



Stockholm
University

Department of English

Royal Subjects: Feminist Perspectives on Diary Writing and the
Diary Form in Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* Series

Hanna Liljeqvist
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Supervisor: Marina Ludwigs

Abstract

Meg Cabot's young adult (YA) novel series *The Princess Diaries* (2000-2009) is one of many modern-day examples of attempts to redefine what Western society considers the classic princess narrative: the story of a beautiful princess passively waiting for Prince Charming. As critics such as Kay Stone and Sarah Rothschild emphasize, the fictional princess is traditionally linked to notions of ideal femininity which, in turn, makes princess stories interesting texts from a feminist perspective. Rothschild notes a surge in YA princess novels in recent years, with YA writers such as Cabot aiming to challenge the traditional image of the princess as a passive feminine stereotype in their re-workings of the princess story.

Previous feminist research on *The Princess Diaries* series celebrates the main character Mia as a symbol of third wave feminism and as such, a positive role model for Cabot's predominantly young, female readers. Mia's characteristic Dr Martens boots are frequently cited as an example of how greatly Mia differs from her princess predecessors. However, these critics ignore important changes in Mia's personality over the course of the series. By the end of the series, the Dr Martens-wearing heroine introduced in the first book has replaced her combat boots with high heels. In my thesis, I will argue that Mia's transformation in terms of appearance and preoccupation with mainstream fashion, from quirky outsider to stereotype girly girl, complicates the idea of *The Princess Diaries* series as feminist texts.

Moreover, previous feminist research largely ignores diary writing's prominent role in the series, and the ways in which the diary format influences the reader-narrator relationship in the novels. In my feminist reading of *The Princess Diaries* series, I therefore use Mia's diary writing and the diary format of the series as my starting points. I argue that while Mia's diary writing is portrayed as empowering, and thereby inspiring, the diary format as a narrative structure creates a rather ambiguous tone and effect; questioning but simultaneously conforming to traditional, restricting notions of femininity.

Keywords: The Princess Diaries series; Meg Cabot; Feminism; The princess character; Diaries; Diary writing; YA fiction

The princess is dead. The success of recent Disney princess films such as *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) suggests that the passive, pretty creature the word ‘princess’ evokes is giving way to a different kind of royal heroine; the kind who refuses to have her life staked out for her and who does not consider Prince Charming a top priority. As Sarah Rothschild notes in *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*, this development is neither restricted to the screen nor to a child audience, as the late 1990’s marked the beginning of an on-going surge in YA novels featuring princess characters (169). Rothschild refers to these as “third wave princess stories” (171), comparing them to second wave princess stories, many of which she describes as “alienating in their dogmatic feminism” (92). In contrast, third wave feminist princess stories “conceived as they were in a society where the goals of second wave feminism were largely realized, strive to combine adventures of smart, independent heroines with a hint of romance” (Rothschild 170). Mia Thermopolis, the protagonist of Meg Cabot’s popular YA novel series *The Princess Diaries*¹, is mentioned as an example of the third wave feminist princesses who, according to Rothschild, reflect how writers like Cabot redefine the conventional princess character, “intentionally attempting to offer princesses as strong, positive role models for modern girls” (214). In this manner, their royal charm is used for good.

Other feminist critics are less optimistic about the possibility to redefine the princess character. In *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, Susan Sellers claims that “[t]he pattern is too entrenched for an insurgent princess to be anything other than an exception which proves the rule” (25). In her article “Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the 20th Century Princess Narrative”, Bridget Whelan goes even further as she questions whether the princess narrative can ever “be

¹Here and throughout my thesis, I use the phrase *The Princess Diaries* series to refer to the 10 novels and 4 novellas in the series which are aimed at young adults. I do not include the first adult instalment of the series, *Royal Wedding* (2015), as my primary focus here is YA texts.

reformed, so to speak, and is this a desirable reformation?” (178). Whelan partly answers her own question by underlining the success of the Disney Princess franchise, convinced that “[a]ll that can be certain is that so long as there is a market for the ever evolving princess narrative, Disney will continue to sell it” (186). What is more, the success of *The Princess Diaries* series indicates that the third wave YA princess story is equally marketable. Today, *The Princess Diaries* series includes ten novels and four novellas, a sequel aimed at adults, three handbooks, a spin-off series for middle school readers as well as, ironically, two Disney films based on the novels. The princess is dead, long live the princess.

As Rothschild points out, the princess story is especially interesting from a feminist perspective as it always “reflects, reinforces, or resists the culture’s changing meanings of femininity” (3). In a feminist reading of *The Princess Diaries* and Mia as a princess character, the Disney princess is a crucial starting point since this is the “version of the princess narrative which has wormed its way into the psyche of the American public” (Whelan 175). Here, ‘American’ could be replaced with ‘Western’, as Disney’s powerful hold over the princess narrative undoubtedly extends far beyond U.S. borders. Whelan describes the princess character in Western culture as “rigidly bound to concepts like dutifulness, self-sacrifice and subservience to males” thanks to Disney (176). Of course, Western beauty standards could also be added to the list of typical Disney princess characteristics.

How, then, does Mia fare in comparison to the typical Disney princess? At first glance, Mia is in several ways a royal Disney stereotype since she is white, heterosexual, non-disabled and skinny. However, what Imelda Whelehan in her article “Teening Chick Lit?” refers to as Mia’s “non-fairytale conception” is the first hint that her story does not fit neatly into the Disney princess narrative. As the result of her parents’ brief love affair, Mia grows up with her mother in New York and visits her father in the summers. These visits take place in the fictional European principality Genovia, under the pretence that Mia’s father is a Genovian politician. Her parents’ plan to keep Mia’s royal heritage a secret is ruined when her father is diagnosed with cancer, the subsequent chemotherapy leaving him sterile. With Mia as his sole heir, her father is forced to reveal that she is a princess and her grandmother is flown in from Genovia in order to prepare Mia for her future as the ruler of Genovia. These preparations mainly consist of what her grandmother refers to as ‘princess lessons’, teaching Mia how to walk, talk and, of course, dress like a princess.

To her grandmother's surprise, Mia is far from thrilled to learn she is a princess. Mia links this to her attitude towards "girly stuff": "I guess some girls might like it, but not me. I've never been good at girly stuff, you know, like putting on makeup and wearing panty hose and stuff" (*Princess Diaries* 38). Despite Mia's initial indifference to fashion, *The Princess Diaries* novels are labelled chick lit jr. or teen chick lit by many critics. As Joanna Webb Johnson explains in "Chick Lit Jr.: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens", chick lit and chick lit jr. not only "embrace, or at least acknowledge, the power of consumer culture" but also "affirm flawed women ... and give lessons in negotiating relationships" (142). Whelehan claims that both of these aspects are evident in Mia's development from girl in overalls to fashion-conscious young woman, describing Mia as "the true 'postmodern' third wave feminist style young woman who celebrates her contradictions" ("Teening Chick Lit?"): Mia is smart, yet stylish, and though a self-proclaimed feminist, she enjoys the Broadway musical *Beauty and the Beast* despite "Walt Disney and his misogynistic undertones" (Cabot, *Princess Diaries* 28). However, as I will demonstrate, what begins as a seeming celebration of contradictions has by the end of the series become more of a predictable promoting of stereotype femininity.

Rather, I will argue that from a feminist perspective, the most interesting aspect of *The Princess Diaries* series is its focus on diary writing both in terms of plot and narrative structure. Written in the form of diaries, *The Princess Diaries* novels portray a heroine characterized not only by her princesshood, but also by her obsessive diary writing. From a feminist point of view, these are crucial aspects to consider since the diary has long been dismissed as a typically feminine form of writing, insignificant women's writing. In *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, Sara K. Day also points out that the diary "has come to be closely associated with adolescent womanhood in contemporary American culture" (144). She observes that "popular culture frequently represents young women writing furiously in pink notebooks" (Day 145). On the surface, then, *The Princess Diaries* series may seem like a conventional combination of two stereotype notions of femininity: the pretty princess and the teenage girl pouring her heart out in her secret pink notebook.

However, Cabot's portrayal of a diary writing princess underlines the empowering potential of diary writing in young women's lives by emphasizing the

beneficial effects of diary writing in Mia's life. Moreover, I will draw attention to how Mia's diary writing can be seen as unconventional and empowering, thereby challenging women's diary writing's negative connotations as limited and limiting. At the same time, I argue that the diary as narrative *form* complicates the reader-narrator relationship in ways that question the idea of *The Princess Diaries* series as feminist texts. Consequently, my reading sheds new light on the idea of Mia as a feminist role model by examining the diary's double position as an important part of the protagonist's life and narrative format in these texts. Furthermore, I hope to add to previous research on *The Princess Diaries* by moving away from its tendency to focus either on Mia's princesshood (as Rothschild and Isbister do) or her diary writing (Day). Instead, I argue that Mia's identity as a princess and Mia's diary writing are equally important and intertwined factors when analysing *The Princess Diaries* series from a feminist perspective. Mia is not simply a princess who happens to keep a diary, or a diarist who happens to be a princess – instead, her princesshood serves as a magnifying glass, exaggerating and thereby illuminating issues closely associated with women's diary writing and with notions of femininity, the latter specifically brought to the surface by the diary form as narrative structure.

The main body of my thesis is divided into two sections titled "Diary Writing" and "Diary Reading". In the first section, "Diary Writing", I begin with a theoretical discussion of women's diary writing before moving on to the diary's functions in Mia's life, focusing on how Mia's diary serves as an empowering space in her life. I demonstrate that it offers her a much-needed sense of privacy and control, as well as the possibility to grow more self-confident through introspection. Moreover, I will demonstrate how her diary writing enables her to develop as a writer. The starting point in my discussion in "Diary Writing" is the assumption that these functions of diary writing are made all the more important in Mia's life because of her princesshood, as her new life as a princess involves severe restrictions in terms of her private life and sense of control over her everyday life, not to mention over her future. In addition, I explore how Mia's use of her diary subverts stereotype notions of women's diary writing as restricted, interrupted, trivial. In contrast, the diary is associated with positive qualities and functions in *The Princess Diaries* series which, in turn, may inspire the reader to keep a diary of her own. Here, I argue, lies the potentially empowering effect of *The Princess Diaries* novels.

After a brief discussion of why Mia stops keeping a diary, I move on to the second section, “Diary Reading”. In this section, I examine the diary form from different approaches concerned with the relationship between reader and narrator and, in particular, Mia’s role as narrator. The three main questions discussed are: What are the implications of first-person narration in YA princess fiction? How can Mia’s unreliability as a narrator, typical of the diary novel, be understood in a feminist reading of the series? And lastly, how are Mia’s diaries used to question and, later, convey ‘princess lessons’ on femininity and consumer culture in the spirit of chick lit? My analysis of changes in Mia’s tone and in her views on appearance suggests that as a narrator, Mia ultimately delivers the very same old-fashioned princess lessons on beauty and femininity she is reluctantly subjected to in the earlier novels.

Diary Writing

The empowering, subversive aspects of Mia’s diary writing become most evident when contrasted to the conventional structures Cabot makes use of in order to create texts resembling real-life diaries. Firstly, the detailed subheadings defining the time and place of the diary entries (or chapters) immediately signal that we are dealing with diaries. Throughout the series, Mia diligently begins every entry with a specification of time and/or place (most often both) such as “Thursday, October 2, Ladies’ Room at the Plaza Hotel” and “Later on Thursday, Penguin House, Central Park Zoo” (*Princess Diaries* 26; 33). In a princess story context, the contrast between these subheadings and the classic fairy tale ‘once upon a time...’ formula is a first hint that this particular princess narrative goes beyond the traditional fairy tale recipe. As Elisabeth Rose Gruner comments in her article “Telling Old Tales Newly” where *The Princess Diaries* is one of the three YA texts discussed, this “up-to-the-minute topicality” is also typical of YA novels in general (5). Another typical YA aspect of *The Princess Diaries* series, closely linked to the diary form, is the first-person narration employed.

However, the most important way in which *The Princess Diaries* series conforms to diary conventions is its relative lack of explicit references to an intended reader other than Mia. Though it could be claimed, as Sarah Gristwood argues in *Recording Angels: The Secret World of Women’s Diaries*, that the private diary always is “public in the sense of the deliberate preservation and possibly publication

of the diary” (95), the fact that Mia never expresses a wish to have her diaries published creates the illusion of a typically private diary, a text intended for private eyes only. The idea of Mia’s diaries as private, and intended to stay private, is further strengthened by the reason Mia begins to keep a diary at all. Mia’s mother, worried about her daughter’s apparent inability to express her feelings, prescribes diary writing as a cure: “Then she [Mia’s mother] hands me this book. She tells me she wants me to write down my feelings in this book, since, she says, I obviously don’t feel I can talk about them with her” (*Princess Diaries* 1). While Day claims that Mia “frequently signals a more general, implicit understanding of a potential reader” (154) – mainly through detailed descriptions of characters and settings familiar to her, but occasionally also through rhetorical questions aimed at an unspecified ‘you’ – this, then, is likely to be evidence of the writer’s wish to make the narrative engaging and intelligible rather than the protagonist’s wish to have her diaries published.

Depicting Mia’s diaries as private texts intended for her own eyes only, *The Princess Diaries* series reflects the tendency to gender the diary as private and feminine as opposed to the public, masculine journal; a gendered convention mirrored in the use of ‘Diaries’ rather than ‘Journals’ in the title of the series. In *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin*, Elizabeth Podnieks traces this distinction back to the early nineteenth century, where “‘journal’ became associated with men and public value, and ‘diary’ devalued as domestic and feminine” (57). This, in turn, reveals a hierarchical attitude towards diary writing, where women’s diaries “have suffered the fate of being gendered ‘feminine’ and thus of less historical, cultural, and literary value than ‘masculine’ works” (Podnieks 50). Yet, despite these negative connotations, diary writing is still a popular activity among women, likely to a certain extent because of the heavy marketing of diary writing as suitable for women: “women buy and read more diaries than men, blank diaries in stores are marketed for women, more adolescent girls receive books than boys” (Podnieks 47). Why, one might ask, is diary keeping to such an extent still seen as feminine writing, dismissed as women’s writing?

The labelling of diary writing as women’s writing is closely tied to the idea of diary writing as a harmless form of written expression; seemingly powerless because of its fragmented structure, trivial subject matter and generally non-existent audience. In her article “When Narratives Meet: Archival Description, Provenance, and

Women's Diaries", Heather Beattie describes how diary writing for centuries was considered a socially acceptable way for women to express "their creativity when other forms, such as writing a novel or play, would have been considered presumptuous and inappropriate" (85). In "Engendered Autobiographies: The Diary as a Feminine Form", Rebecca Hogan notes a similar gendered distinction between supposedly feminine and masculine forms of writing within contemporary autobiography studies:

A number of current critics of autobiography have suggested that the diary – fragmentary, constructed by associative rather than logical connections, concentrating on the everyday ... lacking a sense of the architectonics of shape or plot, non-teleological – is somehow *feminine*; while the autobiography – finished, polished, carefully constructed, providing a shaped image of existence seen from the teleological perspective of the end of a life – is somehow *masculine*.
(R. Hogan 96)

Moreover, Hogan draws attention to how the typical emphasis on details gives the diary "a structure and perspective which have been culturally and historically seen as feminine" (99). The idea of emphasis on details as a key feature of diary writing also points to the fact that diary writing has been, and in many ways still is, dismissed as feminine because of its typical subject matter. As Day points out "[t]he privileging of privacy ... marks the diary as feminine, as the details recorded in the typical diary extend beyond the day-to-day realities of life to include emotions, memories, and concerns that are culturally linked to women" (147). Similarly, in the foreword to *Revelations: Diaries of Women*, Mary Jane Moffat suggests that the diary is "an important outlet for women partly because it is an analogue to their lives: emotional, fragmentary, interrupted, modest, not to be taken seriously, private, restricted, daily, trivial, formless, concerned with self, as endless as their tasks" (5). In this sense, women's diaries have suffered the same fate as their authors, having been dismissed as inferior and insignificant for centuries.

With these predominantly negative connotations of women's diary writing in mind, why write YA fiction – a form of writing already dismissed by many as insignificant or uninteresting because of its young reading audience – in the form of diary novels? In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, Maria Nikolajeva claims that children's and YA fiction often exploits the diary form by using it seemingly "without motivation, more like a tribute to a popular tradition" (125). From a marketing point of view, it is worth noting that diary novels provide

excellent opportunities to increase sales, as the continuity associated with the diary form facilitates turning a successful diary novel into a *series* of diary novels. Notable examples of this within contemporary children's and YA fiction are, besides *The Princess Diaries*, Rachel Renée Russell's *Dork Diaries* series, Louise Rennison's *Confessions of Georgia Nicolson* series and Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. However, as I will demonstrate, the diary form is not used as an empty "tribute to a popular tradition" in *The Princess Diaries* series. On the contrary, the diary form is repeatedly highlighted in *The Princess Diaries* novels by the protagonist-narrator, who frequently discusses the circumstances of her own diary writing: When and where is she writing a particular diary entry? Why does she turn to her diary at this particular point in the novel? What is more, Mia's diary writing is portrayed as beneficial in a number of both concrete and abstract ways, ranging from offering her temporary escape from her busy everyday life as a princess, to helping her tap into her inner strength.

An important starting point here is the link between writing and agency emphasized by feminist critics such as Roberta Seelinger Trites. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, Trites explains writing's central role in feminist children's and YA fiction: "Because writing and re-visioning have so much potential to help people understand their agency, quite a few feminist children's novels explore what it means for children to write" (Trites 63). Discussing a selection of feminist children's and YA novels featuring young, writing protagonists, Trites describes how "[t]hrough language and in writing, they accept their own subjectivities, gaining a voice and rejecting the silencing that their cultures seem to expect of them" (76). In my reading of *The Princess Diaries* series, Mia's diaries not only trace, but also directly contribute to a similar development in Mia's life.

In this manner, *The Princess Diaries* series encourages its young, female readers to turn to diary writing and discover the beneficial effects it can have in their own lives. Nikolajeva points out that most scholars consider the diary form "a good way to imitate children's manner of writing, and that this is why young readers appreciate reading novels in diary form" (*Children's Literature Comes of Age*, 103). Nikolajeva herself takes a contrary position: "I believe it is the other way round – that in writing diaries or journals children intuitively or consciously use the unwritten rules they have learned from children's books in diary form: for instance, the formula 'Dear diary.'" (103). Nikolajeva's interesting point on the element of imitation in

children's diary writing can be taken a step further: If reading novels written in diary form influences children and adolescents' diary writing style, may it not also serve to inspire them to keep diaries in the first place? Interactive children's and YA handbooks on diary writing tied in with diary novel series – *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book* (2008), *Dork Diaries: How to Dork Your Diary* (2011) – suggest that this assumption is supported by the children's books industry.

With this in mind, *The Princess Diaries* become especially inspiring YA diary novels in that the diary form serves a multitude of purposes in the protagonist's life, as will be discussed in following paragraphs. What is more, Mia's explanations of her reasons for keeping a diary add to the inspiring potential of these novels. Typically, Mia describes her diary writing in terms of coping with difficult situations or emotions: "Okay, maybe if I write it all down in a lucid manner, I'll be able to process it" (*Party* 211). On other occasions, her diary writing has nostalgic motives: "I was so happy, I HAD to write it down, so I would never forget how it felt" (*In Waiting* 222). In this manner, the potentially positive effects of diary writing in adolescents' lives are repeatedly underlined by Mia's explanations of the roles diary writing serve in her life. Moreover, diary writing is not only implicitly encouraged in *The Princess Diaries* novels, but also more explicitly promoted in the spin-off text *Princess Lessons*; an ostensibly tongue-in-cheek, yet predictably normative handbook on everything from eyebrow-shaping to table manners. After extensive information structured under the headings Beauty, Etiquette, Fashion, Character, Education, The Mysterious World of Guys, the book concludes with an illustration of a diary: a notebook with a lock, and the writing "MY DIARY" and "PRIVATE" on the cover (*Princess Lessons* 129). The following words are written above the diary illustration:

THE END

or possibly,
The Beginning? (*Princess Lessons* 129)

As I will demonstrate under the subheadings "A Diary of One's Own: The Diary as a Private, Empowering Space" and "In Charge: The Diary as a Site of Introspection, Control and Creativity", *The Princess Diaries* novels are inspiring in their emphasis on how diary writing can function as a new "beginning", resulting in positive long and short term effects within a number of significant areas of Mia's life.

A Diary of One's Own: The Diary as a Private, Empowering Space

The diary's connotation of privacy in modern-day society raises an interesting question from a feminist point of view: Is the notion of a text intended to be read by no one other than its author a positive or negative aspect of diary writing? In other words, can the harmlessness of the private narrative be seen as harmful? Podnieks underlines the ambiguity of women's diaries in her description of them as "silent text", discussing how they "paradoxically comply with and challenge the silence prescribed for respectable feminine conduct" (46-7). The potential dangers of relying too heavily on diary writing as an emotional outlet is addressed in *Princess in Training*, where Mia is taken to the nurse's office after a nervous breakdown. The nurse encourages Mia to "VERBALIZE your feelings" instead of pouring them all out onto the pages of her diary, warning her that "[t]he more you keep it buried inside, the more something like what happened today is going to happen" (*In Training* 160). The limited scope of the diary, the nurse's words imply, makes it restricting, destructive.

However, in Joan W. Blos's discussion of diary writing in "PRIVAT (sic) KEEP OUT: The Diary as Secret Space", diary writing becomes an empowering "withdrawal to a somewhere that is wholly one's own, that no one else can enter" (243-4). Therefore, Blos suggests, "retiring to write *of* one's self and *for* one's self may be the reciprocal of reading's escapist value" (239) – an interesting simile in a feminist context as it brings Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance* to mind. In her by now classic study of romance reading women, the women interviewed by Radway describe their romance reading in terms of escape from everyday life: "Not only is it a relaxing release from the tension produced by daily problems and responsibilities, but it creates a time or space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires, and pleasure" (61). In this way, (romance) reading is similar to diary writing in that the reader or writer establishes important boundaries between themselves and the demands of everyday life through the act of reading or writing. More specifically addressing adolescents and the idea of the diary as space, Karein. K. Goertz writes about "[t]he typical teenager's need to salvage a private space for herself" in her article "Writing from the Secret Annex: The Case of Anne Frank" (255). Discussing Anne Frank's diary writing, Goertz describes how Frank "carves out a private, secret space for herself through writing" (255): "As with most diaries, hers functions as a place of refuge, a safe niche in which to

construct and explore her various, but carefully hidden, selves” (Goertz 255). In this manner, both Blos and Goertz’s depictions of the diary as a space – and not just any space, but a space with empowering potential – subvert the idea of diary writing as limited and limiting.

The limitations typically associated with women’s diary writing are even reflected in the format of the store-bought diary. In her article “Textual Boundaries: Space in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Manuscript Diaries”, Cynthia A. Huff describes a diary her five-year old daughter Alyssa receives for her birthday, noting the “special line for the date at the top” of each page and the “spaces for the diarist’s name, who gave her the journal, and the starting date of the record, as well as for favorite amusements, friends, animals, and food” (123). From this, Huff draws the conclusion that “[c]ultural directives shape the space of Alyssa’s diary”, linking this to the notion of space as “socially and culturally constructed” (123). Approaching the issue from a historical perspective, Huff notices similarities between her daughter’s diary and the 16th century diary of Lady Marianne Brougham:

[...] Brougham’s first diary is commercially printed with predetermined spaces on the verso page for observations and memoranda and sections for amounts received and for money paid or lent [...] The year, the month, the week, the number of days within the month, and the month’s place within the year are printed at the top of each of the printed diary’s pages. (Huff 125)

Just like Alyssa, Lady Brougham is thus “controlled in her self-expression by the tightly determined spatial format” (Huff 125). Associating this control with both class and gender, Huff argues that “[t]he spatial orderings of her printed volume teach Lady Brougham her proper place within the social order” (126). However, Huff notes that Brougham eventually abandons the strict, predetermined diary writing format for a style more in synch “with her own rhythms”; “A single day can produce several entries while another might yield none” (Huff 127). Though a seemingly slight change, the links between space and social or cultural norms emphasized by Huff speak to its significance.

In Mia’s case, her diary writing becomes a similarly subtle defying of the cultural scripts of women’s diary writing and, by extension, of women’s lives, as she dismisses the store-bought diary in favour of the “Mead wide-ruled composition notebook with a black marbled cover” (Cabot, *Party* 147). “Is there”, Huff asks, “a very different textual import when a diarist chooses a printed volume from when she

either constructs her own diary or inscribes the blank page?” (124). Mia’s use of her diary suggests there is, as the number of diary entries she writes per day varies greatly and she is in the habit of including textual elements other than regular diary entries in her diaries: to-do lists, notes from friends, reminders of homework assignments and miscellaneous writing such as “LILLY MOSCOVITZ’S LIST OF HOTTEST GUYS (compiled during World Civ, with commentary by Mia Thermopolis)” (*Princess Diaries* 9). With Huff’s description of textual space as “socially and culturally constructed” in mind, Mia’s diary writing habits become subversive as they frequently exceed the “tightly determined spatial format” Huff associates with the store-bought diary.

Interestingly, the form of control the latter type of diary seems to impose upon its writer can also find its way into seemingly freer forms of diary writing. In “Chick Lit: A Postfeminist Fairy tale”, Georgina C. Isbister describes how Bridget in Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) “records her daily vices, weight measurements, number of cigarettes, alcohol units and self-help mantras performed.” As Isbister points out, Bridget’s obsessive records of every single cigarette and calorie she consumes create a Foucauldian sense of “self-monitoring” (“Chick Lit”). In contrast, Mia’s diary writing is limited neither by her diary’s format nor by Bridget’s form of “self-monitoring”, thus subtly challenging the gendered restrictions reflected in the diary writing practices, both authentic and fictive, discussed above. An interesting passage illustrating this is the confiscation of Mia’s diary in *Princess Mia*, where Mia’s principal confiscates her diary and Mia immediately proceeds to write diary entries in her Chemistry notebook instead (*Mia* 170). Aside from illustrating how important diary writing is to Mia, this scene also has a subversive undertone in its portrayal of a young girl claiming *space* for herself and her diary writing, rather than having it dictated for her by either store-bought diaries or principals.

As mentioned in my discussion of Blos and Goertz, diary writing not only involves the possibility to exceed limits, but also to establish boundaries between oneself and the outside world. In *The Princess Diaries* series, the empowering potential of diary writing in terms of establishing boundaries is magnified by Mia’s princesshood, as her new life as a princess involves a considerable loss of privacy and control over her everyday life. At fourteen, Mia learns that she is her father’s sole heir, destined to one day rule Genovia. In terms of age, the timing here is interesting since, as Kay Stone observes in *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, “it is at puberty

that Rapunzel is locked in a tower, Snow White is sent out to be murdered, and Sleeping Beauty is put to sleep” (19). As Stone notes, this is significant from a feminist perspective since it means that these “heroines have their freedom severely restricted at a time in life when heroes are discovering full independence and increased power” (19). In an illustrating scene in the first novel of the series, Mia describes the aftermath of a newspaper article revealing her royal heritage: “When Lars and I walked out of Albert Einstein [Mia’s school] after my review session there were reporters all over the place. [...] It was just like I was a murderer, or a celebrity, or something” (*Princess Diaries* 162). This scene demonstrates two important aspects of how and why Mia’s privacy is restricted by her princesshood. Firstly, Lars is the bodyguard her father assigns her when her heritage is revealed: “So basically, I am never going anywhere alone again” (*Princess Diaries* 164). Secondly, as Mia will learn, the reporters are now a regular feature in her life which, in turn, is one of the main reasons she now needs Lars to accompany her whenever she steps out the door.

In the last novel of the series, *Forever Princess*, Mia bitterly comments on her lack of privacy in an interview. The reporter gushes over Mia’s material benefits as a royal: “So you’ll always have the tiara, the limos, the palace, the beautiful ball gowns...”, to which Mia replies “... And the bodyguards, the paparazzi, no private life, people like you hounding me” (*Forever* 2). In a media-crazed society obsessed with anything remotely resembling a celebrity, Mia’s tiara comes at the price of privacy or, to return to the issue of limits/boundaries, at the price of personal boundaries. In addition to having to put up with bodyguards and paparazzi, Mia is also forced to attend princess lessons: “I have to go straight from my Algebra review session every day to princess lessons at the Plaza with my grandmother” (*Princess Diaries* 84). The princess lessons consequently become yet another way in which Mia’s life is restricted by her princesshood; mainly by robbing her of much of her free time, thus limiting her in a quite literal sense. The princess lessons also constitute another example of boundary-crossing, as Mia’s grandmother stops at nothing in her quest to transform Mia into a perfect princess, prying into Mia’s love life and submitting her to involuntary make-over sessions. In this manner, the presence of her bodyguard, the paparazzi and her grandmother in her life means that Mia’s physical and mental personal space frequently is restricted or invaded. For these reasons, the diary with its potential to both exceed limits and establish boundaries becomes especially important, not to say essential, to a character in Mia’s unusual situation.

Mia's increased need to create private space for herself is reflected in a slight, but important change in Mia's diary writing habits upon learning she is a princess. Before Mia finds out she is a princess, she writes in her diary at home and sometimes during classes. When her father breaks the news that he is the Crown Prince of Genovia, Mia brings her diary to the ladies' room to gather her thoughts (*Princess Diaries* 26), thus marking her first diary entry not written at home or during class. When Mia returns from the bathroom, she learns the even bigger news that she is her father's sole heir and will inherit the throne. Mia breaks down in tears and runs to the Penguin House at the Central Park Zoo, where she writes her second non-home, non-class diary entry: "I'm so freaked out I can barely write, plus people keep bumping my elbow, and it's dark in here, but whatever. I have to get this down exactly the way it happened" (*Princess Diaries* 33). And so begins Mia's habit of writing in her diary regardless of time, place or company as she from now on writes in her diary whenever she feels the need to; most notably in bathrooms, but also when surrounded by her friends at lunch breaks, during her princess lessons and at one point even in the middle of the crowded kitchen of a Chinese restaurant as indicated by the diary heading "Tuesday, September 7, kitchen of number One Noodle Son" (*On the Brink* 39). Mia's friends and family grow accustomed to the fact that her "head is always buried in that journal" (*In Waiting* 224), and even characters who barely know her notice it: "'Is that what it is?' J.P. said. 'I always kinda wondered.' Then, when I threw him a questioning look, he went, 'Well, every time I see you, you've got your nose buried in that notebook.'" (*Party* 146-7). In this sense, Mia's unconventional diary writing habits subvert the idea of diary writing as an activity to be enjoyed in private.

This, in turn, points to the notion of women's diary writing as fragmentary, interrupted. In Moffat's list of qualities associated with women's lives and women's diaries mentioned earlier, "interrupted" is listed as one of the key features which makes women's diaries "an analogue to their lives" (5). Similarly, Anna Makkonen notes that "[m]any feminist critics ... have drawn attention to the unshaped and fragmentary nature of the diary. Women's lives are full of interruptions, the argument goes, hence the fragmentation of women's diaries" (419). Both Moffat and Makkonen's words reflect how women's diary writing generally is considered secondary to the demands of everyday life and other people's needs. This can be linked to the fact that privacy in modern-day society is so closely associated with

diary writing as to make “the expectation of privacy ... characteristic” (Blos 239). Therefore, it could be argued that the fragmentary character of women’s diary writing is both an effect and reflection of the fact that women often are hard pressed to find a moment alone when they can focus on their diary writing. As discussed above, this issue is exaggerated in Mia’s case, since being a princess means hardly ever being alone. With the idea of women’s diary writing as fragmentary and interrupted in mind, Mia’s use of her diary becomes highly subversive. As mentioned earlier, Day writes about how “popular culture frequently represents young women writing furiously in pink notebooks that are then stashed under mattresses or in underwear drawers in the hopes of being kept secret from the prying eyes of parents and siblings” (145). In contrast, in her unconventional diary writing habits, Mia redefines not only the idea of women’s diary writing as interrupted, but also the link between privacy and women’s diary writing by using her diary writing to create a private breathing-space for herself whenever she pleases. Rather than having her diary writing interrupted by the demands of the outside world, Mia *interrupts* daily life to turn to her diary; thus creating a portable, private room of her own.

The notion of ‘a portable room of her own’ is, of course, inspired by Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and her classic statement that “it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry” (89). In a diary context, the emphasis on having a room “with a lock on the door” can be compared to how the diary writer, as the sole occupant of this private space, controls the access to her diary/room. In *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, Wendy Gan describes British twentieth-century women’s attempts to claim privacy, stressing that they were “wary of replicating an isolationist version of masculine privacy best represented by the man’s study” (17). Instead, they preferred “the generic room” since it “as opposed to the study, was a space and concept that could encompass both privacy and community for women as long as they controlled access to the room” (Gan 17). Mia’s portable room involves a similarly flexible boundary between privacy and the outside world, demonstrated by the frequent inclusions of written conversations between Mia and her friends. These conversations recur throughout the novels and are most often presented in the form of notes passed back and forth during classes – or written directly on the pages of Mia’s diary? This is never explained – but also conveyed as emails and texts. By including the voices of Mia’s friends in this direct way in the narrative, Cabot’s

use of the diary form reflects “the flexibility of the [female] room” as opposed to the masculine “exclusivity” Gan associates with the study (42). In this sense, the access to Mia’s diary is portrayed as a door rather than an inflexible (masculine) wall; a door that can be kept open, closed or half-closed to the outside world according to her liking.

Moreover, the inclusion of these conversations hints at a sense of community outside the privacy of the diary, setting Mia apart from her princess predecessors. As Rothschild points out, this is a typical and significant feature of the modern YA princess novel (189). For Mia’s withdrawals to her diary are voluntary and temporary, which can be compared to the long spells of forced isolation brought upon princesses such as Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White by evil fairies and wicked stepmothers. As all of Mia’s close friends are female, these dialogues also challenge the theme of female rivalry which typically characterizes classic princess stories: Snow White’s stepmother’s attempts to murder her, the fairy’s curse on Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella’s step-sisters’ many evil schemes. It is also worth noting that in contrast to these princess stories, where the ‘bad’ woman inevitably is punished while the ‘good’ princess is rewarded, Lana, Mia’s nemesis throughout most of the series, eventually becomes one of her closest friends. The notes and other evidence of conversations scattered throughout Mia’s diaries thus mirror the novels’ overall promotion of sisterhood over female rivalry.

Interestingly, the diary also functions as an empowering site of sisterhood in a subplot with far-reaching consequences for Genovia in the second last novel, *Princess Mia*. During a visit to the royal Genovian archives, Mia finds the diary of her ancestor Amelie, a Genovian princess who ruled for only twelve days before she died of the plague in 1669, aged sixteen (*Mia* 152). The archivist explains to Mia that they “started on a translation, only to discover they did not turn out to be twelve particularly, er, important days of Genovian history. Just from a glance at the first few pages, one can see that the princess does seem to write quite a bit about missing her cat” (*Mia* 154). As Elizabeth Hampsten puts it in her foreword to *Read This Only to Yourself*: “How many times has someone said that writings of a particular woman had no historical value because they were merely about daily events?” (xi). However, as an avid diarist herself, Mia feels an immediate kinship with her predecessor and insists on reading her diary – an act that indirectly will prove to change the future of Genovia. In this subplot, the diary consequently becomes a vital link between Amelie

and Mia, suggesting an empowering sense of sisterhood across space and time, enabled by the diary.

Moreover, the fact that Mia's discovery of Amelie's diary leads to historical changes in Genovia's constitution warns against underestimating supposedly trivial women's diaries. Thanks to clues given in the diary, Mia finds a letter written by Amelie shortly before her death, granting the people of Genovia the right to elect their head of state (*Mia* 233). Mia is shocked to learn that the Genovian parliament ignored their princess's dying wish and puts it down to age and gender discrimination: "I can only assume they ignored it because they all figured, what could a sixteen-year-old girl have to say?" (186). Determined to finally honour Amelie's wish, Mia tells her father and grandmother about the letter but to her surprise, they decide not to inform the present parliament. An outraged Mia points out the (anti-)feminist implications of their decision: "If this had been written by one of our MALE ancestors ... you'd totally have presented it to parliament when they meet in session next month" (237). Eventually, Mia stages a coup, making Amelie's letter public and the principality of Genovia a republic – all thanks to a teenage girl's diary.

In Charge: The Diary as a Site of Introspection, Control and Creativity

Sisterhood aside, Mia's diary is however mainly depicted as a private space; the secret setting of Mia's transformation from insecure to relatively self-confident. As mentioned earlier, Mia's mother gives Mia her first diary, in the hopes that it will give Mia an outlet for the thoughts and emotions she is unable to articulate. Mia's evident need for this type of outlet is demonstrated by "the immediacy with which Mia embraces the diary", as she from day one writes several diary entries a day and brings her diary everywhere (Day 153). By the end of the first novel, Mia has gone from being shy and insecure to being able to confront the most popular boy in school in public. Describing the confrontation, Mia writes: "If it hadn't turned out that I'm a princess, maybe I might still be all that stuff. You know unassertive, fearful of confrontation, an internalizer. I probably wouldn't have done what I did next" (*Princess Diaries* 215). While Mia credits her transformation to her new identity as a princess, it could be argued that her diary writing indirectly is a decisive factor in her transformation, since the revelation of her royal heritage forces her to rely on her diary to a greater extent than before.

Determined to keep her princesshood a secret for as long as possible, Mia's attempt at a secret double life – high school student by day, princess by night – alienates her from her friends, and especially from her best friend Lilly. In her article “Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason”, Gayle R. Davis describes how the diary for many frontier women became “the lonely author's substitute for personal contact” (8), just as in the first novel of *The Princess Diaries* series, Mia's diary often becomes Mia's substitute for company. Moreover, Mia's almost obsessive diary writing, particularly in the first novel, also reflects how diary writing can function as “a significant coping mechanism” (Davis 5), helping her cope with her new identity. And her diary writing does seem to have positive effects, as Mia two novels later writes: “[...] ever since I started writing things down in journals, I have gotten very in touch with my emotions. I usually know almost exactly how I feel” (*In Love* 77). Getting in touch with one's emotions through diary writing illustrates a recurring theme in feminist children's and YA novels: the notion of “turning inward” and growing through introspection (Trites 2). In short, then, Mia's development from insecure and shy to self-confident enough to speak up for herself can be seen as an effect of two intertwined factors – the news that she is a princess and her diary writing – as her princesshood forces her to turn to diary writing to a greater extent than before, which in turn enables her to ‘turn inwards’ to a greater degree. In this sense, the diary becomes an important site of the transformation which plays such a vital role in both princess stories and YA fiction.

Another common denominator between the princess narrative and the YA novel is their preoccupation with control. As Walter Hogan notes in *Humor in Young Adult Literature*, the perceived lack of control is a typical feature of teenage life and therefore of YA fiction:

Adolescents often feel that they are being persecuted and their lives are out of control. Sometimes this is a realistic assessment of the situation, but it could also be a hormonally driven overreaction to minor or temporary nuisances, such as mild acne, a changing voice, or being grounded for the weekend. (W. Hogan 95)

In Mia's case, however, her sense of lack of control is hardly an exaggeration. This is not only manifested in the everyday restrictions brought on by the constant presence of bodyguards and/or paparazzi discussed earlier, but is also evident when it comes to Mia's plans for her future. In the first novel, Mia tells her father about her plan to work for Greenpeace after she graduates from high school. Her father forbids her,

saying that she has to go to college instead. Not only that, he even tells her exactly which colleges he wants her to apply to: “Vassar, I think. Maybe Sarah Lawrence” (*Princess Diaries* 45). In the last novel of the series, Mia has given up on her Greenpeace plans and has decided to go to Sarah Lawrence. Though she describes this as a coincidence – “in a million years, I’m pretty sure he never thought I’d actually take him up on it” (378) – her decision to go to one of the two colleges recommended by her father is an eerie reminder of her many fictional predecessors whose lives are staked out by their father, the almighty king.

The emphasis on Mia’s lack of control over both her everyday life and future links *The Princess Diaries* series to more overtly feminist children’s novels as these texts, like Cabot’s novels, are “concerned at the most basic level with making the reader aware of how and when she is controlled” (Trites 9). *The Princess Diaries* series contributes to this tradition by presenting diary writing as a powerful tool when it comes to coping with, or even resisting, different forms of control. In her discussion of *The Princess Diaries* series as a revision of the traditional fairy tale narrative, Gruner describes how Mia’s position as first-person narrator is empowering in that it gives her “control of the narrative itself” (9). Whereas both minor and major aspects of Mia’s life are controlled by others because of her princesshood – her appearance, her free time, her future – “writing the diary she has the ultimate shaping control of the storyteller” (Gruner 8-9). A concrete example of this is the element of selection involved in diary writing.

Mia may not be able to choose her future, but she *is* able to choose what to write about in her diary. As Blos stresses, this is a vital aspect of diary writing, as it gives the writer the sense of being in charge: “the diarist chooses what will be included; only that which *she* wants to include *will be included* in the record she is creating” (243). In a sense, then, Mia takes control, deciding what is important in her life, when she chooses to include a copy of her essay on “THE TEN WOMEN I ADMIRE MOST IN THE WHOLE WORLD” which her grandmother rips into pieces (*Princess Diaries* 92), and the English assignment which earns her a C- (*On the Brink* 3). More generally, she, like any other diarist, also indirectly displays control over her diary narrative in deciding what events are significant enough to make it onto the pages of her diary. In addition, as Podnieks writes, women’s diaries can be used “to voice their dissatisfaction with the ways that society has scripted their lives, writing their own versions of self instead” (67). This is another exercise in control that the

diary offers, in *The Princess Diaries* series most notably exemplified by Mia's use of the diary as a secret space to explore her identity as a writer.

Long before Mia is made aware of her talent for writing, her obsessive diary writing establishes her as a writer in the eyes of the reader. When her boyfriend Michael tells her she is good at writing, Mia draws a similar parallel between her talent and her diary writing: "I mean, I *am* always writing in this journal. [...] I mean, I feel like I am *always* writing. I do it so much, I never even thought about it as being a *talent*. It's just something I do all the time, like breathing" (*In Waiting* 224). Writing about Virginia Woolf's diaries, Gristwood describes how Woolf's diary functioned as "an authorial gymnasium where she practised her writing effects" (6). When Mia's talent is revealed to her, she is eager to "start working on honing" it immediately, but her idea of writing being as important as breathing suggests that she has been "honing" her talent all along in her diary writing. This, in turn, gives her many colourful descriptions of other characters and settings in her everyday life a function beyond making the novels coherent for the reader – a reader whom Mia is portrayed as being unaware of – as they can be read as exercises in her very own "authorial gymnasium". This idea is further strengthened by Mia's inclusions of attempts at poetry and play writing in her diaries.

Moreover, Mia's eagerness to immediately "start working on honing" her newfound talent can be seen as an effect of her princesshood and the way in which it not only limits her options for her future, but also influences others' perception of her. In an earlier novel, Mia describes her frustration when younger girls ask her for autographs, lamenting their reason for asking her: "No, not because of my tireless work on behalf of the polar bears or the whales or starving kids. [...] No, because I'd been in a magazine in a bunch of pretty dresses, and I'm tall and skinny like a model. Which is no accomplishment at all!" (*In Love* 172-3). Mia's frustration here implies that Mia does not aspire to be a writer despite her royal heritage, but *because* of it – to prove to herself as well as to others that she is more than a princess posing in "pretty dresses." As mentioned above, Mia's diaries do not only consist of regular diary entries but frequently also of her poems and even occasional play drafts. These inclusions reflect the diary's typical function as "a safe niche in which to construct and explore her various, but carefully hidden, selves" (Goertz 255). The idea of Mia's identity as a writer as one of her several 'selves' is later emphasized by her decision to submit a novel manuscript under pseudonym in the last novel of the series.

As her senior project, Mia secretly writes a romance novel called *Ransom My Heart*² and sends the manuscript to different publishing houses, using her pen name Daphne Delacroix since she wants the manuscript to be judged “on its own merits” rather than for having been written by a princess (*Forever* 298). In this way, Mia sets up a clear boundary between her identity as a writer and as a princess; between her individual talent on the one hand and her family heritage on the other. For this reason, the publishing of her novel is Mia’s most important accomplishment throughout the series, as it highlights her talent and independence. Interestingly, the publishing house eventually persuades Mia to let them publish her novel under her own name for marketing reasons, thus allowing her different ‘selves’ as princess and writer to merge. This, in turn, marks Mia as one of the third wave feminist princesses who, according to Rothschild, differ from the traditional princess character in that “they have individual goals and dreams” (172). In other words, their princesshood does not define them, but is merely one of several aspects of their identities.

From a feminist perspective, Mia’s choice of genre is also interesting. As a self-proclaimed feminist, Mia’s choice to write a romance novel can be seen as an example of how she, at least to a certain extent, is “the true ‘postmodern’ third wave feminist style young woman who celebrates her contradictions” (Whelehan, “Teening Chick Lit?”). More importantly, her choice to write a romance novel can also be linked to Radway’s conclusions about the positive escapist quality of women’s romance reading, as well as to the “escapist value” Blos associates with diary writing (239). As discussed above, Mia’s diary writing not only offers her temporary respite from the many demands in her life, but also empowers her by offering her a much-needed sense of control, not to mention the chance to develop her talent as a writer in private. Thus, her successful attempt to have her romance novel published can be seen as the most concrete outcome of the diary’s empowering effects in her life. In this manner, the escapist value of diary writing and romance reading are tied together, as Mia, empowered by her frequent escapes into diary writing, offers the readers of *Ransom My Heart* the similarly empowering sense of escape Radway links to romance reading.

In her discussion of women’s diary writing, Gristwood poses an important

²Interestingly, Cabot wrote a romance novel titled *Ransom My Heart*. It was first published in 2009, the same year as the last novel in the YA part of *The Princess Diaries* series, and the front cover states Meg Cabot and Mia Thermopolis as its authors.

question: “Why do women write diaries? There are plenty of answers [...] But why do they *stop*?” (13). As Day notes, “changes in the immediacy of Mia’s narration” over the course of the series indicate that the last novel not only constitutes the end of Mia’s high school years, but also the end of her days as a diligent diary writer (157).³ In the last novel, Mia explains the most recent and longest pause in her diary writing as a side effect of being completely absorbed by her senior project, the above mentioned romance novel *Ransom My Heart*: “I mean, that’s why I didn’t keep up with my journal, or anything, not for almost two whole years. It’s hard, when you’re really concentrating on a creative project, to keep your mind on anything else” (*Forever* 37-8). But is lack of time really the issue?

Rather, Day sees Mia’s increasingly longer pauses in between entries and diaries as an intended sign of maturity, arguing that “Cabot seems to suggest that Mia has outgrown the need to rely on her diary as an outlet for all of her thoughts, feelings, and experiences” (157):

That the series ends just a few pages later with Mia’s graduation from high school underscores the suggestion that the diary is an object uniquely suited to young women as they navigate cultural demands regarding concealment and revelation; the narrative intimacy developed throughout the series, then, ends as Mia becomes an adult. (Day 157)

According to Day, this is evident in Mia’s “shift from complete disclosure to an explicit concern with discretion” (157). Day is referring to Mia’s description – or rather, lack thereof – of losing her virginity in one of the final entries of the last novel: “[...] I don’t want to go into too much detail about what happened between us here in his loft last night, because it’s private – too private even for this journal. Because of what if it were to fall into the wrong hands?” (*Forever* 369). Interestingly, this is the first and last mentioning of the possibility of the diary “falling into the wrong hands”. This is surprising considering Mia’s habit of bringing it with her everywhere, not to mention the fact that many reporters and publishers would go to great lengths to get hold of the diaries of a royal celebrity. Perhaps Mia has not simply grown out of diary writing, but instead eventually realized that the private diary of a princess can only stay private for so long? What, she may worry, would a reader make of her diaries?

³Of course, this was later to be partly disproven by the publication of *Royal Wedding* (2015), the previously mentioned first adult instalment of the series.

Diary Reading

Mia may be inspiring as a diary writing protagonist, but a feminist reading focusing on the reader-narrator relationship in *The Princess Diaries* suggests that her role as a narrator is more ambiguous. In this context, the first-person perspective typical of the diary form is an important starting point as it is a common denominator for YA fiction, chick lit and feminist fairy tale revisions – all different types of fiction which *The Princess Diaries* series represents. Firstly, as Mike Cadden mentions in his article “The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel”, first-person narration is the most common form of narration in YA fiction, likely because YA writers consider it an effective way of ‘levelling’ with their younger readers (146). Moreover, the first-person perspective enabled by the diary format resonates with the chick lit genre as “this mode of narration [the diary] allows for the dominant confessional first person voice so popular in chick lit” (Whelehan, “Teening Chick Lit?”). In her article “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture”, A. Rochelle Mabry argues that the first person-perspective favoured within chick lit has important feminist implications in that the “move toward first-person narration is an especially significant change from the third-person narration employed in most traditional romance novels” (194-5). Mabry claims that this is a subversive shift in narrative perspective since it “strengthens the heroine’s voice and increases the reader’s opportunities to identify with her” (196). Consequently, the first-person perspective in *The Princess Diaries* can be linked to narrative traditions in a double sense, as it honours the tradition of first-person narration in YA fiction while simultaneously challenging the traditional third-person narration of the romance novel.

Gruner investigates a similarly empowering move from third-person to first-person narration within feminist fairy tale revisions in her article “Telling Old Tales Newly” mentioned earlier, where she notes that replacing the “objective narrator” conventionally associated with the fairy tale narrative with a first-person narrator is an effective way of revising fairy tales in general and princess stories in particular (8-9). In *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, Elizabeth Wanning Harries confirms that this is a common denominator among contemporary feminist revisions of fairy tales as these texts tend to “abandon the objective third-person narrator, telling the story in the first person or in an unreliable third-person

voice” (101). Thus, the subjective first-person perspective in *The Princess Diaries* series is significant in that it stands in sharp contrast to what modern-day Western society tends to think of as “[t]he voice of the fairytale”, a narrating voice that is “detached and dispassionate, an objective narrator who tells what happened but rarely why” (Gruner 8). This type of narrator is the voice we recognize from Grimm and Disney’s fairy tale narratives. As Gruner points out in her discussion of *The Princess Diaries* series, Mia’s role as first-person narrator thus redefines the princess’s position in the story by transforming her from passive object to “speaking subject” (8). In feminist terms, the function of this revisioning is twofold as it not only empowers Mia by giving her “control of the narrative itself” (Gruner 9), but also encourages the reader to critically examine the anonymous, supposedly objective third-person narrator we associate with the traditional fairy tale.

Consequently, the first-person narration of a diary writing princess draws attention to issues of voice and, more specifically, the ways in which narratives inevitably confirm or challenge typically gendered links between voice and power. As Susan Sniader Lanser claims in *Fictions of Authority*, “[f]ew words are as resonant to contemporary feminists as ‘voice’”, noting that “for the collectively and personally silenced the term has become a trope of identity and power” (3). From a narratological point of view, “voice is an equally crucial though more circumscribed term, designating tellers ... of narrative” (Lanser 4). Although Lanser argues that both the feminist and the narratological approach to voice associate it with power, “they have entailed separate inquiries of antithetical tendency: the one general, mimetic, and political, the other specific, semiotic, and technical” (4). For this reason, Lanser sees the two different approaches as “fruitful counterpoints” (5):

As a narratological term, “voice” attends to the specific forms of textual practice and avoids the essentializing tendencies of its more casual feminist usages. As a political term, “voice” rescues textual study from a formalist isolation that often treats literary events as if they were inconsequential to human history. (Lanser 5)

By bringing these two counterpoints together, Lanser shows how “both narrative structures and women’s writing are ... complex and changing conventions that are themselves produced in and by the relation of power that implicate writer, reader, and text” (5). In *The Princess Diaries*, Mia’s diary writing reflects these different yet intertwined uses of the term ‘voice’, since the first-person narration of the diary form gives Mia a technical voice as a narrator while diary writing simultaneously

empowers her as a protagonist in that it enables her to speak up and, in a more concrete sense, to find her voice as a writer.

In this manner, Cabot's choice to give Mia a literal voice as a diary writing narrator also underlines how "voice often serves as a metaphor for female agency" in children's and YA fiction dealing with feminist themes (Trites 6). For this reason, as Trites points out, feminist protagonists "are often more articulate by the end of the novel than they were at its inception" (7). One of the most common tools in the protagonists' development, Trites argues, is writing because of its "potential to help people understand their agency" (63). In the beginning of the series, Mia is portrayed as a truly inarticulate character; voiceless in every sense since she is unable to express her emotions, to speak up for herself – and lacks the tools necessary to overcome this silence. As discussed earlier, this prompts her mother to give Mia her first diary, which marks the beginning of *The Princess Diaries* series: "She tells me she wants me to write down my feelings in this book, since, she says, I obviously don't feel I can talk about them with her" (*Princess Diaries* 1). Mia's mother's idea of the diary as a tool to overcome destructive silence mirrors the role of writing in feminist YA fiction, where writing in the protagonists' case typically is depicted as a means of "gaining a voice and rejecting the silencing that their cultures seem to expect of them" (Trites 76). In this sense, Mia's diary writing reinforces the conventional linking of voice to power while also questioning the traditional gendering of voice and power as male privileges.

Mia's first-person narration also highlights another important power relation characteristic of YA fiction; the uneven balance of power between the adult writer and the adolescent reader. While the diary format may make greater claims for authenticity than other forms of fiction, YA writers like Cabot make an ever greater claim by presenting not only a supposedly authentic diary, but also a supposedly authentic *teenage* voice. As Nikolajeva notes: "In order to sound genuine, the simultaneous, immediate personal voice must be adapted to the cognitive, emotional, existential and not least linguistic level that the protagonist is supposed to possess" (*Power, Subjectivity and Voice* 125). Cadden observes that the adult writer's attempt to sound 'genuine' to an adolescent reader has implications for the power relationship between the adult writer and adolescent reader as "[n]ovels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent's voice are inherently ironic because the so-called adolescent voice is never – and can never be – truly authentic" (146). As Cadden

points out, “the YA novelist often intentionally communicates to the immature reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be incomplete and insufficient” (146). This, in turn, gives the narrative an ironic quality – a quality which YA writers ideally help their readers recognize through different narrative devices (Cadden 146). Why, then, and more importantly, how do YA writers strive to expose this irony?

As Nikolajeva emphasizes, it is of vital importance that the young reader is encouraged to recognize this irony as (s)he otherwise runs the risk of identifying with the protagonist to a problematic degree: “Contemporary scholarly studies, especially those leaning on narratology and reception theory, emphasize the importance of the reader’s ability to liberate themselves from the protagonists’ subjectivity in order to evaluate them properly” (*Power, Voice and Subjectivity* 185). According to Cadden, double-voiced texts are ideal in terms of enabling young readers to liberate themselves from the subjectivity of a YA first-person narrator as “novels that employ doubled-voiced discourse offer young adult readers the tools necessary for identifying and coping with that irony” (146). Here, Cadden refers to the Bakhtinian notion of the dialogic, or double-voiced, text which “represents voices as equal and provides alternative interpretations that offer, in their aggregate, no single and final answer for the reader” (Cadden 147). While *The Princess Diaries* novels may not strive for the complete open-endedness of not providing “a single and final answer for the reader,” they repeatedly hint at interpretations other than the narrator’s by presenting Mia as an unreliable narrator, in particular in the earlier novels.

Firstly, Mia’s habit of lying to her friends and family raises suspicions that she may not be entirely truthful in her diary entries – especially considering the melodramatic first line of her first diary entry: “Sometimes it seems like all I ever do is lie” (*Princess Diaries* 1). This can be compared to Holden Caulfield who in *The Catcher in the Rye* “presents himself as the worst liar in the world, and although this description is self-ironic, the reader’s trust in the narrator is somewhat diminished” (Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity* 127). The initial sentence of the first novel, then, serves as a warning to the reader not to take Mia’s version of events and other characters too seriously. Moreover, in their discussion of narrators and narration, James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz describe how “narrators can be unreliable by misreporting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating ... and by underreporting, underreading, and underevaluating” (34). With these criteria in mind,

Mia can be seen as an unreliable narrator in a number of ways, and her many misreadings in the first novel set the tone for the rest of series.

The first example of Mia's misreadings occurs as early as the second entry of the first novel, where Mia describes how Josh, the most popular boy at school, smiles at her in a shop. While including her best friend Lilly's suggestion that "he probably thought I looked familiar but couldn't place my face outside the cement block walls of Albert Einstein High behind me" (2-3), Mia also offers her own, supposedly true, version of the event: "The truth is, when he's away from Lana and all his jock friends, Josh is a totally different person. [...] I know because when I looked into his eyes that day at Bigelows, I saw the deeply sensitive person inside him, struggling to get out" (3). Here, the inclusion of Lilly's more probable version signals to the reader that Mia is misinterpreting the situation. Another typical example of Mia's unreliability as a narrator is her 'underreading' of a song written by Michael – Mia's main love interest throughout the series who, initially unbeknownst to Mia, also is in love with her. Mia describes the song he plays her as being "about this very tall pretty girl who doesn't know this boy is in love with her" (*Princess Diaries* 225). As Mia's description of Michael's song appears in the second last entry of the first novel, the reader is by now familiar with Mia's habit of underestimating herself. What is more, the reader is aware of Mia's frustration with her height. The reader therefore recognizes Mia's 'underreading', knowing exactly who the "very tall pretty girl" in Michael's song is. The Josh incident and the song comment are typical examples of how *The Princess Diaries* series offers "alternative interpretations" that challenge Mia's versions of events; either by explicitly including other voices, such as Lilly's interpretation of the Josh incident, or as in the case of Michael's song, by giving the reader enough clues to understand that Mia clearly has it all wrong.

From Misreader to Preacher: Narrative Authority and Princess Lessons

Combined with the diary form, Mia's inability to accurately interpret situations and other characters also makes her a typical example of what Alison A. Case refers to as a 'feminine narrator', a position influencing not only the narrator's relationship to their own narrative, but also the reader's relationship to the text and its narrator. In *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, Case describes the feminine narrator as defined by his or her inability –

or in some cases, unwillingness – to make sense of her own narrative (16). While Case emphasizes that feminine narration “is defined by the narrator’s conceptual relationship to the shape and meaning of the narrative as a whole, not by a particular narrative technique”, she does present epistolary and diary novels as two of the most typical narrative forms of feminine narration (*Plotting Women* 10). Case makes an illustrative distinction between what she calls ‘plotting’ and ‘preaching’ in contrast to ‘witnessing’:

To the extent that female narrators are excluded from plotting, their role again becomes, in a different sense, that of a witness. While a preacher or a plotter assumes authority over his listener, a witness does the opposite, submitting her testimony to the readings of others, who may understand it in ways that she cannot (Case, *Plotting Women* 16).

Instead, it is the reader’s responsibility to derive meaning from the “raw material of narrative” offered by the feminine narrator which, in turn, results in a reversal of “the power relations of narrator and reader” (Case, *Plotting Women* 32;16). In this way, feminine narrators “share in common the fact that we are expected to take our narrative pleasure at their expense” (Case, *Plotting Women* 30). Although Case’s description of a witness “submitting her testimony to the readings of others” seems to suggest the need for an explicit intended addressee, Mia’s characteristic naivety nevertheless makes her a feminine narrator as it invites the reader to actively interpret “her testimony”. What, then, are the implications of feminine narration in a feminist reading of texts like *The Princess Diaries* novels?

While Case focuses on the way eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction reflects women’s limited or non-existent authority in this particular historical and cultural context, modern-day fiction featuring feminine narrators appears to continue this tradition. In an article titled “Authenticity, Convention, and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*”, Case applies the concept of feminine narration to a contemporary novel series similar to *The Princess Diaries* series both in terms of narrative structure and genre: Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Case defines Bridget as a typical feminine narrator since “one need not read far before future plot developments become highly predictable to a reader, if not to Bridget, since we can be certain any time she makes a statement like ‘expect to become known as brilliant cook and hostess’ (72) that disaster and humiliation are on the way” (“Authenticity” 178). In this manner, the reader is constantly one step ahead of Bridget, thus reflecting “[o]ne of the pleasures feminine narration offers” (Case, *Plotting Women* 32). However, as Case points out,

Bridget's inability to take charge of her life, mirrored by her inability to assume authority in her own narrative, becomes problematic from a feminist perspective as these failures paradoxically are presented as the reason her love interest Mark Darcy falls for her: "the genuineness that apparently wins Darcy's heart ... is the product of Bridget's persistent failure to carry through her plans to remake herself in another image, as thinner, more cool and poised, more intellectual – in short, more like the 'laquered over' women Darcy rejects (207)" ("Authenticity" 181). In this way, Case's analysis reveals how *Bridget Jones's Diary* reinforces the idea that a good woman is a woman unable to take care of herself.

Does Mia follow in Bridget's narrative footsteps? And if yes, is this entirely negative? The lack of narrative authority Mia displays by her constant misinterpretations is, of course, problematic from a feminist point of view since "[n]arrative authority necessarily retains an intimate link with social authority" and "[s]uch authority ... has never been gender-neutral" (Case, *Plotting Women* 13). At the same time, a sense of superiority over the narrator is not all feminine narration may offer the reader – rather, in texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Princess Diaries* novels, where the protagonist is prone to underestimate herself, the reader is potentially empowered by recognizing similar patterns in her own life. An example of this is Mia's misguided idea of herself as untalented, mainly reflected in the fact that it takes Mia four novels to recognize her talent for writing. In *Princess in Waiting*, Mia bemoans her supposed lack of talent:

Oh, that I had some kind of outlet, such as music, into which to pour the suffering I am currently feeling! But alas, I'm no artist. I just have to sit here in silent pain, while around me, more gifted souls express their innermost angst through song, dance, and filmography. (Cabot, *In Waiting* 199)

The reader, who has taken part of Mia's many diary entries and occasional poems, is all too aware of what Mia's "outlet" is, but can do nothing but wait for Mia to realize it. Consequently, the quote above reflects how feminine narrators often appear "unconsciously funny ... because they're intended to be perfectly serious" (Case, "Authenticity" 180). Nonetheless, I argue that passages like this also can be read as cautionary examples, warning the readers not to underestimate themselves the way a feminine narrator like Mia does. In this way, a feminine narrator may not only offer the "narrative pleasure at their expense" that Case associates with feminine narrators,

but also hope. If Mia constantly underestimates her own worth, these novels suggest, perhaps this could be true for the reader as well.

However, much like in Fielding's novels, the empowering potential of Mia's feminine narration is somewhat ruined by its reliance on male approval as one of the main ways of challenging Mia's (mis)conceptions of herself. The most evident example of this relates to Mia's body image. In the very first entry of the first novel Mia describes herself as "[...] the biggest freak in the entire school. I mean, let's face it: I'm five foot nine, flat-chested, and a freshman. How much *more* of a freak could I be?" (*Princess Diaries* 1). Body and body image are, of course, typical examples of "common teenage anxieties" that teen chick lit readers, "who are often at their most vulnerable and self-critical stage," will be able to relate to (Whelehan, "Teening Chick Lit?"). Female readers in particular will recognize the frustration of being a tall and flat-chested woman in a culture which deems these features unfeminine; 'freakish', to borrow from Mia's vocabulary. However, as hinted at earlier in my discussion of Michael's song, Mia's popularity among the boys in her circle of friends is throughout the series used as heteronormative assurance of Mia's misconception of herself as unattractive, since not one but three boys fall in love with her over the course of the series. In this manner, *The Princess Diaries* novels become a YA version of what Kate Dorney in her article "Shop Boys and Girls!: Interpellating Readers as Consumers in Chicklit and Ladlit", describes as "the stream of [chick lit] books" inspired by Fielding's success in which "[t]he comic twist is that in her miasma of self-analysis, absorption and obsession, the protagonist is incapable of seeing her own worth until validated by a man" (13). A comic twist indeed, but problematic from a feminist perspective.

Moreover, the narrative strategy favoured by Cabot to illustrate Mia's warped body image is similarly problematic because of its unpredictable effect, seeing that Mia's unreliability when it comes to her descriptions of her body mainly is signalled by the use of hyperbole: "Why did *I* have to be cursed with such freakishness?" (*Princess Diaries* 141); "I look weird enough, with my half-grown-out hair and my androgyny" (*In Waiting* 153); "the dateless biological freak that I am" (*In Love* 221). As Cadden stresses, hyperbole is a rather risky narrative device to use in children's and YA fiction as hyperbole "is harder to detect than either the contradiction provided by multiple perspectives or the doubt suggested by a more self-conscious narrator" (149). Moreover, Cadden argues, "hyperbole, even if readers recognize it, does not

enable them to consider the claims of characters with any equity” (149). In *The Princess Diaries* series, the heavy use of hyperbole alerts the reader to Mia’s misreadings of her body, but does not offer the reader the tools to go further, to critically examine the idea of the tall, flat-chested woman as unfeminine and therefore unattractive. In addition, as Hogan points out in his discussion of humour in YA fiction: “While authors of these works usually have tongue firmly planted in cheek, the perspective of the reader is also important” (147). As he notes, “[i]t is often possible to enjoy an ironic work as a straightforward adventure story” (W. Hogan 147). The reader, then, may recognize the implied author’s intention to question restricting cultural norms on feminine beauty, but simply ignore this in favour of the less challenging because more ‘straightforward’ reading experience which results from reading Mia’s version of her body as truth.

The possible discrepancy between the implied author’s intention and the reader’s interpretation draws attention to the age-gap between writer and reader in works like *The Princess Diaries* series, and what is generally perceived as YA fiction’s “moral and educative responsibility to its readers, which it falls upon the writers to deliver” (Whelehan, “Teening Chick Lit?”). YA writers’ approach to their supposed “moral and educative responsibility” is especially interesting when it comes to YA princess novels, seeing as “the educative quality of the material” is a key ingredient in the princess story (Rothschild 15). As Rothschild emphasizes, “princess stories include a heavy dose of princess lessons, which teach the reading audience as well as the fictional princess how best to become this exemplary girl” (16). What, then, do these lessons consist of in *The Princess Diaries* series? It could be argued that the series offers two forms of princess lessons. On the one hand, the series involves literal princess lessons which take up a considerable amount of Mia’s free time during her high school years. Mia spends innumerable weekday afternoons with her grandmother, the Dowager Princess of Genovia, who teaches Mia the dos and don’ts of royal etiquette: how to behave, how to speak, how to dress – the list goes on. In addition, *The Princess Diaries* series includes a subtler form of princess lessons linked to how “the princess character both reflects and inculcates socially desirable behaviour and beliefs in and about girls and women in the culture that produces her” (Rothschild 1-2). The latter lessons become most evident in the two last novels of the series, as Mia’s diary goes from being a space where she questions her grandmother’s

normative princess lessons to a site where Mia offers the reader eerily similar princess lessons on how to be a girl.

In the earlier novels, the contrast between Mia's scepticism when it comes to "girly stuff" and her grandmother's insistence that she conforms to traditional ideals of femininity leads to constant conflicts between them, conflicts which Mia frequently complains about or questions in her diary:

I am not a bit happy. *Grandmère's* happy. [...] Because I don't look a thing like Mia Thermopolis. Mia Thermopolis never had fingernails. Mia Thermopolis never had blond highlights. Mia Thermopolis never wore makeup or Gucci shoes or Chanel skirts or Christian Dior bras, which, by the way, don't even come in 32A, which is my size. [...] *She's turning me into someone else.* (Cabot, *Princess Diaries* 104)

While the princess lessons address many different aspects of princesshood, appearance is thus depicted as the issue creating most tension between Mia and her grandmother. Mia's reactions to her grandmother's attempts to transform her range from the frustration displayed in the quote above to the incredulity reflected in the following passage, where Mia prepares for her first high school dance: "But Grandmère went ape anyway, and kept on worrying there wouldn't be time to dye shoes to match my gown. There's a lot of stuff about being a girl I never realized. Like having your shoes match your gown. I didn't know that was so important" (*Princess Diaries* 193). While the narrator's tone here is difficult to read – is Mia being sarcastic or is she slowly beginning to accept her grandmother's notions of what "being a girl" entails? – the implied reader's intended 'lesson' for her young readers seems less ambiguous: having one's shoes match one's dress is *not* as important as Grandmère claims it to be. Instead, the episode pokes fun at Grandmère and her old-fashioned ideas of what "being a girl" involves, at the same time as it exposes ideal femininity as an artificial construction, requiring vast knowledge in areas such as fashion. By the end of the series, however, both Mia's tone and her views on "being a girl" have gone through considerable changes.

Of course, a certain amount of change is to be expected considering that the protagonist's transformation is a key ingredient not only in YA fiction, but also, as Rothschild points out, in the princess story: "the heroine transforms into or becomes identified with a princess ... and the girls reading about her are encouraged to do the same" (15). A feminist reading of *The Princess Diaries* novels reveals many positive forms of transformation. As Mia describes her princess education in the last novel:

“It’s actually taught me things, some of them very important. Like how to stand up for myself, and be my own person. How to get what I want out of life, on my own terms” (*Forever* 381). Another important example of how Mia transforms, or develops, over the course of the series is the issue of honesty. Day notes that Mia throughout the series struggles with being honest with her boyfriend, family and friends, drawing attention to her “increasing willingness to make disclosure to the characters in the novel” (157). Mia’s development in terms of honesty is especially evident in the last novel, where she finally has an honest conversation with Michael: “I couldn’t believe we were finally saying these things ... these things I’d been thinking for so long” (309). This, in turn, can be linked to Mia’s gradual emotional maturity as she in earlier novels tends to avoid confrontation and deals with difficult situations by sulking, running away, or simply ignoring them. In the two last novels in particular, Mia learns to handle conflict and difficulties in a more mature way. This is reflected in her decision to stop ignoring Michael’s emails after their break-up in *Princess Mia*: “So this time, instead of DELETE, I hit REPLY. And then I wrote him back” (274). Moreover, Mia not only matures emotionally but also transforms when it comes to confidence and talent. By the end of the series, Mia, who in the first novel describes herself as a freak with no particular skills, has played the lead part in a musical, has been elected student council president and, most importantly, she has had her own novel published.

However, from a feminist point of view, Mia’s positive development as a protagonist stands in sharp contrast to her transformation as a narrator – from student to teacher of princess lessons in terms of beauty and appearance. This development is reflected in Mia’s bodily transformation from flat-chested to a 36C in the second last novel. Significantly, Mia’s new bra size sparks her interest in fashion, leading up to the following statement in *Forever Princess*:

Look, I get the fashion thing now. I do. How you look on the outside is a reflection of how you feel about yourself on the inside. If you let yourself go – not washing your hair, wearing the same clothes you slept in all day or clothes that don’t fit or are out of style – that says, “I do not care about myself. And you shouldn’t care about me either.” (Cabot, *Forever* 39)

This quote demonstrates a remarkable difference compared to the non-matching gown and shoes comment discussed above, both in terms of attitude to fashion and narrative strategy. Firstly, the most striking aspect of this passage is undeniably how greatly it

differs from Mia's attitude towards fashion and femininity in earlier novels. Over the course of the novels, looking your best, dictated by what is in or "out of style", goes from being dismissed as 'girly stuff' to being "a reflection of how you feel about yourself on the inside." Consequently, Mia can be seen as moving from questioning the construction of stereotype femininity to promoting it. Secondly, the quote suggests a significantly smaller, if any, distance between the narrator and the implied author's opinions. The diminishing of this gap is mainly implied by the fact that the quote shows no sign of the hyperbole or naïve/sarcastic tone the reader has come to expect of Mia. The lack of these trademark features results in a surprisingly didactic tone – Mia is no longer taking princess lessons, but giving them. In this manner, the reader is in a quite direct way encouraged to imitate Mia's transformation into the image of conventional femininity.

The emphasis on fashion as a fundamental feature in this transformation also points to the close and questionable ties between the princess character and consumer culture in contemporary Western society. Discussing the Disney Princess franchise and its powerful influence, Whelan claims that "one of the reasons Disney is able to offer such a variety of [princess] products is due in part to the very broadly constructed definition of 'princess'" as the Disney Princess franchise not only includes princesses like Snow White and Belle, but also heroines who "are not technically princesses" (174). In this manner, Whelan claims, the Disney Princess franchise not only reflects Disney's "claim on the princess narrative" (170), but also the fact that "girlhood and princesshood still remain as tightly intertwined as they were during Sara Crewe's time – Sara Crewe, who was never born a princess and never became one, yet considered herself one all the same" (174). Whelan describes how the Disney Princess franchise profits on the idea that "any girl who wants to be a princess can become one" by translating this into sellable products (183). Whelan notes that "[t]he Disney Princess franchise currently offers approximately 26,000 different products on the market. These products include not just media-related material, such as movie tie-in books and Disney Princess compilation CDs, but also toys, clothing, and kitchen utensils" (174). Consequently, Whelan argues, any girl who can afford it can buy herself princesshood: "She can drag her parents or guardians to the store and purchase a princess costume. She can purchase princess school supplies, princess socks, dresses, and hair ribbons. She can play with princess dolls, swim in princess plastic pools, and ride her princess bike" (183). While not

encouraging the reader to buy princess merchandise, the two last novels in *The Princess Diaries* series similarly boost the link between the princess character and consumer culture by associating appearance and fashion with confidence.

The question, however, is whether the earlier novels in the series partly do so too? Approaching the ties between chick lit and consumer culture from a stylistic research perspective, Dorney observes how “paying attention to detail” enables the reader to recreate chick lit heroines’ lifestyles, using *Bridget Jones’s Diary* to illustrate her point: “We know Bridget buys her clothes in Jigsaw, shoes in Pied a Terre, and her food, chardonnay and cigarettes in Cullens” (14). In the two last *Princess Diaries* novels, the observant reader is given ample clues to copy Mia’s (life)style, as she frequently makes references to specific brands, most notably in terms of fashion. The true Mia fan could follow in her footsteps in Prada Mary Janes (*Forever* 111), and complete the outfit with an “Agent Provocateur demi-cup” bra (*Mia* 115), worn under her “Nanette Lepore top” (*Forever* 111). In this way, Dorney argues, products are used in chick lit not only to “flesh out character” but also to “make sense of” characters (14). To this could be added a third, likely unintentional, function: to reinforce the notion that femininity – or rather, femininities – can be bought. Dorney touches upon this in her discussion of India Knight’s chick lit novel *My Life on a Plate* (2000), where she draws attention to the novel’s backdrop of “myths about beauty and fashion, myths that ... are aimed entirely at women, at constructing their femininity” (15). While *The Princess Diaries* series most evidently links femininity to fashion and beauty products in the later novels, a brief analysis of the use of brand references in the series indicates these ties were there all along, only conveyed in a different form.

In “Teening Chick Lit?”, Whelehan mentions *The Princess Diaries* series as an example of YA novels that contradict what Ilana Nash in *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* describes as the “empty slogans of a ‘girl power’ that only means what it meant all along: the power to shop and to excite men; the power to serve capital and patriarchy” (228). However, when Mia compares “not washing your hair, wearing the same clothes you slept in all day” to wearing clothes that “are out of style”, she evidently reinforces rather than challenges these “empty slogans.” This, in turn, highlights the idea of *The Princess Diaries* novels as chick lit texts, (in)famous for their promotion of consumer culture. However, long before Mia’s transition from alternative girl to fashionista woman,

brand references are used to depict and explain characters, most notably Mia herself. Through frequent name-dropping of brands, the reader is informed that Mia prefers Dr Martens and Converse to high heels, that she wears her “Queen Amidala panties” for good luck (*In Training* 30), and recovers from heartbreak in her “Hello Kitty flannel pajamas” (*Mia* 28). Whelehan claims that *The Princess Diaries* series, in contrast to the average teen magazine and its promotion of homogeneity, “emphasises difference and freakishness” (“Teening Chick Lit?”). However, the abundance of brand references found in earlier novels implies that these, just as much as the two last novels in the series, rather emphasize “the power to shop” that Whelehan presents as a contrast to works like *The Princess Diaries* novels.

While the earlier novels in the series may not promote the homogenous femininity illustrated in *Princess Mia* and *Princess Forever*, they still serve to promote a construction of femininity based on buying the right products: the quirky, alternative girl in Dr Martens and Hello Kitty pyjamas. Consequently, what distinguishes *Princess Mia* and *Forever Princess* from earlier novels in the series is not so much their implicit reinforcing of the link between the princess character and consumer culture, but Mia’s transition from student to teacher of princess lessons; encouraging her readers to shop their way to femininity by making it an issue of self-esteem. In this sense, a feminist reading of the two last novels of the series reveals a tension between Mia’s positive development as a protagonist – from insecure girl to an accomplished, self-confident young woman – and her development as a narrator; from rebellious student to teacher of conventional princess lessons on femininity.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I have aimed to add to previous feminist research on *The Princess Diaries* series by combining two aspects critics have tended to discuss as separate, seemingly non-related issues: Mia’s princesshood on the one hand, and her diary writing and the diary form of the series on the other. Instead of focusing solely on either of these aspects of the series, I have aimed to bring them together. In my discussions of Mia’s diary writing and the implications of the diary form as narrative structure, I have therefore endeavoured to continually link these issues to Mia’s princesshood in different ways.

In the first section, titled “Diary Writing”, I have demonstrated how Mia’s princesshood magnifies and thereby draws attention to issues which feminist critics typically associate with women’s diary writing: voice, authority, privacy and the possibility to explore different identities, to name a few. Moreover, I have shown how Mia’s unconventional, at times even subversive, uses of her diary present the diary as a space for escape, introspection, and creativity. In this sense, I have argued, Mia’s diary writing can be seen as empowering not only Mia but also the reader, in that the beneficial effects of Mia’s diary writing may inspire the reader to start writing a diary of her own.

In the second section of my thesis, “Diary Reading”, I have linked the diary form of *The Princess Diaries* novels specifically to Mia’s role as a first-person narrator and the relationship between reader and narrator, discussing this from three main perspectives. Firstly, I have discussed Mia as a first-person narrator and the implications of first-person narration in a YA princess story context. Secondly, I have analysed Mia’s role as an unreliable, ‘feminine’ narrator, arguing that this complicates the idea of *The Princess Diaries* novels as feminist texts. Concluding the “Diary Reading” section, I have discussed how changes in Mia’s tone over the course of the series reflect Mia’s shift from sceptical student to normative teacher in terms of the ‘princess lessons’ on femininity conveyed in *The Princess Diaries* series – a development that, despite Mia’s positive development within many other areas, partly overshadows the idea of *The Princess Diaries* novels as inspiring from a feminist point of view.

My overall aim has also been to question both the general notion of princess stories as inherently unfeminist texts and the specific idea of Mia as a feminist role model implied by Isbister and Day. Instead, the ambiguities revealed in my reading of *The Princess Diaries* series suggest that the novels be placed somewhere in between these points of view. Cabot may not succeed entirely in redefining the princess character, but her attempts to do so imply that it *is* possible. Moreover, the success of *The Princess Diaries* series points to the fact that the princess character is as popular as ever, making it all the more important to examine and redefine the notion(s) of femininity that she is seen as representing. The princess is dead, long live the princess.

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