

My Little Brony: Feminism is Magic

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Thomas Eugene Reeder played with both Barbie dolls and Batman action figures when he was young. When assigned to write about an object and its unexpected function in society during Melissa Bender's UWP 101 class, as a joke he suggested that he would write about the My Little Pony toy that was still in his bag from his faded infatuation with the show. Through the combined forces of postponing the search for a more conventional topic, an impending deadline, an eternally enthusiastic teacher, and actually growing fond of the idea of an essay all about My Little Pony, what was once merely a bad joke became an almost actually serious academic pursuit that he might sort of care about an awful lot. Over the course of its development, the essay became an amalgamation of his passions, ranging from watching cartoons to playing with toys to learning about modern social disequilibriums, all interpreted through the lens of My Little Pony. While writing this essay, he watched more pony fan videos than he would care to admit, but he will admit that his favorite pony is Rarity. When not writing essays about children's toys, he watches animated children's movies and plays children's video games, and it is rumored that he turns into an actual adult on the night of the full moon.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: My Advanced Composition course (UWP 101), organized around the theme of "The Rhetoric of Everyday Objects," asks students to refine their analytical writing skills and simultaneously consider how the ordinary things around us reflect and shape our selves and our social roles. Thomas Reeder's "My Little Brony: Feminism is Magic" is an excellent example of an essay that meets both of these challenges. Tom skillfully brings together a variety of resources and draws upon his own experiences to de-familiarize a familiar children's toy. My Little Pony is not simply a mundane object, according to Tom's argument, but a social barometer to assess how far we have advanced in loosening restrictive gender roles since the decade in which Marlo Thomas gleefully encouraged boys and girls to "be free." Tom convinces us that we are not as free as many of us would like to think we are and that it is not only girls who suffer from the restrictions of the "girls will

be girls” and “boys will be boys” worlds of children’s toys. On the other hand, drawing our attention to the relatively unknown Brony subculture, Tom demonstrates that it is possible to disrupt the gender-segregated world of toys and call into question the conventional boundaries of acceptable behavior for men and women. Who would have thought that all of that might be gathered from a little pink plastic toy that came free with a burger and fries?

—Melissa Bender, University Writing Program

I still recall the moment my friends returned from their quest. They were all smiling and smelled like stale, processed french fries, something that might be construed as beef, and high fructose corn syrup-filled drinks. All of them had small plastic ponies clipped to their bags. One of my friends had a matching set with his girlfriend. Another had harassed the McDonalds workers to give him his favorite pony, Rainbow Dash. Most of them planned on returning several times to collect more of them. They were almost exclusively male, akin to a band of pink pony-wielding vikings returning from battle.

I coveted those cheap plastic girl toys, and in a fit of 21st century ironic nostalgia for a phenomenon I was not alive to experience, I made plans to go buy my own Happy Meals very soon. At the time I did not know that my nostalgia would be succeeded by a genuine appreciation for the toys or that my friends’ motives for acquisition were all similarly sincere. But before I knew it, I had watched an entire season of *My Little Pony* and discussed with my friends the merits of our favorite episodes just as we might talk about a Cormac McCarthy novel. And perhaps most importantly, none of it seemed odd.

Since its inception in the 1980’s, *My Little Pony* has been a franchise almost solely marketed towards and enjoyed by young girls, but in the wake of a new cartoon, a new demographic of young adult males, called “bronies,” has been awakened. By clipping these small plastic McDonald’s toys on to their backpacks as they parade around, this unintentional demographic has allowed the technicolor equestrians to surpass their intended purpose of being yet another inherently disposable children’s toy that abides to traditional gender stereotypes. They have become an expression of a current fad, a vehicle for social engagement with other individuals who share an interest in a cartoon for young girls instead of traditionally masculine pursuits, and the instrument through which social gender constructs are dismantled.

To properly understand this modern phenomenon it is necessary to understand its cultural context, which traces back to the feminist movement of the 1960's and 70's. Frustrated by the lack of children's products that embodied progressive ideologies, Marlo Thomas gathered together some of the biggest names in the entertainment industry to make an album called *Free To Be . . . You and Me* that "aimed to teach kids that boys and girls aren't different at all," bundled in a "palatable" package that the American public would be willing to accept (Kois). Upon release, the album was a hit, selling 95,000 copies (Kois). To date it has sold "hundreds of thousands of copies," and the children initially brought up with its equality-oriented tunes have grown into a new generation of directors and musicians and citizens (Kois).

But is all well and equal in the wake of *Free To Be . . . You and Me*? As of the 2012 United States Presidential Election, there is a record number of twenty female senators in the federal legislature, and reporters noted that "gender played little role in many of the races" (Tumulty). This would suggest that the post-*Free To Be* world is a more egalitarian society, where women are allowed to pursue positions that were once reserved for men, and moreover that it isn't considered strange for them to do so. But while these accomplishments are important, they also emphasize the representational disparity: if the number of female senators were proportional to females in the population, there would be fifty rather than twenty female senators. Strides have clearly been made, but there is still work to do.

This lack of significant improvement extends into the realm of children's toys. Where *Free To Be* proved that gender-neutral entertainment could be successful, sexism is just as strong as ever. A quick glance at the LEGO Friends line's purples, pinks, "curvier than the standard dwarf" figurines and sets such as "a salon, a horse academy, a veterinary clinic, and a café" provide a stark contrast to the traditional racially neutral yellow figurine and general scenarios that make it distinct from their normal line of neutral toys, as it is obviously intended for girls (Wieners). And this is from a line touted as "[breaking] down old stereotypes" (Wieners). If the toys considered to be progressive in our day and age emphasize as many stereotypes about femininity as they try to break down, it's hard to suggest that any significant headway has been made in the realm of children's toys. It would seem that boy toys are boy toys, and girl toys are girl toys.

This may not seem to be such a large issue, considering the improvements made in the adult economic and political realms, which are arguably more important than that of children's toys. But to understate the importance of objects would be criminal. As psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi notes, humans behave "in terms of a consciousness shaped by appliances" (21). Objects are able to do this by providing "a sensory template" that creates an "external order" by which we may approach the world, and we receive a "positive sense of who we are through the mediation of the things we own" (Csikszentmihalyi 22, 25). While it may not seem inherently troublesome to allow young girls to resign themselves to worlds of pink princesses and baby-raising, if our sense of who we are is dictated and shaped by the things we own and interact with, then exclusive exposure to such styles of play dictates and shapes the world of the young girls into one that is largely defined by said pink princesses and baby-raising. And if that is all they know, then why would they ever know to reach for anything more? When we allow the standards to be set for our young girls, we define their futures by the very same standards.

A glance at the *My Little Pony* product line does very little to differentiate it from any other for-girls toy line on the market. Stemming from the originals in the 1980's and reaching all the way into the current "G4" ponies, there are a few traits that all incarnations of *My Little Pony* possess. They are, to some degree, equestrian, and are decked out in bodacious pinks, bright purples, and sparkling teals. But some things have changed along the way: their appearance has assumed a more feminized, "sexually available" stylization that is in many ways distinctly unequine in their "accentuated buttocks" (Rutherford 19). They each come with a hairbrush, and the themed play-sets are modeled after concepts that sound as if they came from a sexist word jumble, such as "Pony Princess Wedding Castle" (Hasbro). They are unabashedly girly toys, designed to pander to a specific demographic, and a prime example of sexism's pervasive presence in children's toys. However, this reinforcement of sexist concepts does not make them exceptional. It merely places the ponies on the same shelf as princesses and LEGO Friends: just one more footnote in the history of gender stereotypes.

When the recent television series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, was being pushed around the executives' table at Hasbro, it was intended to do little more than act as a half-hour commercial for the toy line. In keeping with the precedent of previous *My Little Pony* television and film

releases, it would presumably not stray far from the toy's well-trodden path of sexism as well. However, this time around, something was different in Ponyville. The heads of Hasbro, the toy company in charge of My Little Pony, were willing to reach out to artists who deliver quality products rather than settling for someone to simply fill the screen with half an hour of ponies, hoping to replicate the success of their recent endeavor with Michael Bay's *Transformers* film (Tekaramity). Even though the show's creative director, Lauren Faust, instilled the show with many of her more progressive ideals such as "girls are smart," and enough dedication to the product to reflect such beliefs (Faust), she did not expect it to be significantly more than what it was: a cartoon starring vividly colored ponies aimed at a demographic of young girls (Tekaramity). Therefore, when an early review suggested that *My Little Pony* and the commercially motivated circumstances that spawned it would "erode the quality of [TV] series animation," few argued against the assertion (Amidi). There was no reason to believe that the show would be any good, and few, if any, did.

Then, the show caught on like wildfire, though not exactly as Hasbro had intended it to. The most avid demographic of the show was, rather than young girls, young adult males. It began to pop up as a topic of interest in online circles, and quickly carved out its own homes online, such as *ponychan* and *Equestria Daily*. Soon, the culture of the adult male *My Little Pony* fans, or "bronies," was established (Tekaramity). Much of the admiration of the show took place and stayed online, but as the community expanded, members became more open and took to wearing their brony-ism on their sleeve, or, rather, attached to their backpacks. This use of the My Little Pony as an explicit emblem of their devotion allowed the real-world replication of connections initially made online, and the cheap throwaway promotional plastic became a promotion of a once hidden identity for many an adolescent male.

Fred Davis notes that fashion has much to say "about our masculinity and femininity, our youth and age...national identity and religion," and that blue jeans have a unique ability within modern culture to evoke both a "conspicuous poverty" and "haute couturier" at alternating or even the same time (Davis 107, 105, 106). Blue jeans have transcended their initial purpose and become a social beacon, pliable to the needs and desires of any number of social groups, representing everything and nothing in the same broad stroke. In the same sense, My Little Pony has been twisted and molded from its original purpose of being a toy

for young females, and its original identity of upholding sexist views of effeminate toys for said demographic, into a symbol of equality and kindness for a completely separate group.

This uptake of a shockingly sexist toy by a demographic normally considered to be the polar opposite of the toy's target oddly complements Marlo Thomas's goal all those years ago with *Free To Be*. The second wave of feminism elevated the role of women in society and paved the way for acceptance of females in traditionally masculine spheres, such as the attainment of political power, but it was imbalanced. Men were, and largely still are, denied entry into the traditionally feminine spheres (Kois). So while it may have liberated women, it was not able to do much for the men of the world.

It is ironic, then, that the same toy that divides children into distinct and insurmountable groups of boys and girls is the agent by which men are able to cross the exact gap that has been created. A brief look at the *Equestria Daily* website shows that they collect the figurines, watch the new episodes, draw fan art, write their own stories about the ponies, meet up with each other at fan conventions, and entrench themselves in the same land of pinks and purples that so many feminists have found confining (Tekaramity). It would seem that for once, the gender gap is not something that women must cross alone. Men are reaching across to the other side, out of their own personal interest, proving just how restrictive the traditional gender roles have been for both sides and illustrating how unnecessary and incompatible they are with our modern society.

But the brony community also has a dark side, and it is exposed by multiple blogs dedicated to exposing misogynistic bronies, exemplified in the criticisms of a documentary about the emergence of the brony community that focus on the documentary's failure to portray female fans in any meaningful way (Romano). It is evident that some parts of the brony community may not be as tolerant as they might initially appear. Although this is problematic for the bronies' reputation, and for the women and girls being oppressed within what was once their realm, it reinforces the significance of My Little Pony's transformation. To have become a badge of honor not just for the progressives of society, but also for those more prejudiced, shows that My Little Pony has extended beyond the realm of young girls, and even the realm of feminists, to a wider market composed of many kinds of people who all genuinely enjoy it. Although it may not be an ideal community, the lack of discrimination

in deciding what to enjoy is what makes the brony so significant. It has rallied groups of feminists and groups of misogynists, and other people as well, under one unabashedly feminine banner, without regard for whether it belongs to girls or boys because it belongs to both. This community banner reflects the modern My Little Pony: a sexist toy, built up as a construct of unrelenting feminism by a fan base of egregious sexists. The culture surrounding My Little Pony was created from such disparate parts that it would seem to be at odds with itself.

These two identities, that of the reinforcer of sexism and that of the destroyer of gender boundaries, are seemingly irreconcilable, yet manage to coexist in the same continuous product. As with the jeans mentioned in Davis's essay, opposing viewpoints have managed to find a common ground. But unlike the blue jeans, which are modified to fit the function of the involved parties, the My Little Pony toys that little girls play with and the toys that young adult men collect are one and the same. They come in the same packaging in the same part of the toy store, the dreaded pink aisle of feminine traps. It hearkens back to the ideals of *Free To Be . . . You and Me*, where boys and girls of all ages could be whatever they wanted to be. They could be mommies and daddies and presidents and they could play with LEGO and they could play with ponies. We have yet to fully realize the society that Marlo Thomas sang of, but we are at least able to advance, using the same barriers that once held us back to create a new world, one pony at a time.

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