminism incorporates self-sufficiency, an authoritative tone, equality, and leadership skills without being bitchy, along with the previous mentioned qualities of liberated, strong, and not sexually objectified.

Return of the Bikini

When we first see Princess Leia in *Return of the Jedi*, we don’t know it is Princess Leia. She is dressed as a bounty hunter, touting Chewbacca as her prisoner. She offers to trade Chewbacca for the carbonized Han Solo, but Jabba the Hutt responds that he could not part with his “favorite piece of art” as he gestures towards Han. In the dark of the night, Leia releases Han from the carbonate, but the reunited lovebirds are quickly captured and they both become prisoners of Jabba. It is during Leia’s imprisonment that her sexual objectification climaxes with the introduction of the well-known bikini outfit with a chain around her neck.

The bikini became the icon of young men’s sexual fantasies; the bikini also became an antithetical symbol of female empowerment (Jacobs). Bowman argues

that the bikini scene is a moment that showcases Leia’s sexuality as “she becomes a representative of the power of female sexuality” (166).

I sit there watching the scenes take place in Jabba’s lair, paying particular attention to Leia. When Luke first enters the lair, he makes eye contact with Leia but no words pass. Is he making note of her outfit, or is he sending her the message that everything will be okay?

When Luke is battling the giant monster in the pit, Leia leans over to watch from her spot in front of Jabba, Jabba constantly pulling the chain around her neck to keep her back, as if he doesn’t want her to see the action taking place below the lair. The pulling of the chain could also symbolize male control, as Jabba has control of how far Leia can move and what she can and cannot see. As he pulls on the chain, Leia uses her fingers to try to keep the collar, connected to the chain, from digging into her neck, this movement is a subtle notion of females trying to prevent complete male control.

Later, after R2D2 helps Luke Skywalker escape death in the desert, Leia uses the chain as a weapon, strangling Jabba with all her bodily strength until his tail stops flapping and he collapses dead. Leia takes control over her sexuality by using the chain as a weapon instead of it being a symbol of men’s control over females (Bowman 166). Dominguez writes that while the scene “is rife with titillation for the primarily young male audience of the films, it can be read as a moment of great empowerment for the females in the audience” (117). Leia’s actions alter the symbolic meaning behind the chain, using the very element that represent her enslavement to escape Jabba.

As the rebels reunite on the small aircraft, I look at Caroline, who is snuggled next to me on the couch, and say, “Violence isn’t always the answer,” as she applauds the explosion, the firing of the guns, and the sounds of the light saber. “And never wear anything that you don’t want to wear.” I didn’t know how else to explain, especially when she is still a toddler, the bikini and how Leia was forced to wear it by Jabba the Hutt.

Carrie Fisher explained, “In *Return of the Jedi*, she [Leia] gets to be more feminine and affectionate. But let’s not forget that these movies are basically boys’ fantasies. So, the other way they made her more feminine was to have her take her clothes off” (Asher-Perrin, “Carrie Fisher’s Sound Thoughts on Princess Leia in 1983”). But the bikini was more than just about sexualizing the female body. Fisher knew that Leia would never pick the outfit herself, but rather the forcing of Leia to wear it symbolizes the patriarchy in Jabba’s lair, while

simultaneously fulfilling the fantasies of young boys (Asher-Perrin, “Carrie Fisher’s Sound Thoughts on Princess Leia in 1983”).

“You know in 1983 I didn’t think anything about the bikini. I think it was one of the rare times that we are reminded that Leia is a girl. Then it came up again in an episode of *Friends* as the outfit in Ross’ sexual fantasies. That is when the meaning of the outfit began to change for me. It went from having no meaning to being a sexual fantasy,” I explained to Matt.

“Why does it matter what she wears?” Matt asked.

The bikini matters, as it has been a catalyst for debates since *Return of the Jedi* hit theaters. As recently as November 2015, parents were in an outrage because only Leia action figures clad in the bikini were available for purchase (Jacobs).

How do I teach them to fight back against the very culture that enslaves them because of their gender?

That you can be a feminist, fight for what you believe in, and still show skin?

That clothes don’t make the female?

Leia Feminism incorporates the power to fight against the system that sometimes holds females back.

The Softer Side of Leia

Return of the Jedi is the film when Leia’s growth as a character is complete, well, until I watched *The Force Awakens* and saw more character development. During *Return of the Jedi*, Leia was

“[. . . f]orced to be a sexual object for a crime lord? Choke him to death and got outta dodge. Find out the stealth party was spotted by the enemy? Hunt them [the enemy] down with their own vehicles. Meet a strange new species that doesn’t speak one’s language? Share food and make friends.” (Asher-Perrin, “Can We Talk About Why We *Really* Love Princess Leia?”)

“Watch this…” I say to Matt.

It is the scene where the Stormtroopers approach Han and Leia as they are attempting entry to the outpost.

“Hands up,” the Stormtrooper commands Han, as Leia pulls her legs in trying to hide. Han makes eye contact with Leia, and she smiles as she shows a blaster she has hidden under her cloak.

“I love you,” Han says.

“I know,” Leia returns, just before she turns and blasts the Stormtrooper.

I pause the film.

“Did you ever notice Han freaks when Leia gets shot?” I ask Matt.

“No.”

“Well, he does. When he sees Chewbacca, he says, ‘I need you. The princess has been shot.’ Then he says, ‘No, wait!’ As he makes eye contact with Leia again, he says, ‘I have an idea.’ Meanwhile, Leia is acting like it is a flesh wound. And did you see where Leia homed in more on feminine-like qualities in this episode, showing tears when she tries to persuade Luke not to go after Vader but rather to run away.”

“I think you are seeing way too much into this,” Matt says.

“Maybe. But the tears are just another step in Leia’s evolution. She went from needing rescue and acting tough, to becoming a leader who leads a rescue, to a female who can still shoot but can also shed tears. She shows that you can be tough but also share your emotions. She cares for her friends. And while she knows she can be a leader, she also knows when to defer the leadership role. She is the epitome of the definition of *princess* that I can handle. Maybe the ‘p-word’ doesn’t have to be a bad word in our house after all.”

Defining Leia Feminism

During my viewing of the original *Star Wars* saga and reading the research I found on Leia, I had hope of developing a contrasting definition to Battaglia et al.’s concept of Cinderella Feminism.

Leia is a *hero* without losing her gendered status; she does not have to play the cute, helpless sex kitten or become sexless and androgynous to get what she wants. She can be strong, sassy, outspoken, bossy and bitchy, and still be respected and seen as feminine. (Dominguez 116)

As a result of reading Dominguez’s analysis of Leia and my own analysis of the scenes, actions, and words of Leia, my definition of Leia Feminism has morphed

into “liberated, strong females who demonstrate leadership qualities, fight back against being sexually objectified, stands up for themselves, while balancing between being a bitch and sharing their emotions.”

By the time we left the theater after viewing *The Force Awakens*, I had watched nearly 12 hours of *Star Wars* films, analyzing each Leia clip with more scrutiny than I could have ever imagined. But in re/watching these films from the perspective of needing to accept the word *princess*, I saw what Battagli et al. were trying to illustrate with their concept of Cinderella Feminism, yet I also believe the authors fell short.

Yes, like other girls of my generation, I imagined riding off in a carriage pulled by four white horses with my prince by my side. I also imagined myself as Lady Jane of *G.I. Joe* fame. But until reviewing the *Star Wars* trilogy, I didn't think my daughter would have a “ying” to the princess “yang.” Princess Leia has proved me wrong.

Leia Feminism is being able to speak your mind, take control of the situation, and give orders with authority, but also balances falling in love and showing one's emotions. It is about chasing your dreams while keeping those who matter to you close. Even in *The Force Awakens*, Leia still feels for Han, even though he is the one who left when their son went to the Dark Side. The anguish on her face when she knows Han is dead was deeper than any anguish shown in *A New Hope* or *The Empire Strikes Back*. She takes a moment to grieve and then goes back to work.

I am sure that in the coming years, especially now that we have two girls, princess dresses will wind up in at least one closet. I just hope my girls will understand that it is not the dress that makes the princess, it is the character of the female who does.

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