

Deconstructing Princess Empowerment:

A Discourse Analytic Commentary on Media Representations of Royal Fashion

Royalty, particularly princesses, are currently big news in the UK media and elsewhere. While the media's once-intense fascination with Princess Diana has waned somewhat in the last few years, coverage of recent British royal weddings, births and pregnancies represents a significant resurgence in media representations of 'modern' princesses who are variously presented as, amongst other things, vehicles of nationalist and royalist sentiment and icons of femininity. Of course, images of fairytale princesses as models of 'ideal' femininity are hardly new and a wealth of feminist analyses have detailed the gender norms and values embedded in such figures and their significance in regulating girls' and women's identities, practices and experiences (e.g. Adams, 1986; Heatwole, 2016; Rothchild, 2013, Tatar, 2014). We have, of course, witnessed some notable recent shifts in gender ideologies, not least in the rise of post-feminist celebrations of a seemingly empowered and sexually agentic femininity (e.g. Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004) that is, in many ways, at odds with the values embedded in images of fairytale princesses. Yet princesses, perhaps most notably Disney princesses, remain hugely prominent cultural figures (Bell, 2014), often referencing a 'pseudo medieval... imaginary past' and a nostalgia-oriented set of patriarchal gender norms (Heatwole, 2016: 1; see also Rothchild, 2013, Tatar, 2014). How then should we read the media's recent attention to real-life princesses who are frequently framed explicitly as modern, empowered women?

In this paper we briefly explore how 'modern princesses' are discursively constituted as models of a fashionable *and* ostensibly empowered, modern femininity through an analysis of a recent article, *The Return of the Royals*, published in March 2018 in *Elle* (UK edition), a high circulation women's

fashion magazine (Cartner-Morley, 2018, p.163). Our choice of this particular article is premised not on anything peculiar to it but precisely for the fact that, aside from the level of sartorial detail, it says little about 'modern princesses' or 'modern women' that has not been much-reiterated elsewhere in the British media. In this page-length article of approximately 1200 words the author, Jess Cartner-Morley, discusses what it means to 'dress like a princess', arguing that, contrary to what she implies is popular belief, royal women today are in fact fashion icons whose looks exemplify contemporary female empowerment. Through a close reading of this text from a post-structuralist perspective (Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1972; Sim, 2006), our aim is to deconstruct its arguments, attending to the slippages and instabilities of its apparent meanings so as to explore the gendered power-relations that are articulated and occluded in this discussion of royal wardrobes

The article begins with a now-quite-familiar rhetorical move: staking out the authorial position of a seemingly pro-equality rebel arguing against an apparently established consensus.

NO MODERN, LIBERATED, INDEPENDENT-MINDED, ELLE-READING WOMAN would ever want to dress like a princess. Surely not. The very idea is ridiculous. We grew out of princess dress-up in single figures, when we graduated from party frocks with sashes and frilly socks and started putting trainers on our birthday lists instead. Our female role models don't cut ribbons, they smash glass ceilings. Right?

Wrong. Take a look in the mirror at what the modern, liberated, independent-minded, Elle-reading woman is wearing right now. Because she *is* dressed like a princess even if she doesn't know it. (Capitals and italics in original)

The reader is explicitly constituted here as a 'modern, liberated and independent-minded' woman who will inevitably see 'the very idea' of 'princess dress-up' as childish and 'ridiculous', associating it with an image of outmoded aristocratic women cutting ribbons rather than of modern women

'smash[ing] glass ceilings'. The article thus articulates a distinctly post-feminist stance (see e.g. Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004), assuming that 'we' - or at least Elle-readers - are already 'modern, liberated and independent-minded' women who aspire not to be saved by Prince Charming but to climb career ladders and grab top jobs. Interestingly, then, any notion of royal women engaged in serious pursuits or wielding political and economic power is occluded here by images of princesses as either childish, fairytale fantasy figures or anachronistic ribbon-cutters of little relevance beyond the environs of village fetes and ship launches. In the final paragraph of this article, the Queen is described as 'a formidable example of female leadership' but in the quote above and throughout the article the class privileges, power and serious work of (some) royal women, either historically or today, are largely obscured, rendering 'princesses' and consequently 'princess dress-up' as - until now - irrelevant to modern, liberated women.

The view that 'princess dress-up' is not for empowered women is thus presented in the above quote as both an established consensus and a view with which the article's author takes issue, not because she opposes female empowerment but because, the view is premised, Cartner-Morley argues, on a misunderstanding of 'princess dress-up'. Real princesses, she goes on to inform us, might wear a 'Bill Pashley tweed' or a 'divine Erdem dress ... with the jazzy floral print' rather than the floor-scraping, full-skirted, pink nylon confections accessorised with plastic tiaras and fairy wings that 'we' were (presumably) imagining. Even 'the Queen's signature quilted coat and neatly tied headscarves' can, the author suggests, be found on contemporary couture catwalks. 'Princess dress-up' - even perhaps queen-style dress-up - is thus presented as highly fashionable and as something 'the modern, liberated, independent-minded, Elle-reading woman is wearing right now.'

This alleged salience of royal wardrobes for 'modern, liberated' women is emphasised throughout the article, through a discussion of royal wardrobes that focuses almost-entirely on Kate Middleton

and Meghan Markle (the Queen and Princess Diana being the only other royal women even mentioned). Of course, this might be explained in terms of media coverage of their recent engagements, weddings and childbirths but the omission of other princesses - for instance, Princesses Anne, Eugenie or Beatrice - is also significant in presenting a particular homogenised image that occludes other ways of 'doing' princess that might be seen as less modern or glamorous. Indeed fashionable glamour is central to the article's presentation of royal women as '*modern-day princesses*'. Middleton and Markle are presented as fashionable women who, in being fashionably attractive, have broken with 'royal tradition'. While Queen-style clothing is framed above as on trend for 'SS18', it is repeatedly derided elsewhere in the article as

posh hi-vis. The look is buttoned up for duty rather than dress up for fun. ... Royal dressing used to be everything that fashion wasn't... [until] ... Kate Middleton came along and changed what royals look like.

Middleton's – and, elsewhere in the article, Markle's - style is thus presented as iconoclastic; as *newly* (for royals) fashionable and glamorous. And this newly fashionable appearance is pivotal in defining Middleton and Markle as '*modern princesses*'. 'With a flattering dress and a mid-height heel – she [Middleton] has a very modern understanding of fashion messaging' while 'a world away from the fussy tropes of debutant dressing' ' she [Markle] seldom looks better than in blue jeans and a crisp white shirt.' Through accounts of their clothing the article constitutes these women as *modern princesses* while also providing a set of *de rigueur* guidelines on how to dress like a princess.

Of course, as fashion icons, Middleton and Markle are quite obviously not breaking with 'royal tradition' with its longstanding royal patronage of haute couture. Indeed, even in this same article Cartner-Morley admires the designer fashions worn by 'Diana and the Queen' and argues that contemporary fashion pays 'direct homage to the charms of a young Queen Elizabeth ... in 1958'. Yet, through repeated contrast with 'once attic-dusty royals' belonging to 'an earlier era', the

article also creates a rhetorical wormhole in space-time in which a eulogising of past royal fashions sit alongside a presentation of Middleton's and Markle's current fashionable glamour as a *modern*, radical departure from royal tradition.

It could, no doubt, be argued that the sartorial focus on Middleton's and Markle's wardrobes is inevitable in a fashion magazine. What is nevertheless significant here is the construction of 'princess dress up' as both central to the emergence of 'the modern princess' *and* as a trope for 'modern, liberated, independent-minded' femininity. Intertwined with details of Middleton's and Markle's various outfits, always construed as fashionably glamorous, are portrayals of the modern princess as the epitome of empowered womanhood. Markle, we are told, 'was holding her own on the red carpet long before she met Harry. (Modern-day princesses don't have to wait for a prince to show up to go to the ball.)' An independence that is presented as being expressed through her 'California casual' 'brand of glamour'. Even more explicitly, she is described as 'a self-proclaimed strong, confident, mixed-race woman', 'a proud feminist' and a working woman. She is 'daring', 'decidedly racy' and no 'virginal country mouse from the shires'. Inequalities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and social class are obscured by a neoliberal fantasy in which Markle's entry into the highest tiers of the British aristocracy, with all its elitist class privileges, heteropatriarchalism and Eurocentric (post)colonialist ideology, is, paradoxically, re-presented as a demonstration of female empowerment and an egalitarian status quo.

Modern princesses are thus portrayed as paragons of empowerment and the recurrent emphasis on their clothing works to imply that this empowerment is not only visible in their appearance but, indeed, is synonymous with it. The question that follows the above description of Markle is about what she will 'wear to marry into the British royal family? Now *that* is going to be a fashion moment.' Middleton's choice of 'Sarah Burton to make her wedding dress ... bring[ing] an air of

boldness and daring ... to the excitement of her wedding' - similarly presents fashion (even wedding fashion) and empowerment as interchangeable concepts. Female empowerment is presented here as being authenticated and enacted through women's ability to adhere to the distinctly exclusive aesthetic guidelines set out in the article (see Gill, 2008) such that empowerment appears not as an experience or practice of liberation or even self-expression but as a conformity to a specific set of fashion regulations that allow only certain bodies with the required characteristics and the requisite disposable income to be 'empowered' (see also Arthurs, 2003; Butler, 1990; Gill, 2008; Malson et al., 2011). Indeed, it might be argued that the regulatory power of these guidelines is further amplified by the article's repeatedly referring (as we have also done) to Middleton and Markle by their first names and/or surnames while framing them as 'princesses'. While Middleton is referred to twice as a duchess both she and Markle are presented predominantly as 'princesses', a title which arguably evokes more feminine glamour than the possibly more unattractively staid connotations of 'duchess' and other aristocratic titles. As 'modern-day princesses' 'Kate' and 'Meghan' appear simultaneously as familiar, ordinary women and as (thus emulatable) glamorous fantasies of (modern, empowered) femininity.

Moreover, while Middleton and Markle are explicitly and repeatedly portrayed as breaking with royal traditions - sartorially, economically and/or sexually - the female sexuality that Cartner-Morley (2018) describes is rarely far away from a discussion of marriage and reproduction.

Everyone loves a fairytale nuptial, and Harry and Meghan's has more stardust than most ...

And, as if that weren't excitement enough for the younger generation royals, the season will also see the arrival of baby number three for the Cambridges.

The new sexual freedoms allegedly enjoyed by 'daring' and 'racy' modern princesses appear short-lived; seamlessly transformed into a slightly edgy choice of wedding dress such that heterosexual marriage and motherhood remain central to their seemingly modern and empowered femininity

(see Phoenix et al., 1991; Rudolfsdottir, 2000). Indeed, even the accounts of their 'non-virginal', 'bold' and 'racy' qualities can be read as a typically post-feminist marginalisation of any sexuality that isn't (presented as) actively, enthusiastically and androcentrically heterosexual (see Arthurs, 2003).

What is perhaps even more remarkable (but also perhaps quite predictable) in these re-presentations of heteronormative femininity is an implicit applauding of Kate Middleton for presenting herself so glamorously after having just giving birth. Following directly after the quote above, Cartner-Morley continues:

There is no clearer proof of how seriously the Duchess of Cambridge takes glamour than her willingness to pose on the steps of the Lindo Wing, within hours of giving birth, in high heels and a red-carpet-standard blow-dry of the kind that requires hot brushes and clouds of Elnett.

Middleton's appearance 'within hours of giving birth' is presented as a laudable prioritisation of fashion and glamour over all else, even after the possibly considerable physical and psychological strains of childbirth (e.g. Carter, 2010; Nicolson, 1999). Her 'high heels' and 'red-carpet standard blow-dry' can be seen as integral to the above mentioned 'excitement' of 'the season'. The account thus functions to suggest that women should disregard their health and wellbeing in favour of maintaining a glamorous appearance while also occluding the actual labour of childbirth with the seeming achievement of having a particular look. A peculiarly literal re-presentation of a woman-doing as a woman-appearing (c.f. Berger, 1972) where the actuality of Middleton's work in giving birth is erased by images of her *appearing* glamorous afterwards. Yet 'we' are invited to see these images as images of modern female empowerment: Middleton appears in high heels and a labour-intensive hairstyle *because* she is a modern princess and, as we have argued above, modern princesses are empowered princesses. Indeed, this is, perhaps, a particularly potent deployment of post-feminist notions of modern liberated women where empowerment has come to be

understood not so much in terms of achievements or power to effect change in one's own or others' lives but, rather, in terms of achieving a particular 'empowered' look. While Middleton is lauded for the not-entirely-modern achievements of marrying a prince and giving birth to an heir-to-the throne, she is presented as the epitome of modern female empowerment precisely and, arguably, only because she appears on the hospital step as a glamorous and fashionable rich, white woman with expensive heels and 'perfect' hair.

To conclude, our aim in this paper has been to briefly explore media constructions of 'modern princesses' as highly fashionable *and* as exemplars of modern female empowerment. While Middleton and Markle are celebrated as ostensibly emancipated and empowered women, we have sought to illustrate how, in the article we have chosen to analyse, a post-feminist discourse enables fashionable, glamour to masquerade as empowerment such that heteronormative physical appearance remains integral to femininity (Gill, 2008) much as it has been historically and 'empowerment' is recuperated back into the service of a hetero-patriachally defined femininity that requires an adherence to fashion regulation (and the income to purchase the 'necessary' clothes, hairstylists and so forth), heterosexual marriage, motherhood and a willingness to disregard one's own wellbeing in pursuit of glamour. While this construction of 'the modern princess' differs in some ways from the post-feminist femininities discussed elsewhere (e.g. Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004), it shares in common an image of female empowerment that is shorn of political meaning and repackaged as an aspirational fashion ideal that re-instates a raft of largely unreconstructed traditional gender norms while occluding the inequalities of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and social class it claims to have superseded. The distinction between the 'modern princess' figure of fashionably glamorous female empowerment and the 'ridiculous' outmoded traditional gender ideals signified by frilly 'princess dress-up' begin to appear distinctly tenuous.

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