



2018

'There Must Be More Than This Provincial Life:' An Analysis of the Construction of Femininity of Princesses in Disney Animated Films

Kelsey Grace McDougall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses>

Recommended Citation

McDougall, Kelsey Grace, "'There Must Be More Than This Provincial Life:' An Analysis of the Construction of Femininity of Princesses in Disney Animated Films" (2018). *Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection*. 458.

<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses/458>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Honors Thesis Certification

Please type all information in this section:

Applicant Kelsey McDougall

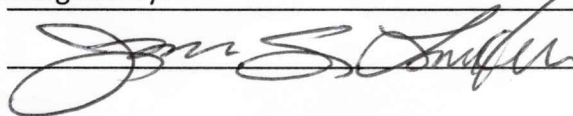
(Name as it is to appear on diploma)

Thesis title 'There Must Be More Than This Provincial Life:' An Analysis of the
Construction of Femininity of Princesses in Disney Animated Films

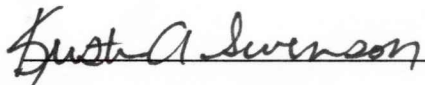
Intended date of commencement

May 12, 2018

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s)  5/3/18
Date

Reader(s) _____ Date

Reader(s)  5-2-18
Date

Certified by _____ Date
Director, Honors Program

**‘There Must Be More Than This Provincial Life:’ An Analysis of the Construction of
Femininity of Princesses in Disney Animated Films**

A Thesis

Presented to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Kelsey Grace McDougall

May 3rd, 2018

**‘There Must Be More Than This Provincial Life:’ An Analysis of the Construction of
Femininity of Princesses in Disney Animated Films**

Disney is the world’s largest media company (*thewaltdisneycompany.com*). The Walt Disney Company owns the Disney Channel, ABC, Freeform, and ESPN, as well as a number of entertainment studios; Pixar animation studios, Marvel, Touchstone pictures, and now Lucasfilm (*thewaltdisneycompany.com*). Disney is prevalent in the United States, as well as the Asia Pacific, Japan, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Disney also produces media that appeals to people of all ages while still maintaining itself as a “family company.” According to Hollywood biographer and reporter Bob Thomas in his book *Walt Disney: An American Original*, Walt Disney, the creator of the Disney empire, thought that “the right kind of entertainment can appeal to all persons young or old,” and Walt Disney’s “magic” came from his ability to create “human” characters, not merely two-dimensional caricatures (Thomas, location 178). Thomas writes that Disney “insisted on rounded, humanized figures. He wanted the humor to come out of character, not from outrageous action. His cartoon actors had to move convincingly and distinctly; there could be no vague or unsure motion” (Thomas, location 273). Disney wanted to reflect human nature in his work, to reflect the reality of American culture. But Disney also created and perpetuated it.

According to *Forbes* magazine, the Walt Disney Company ranked as the most powerful corporate brand of 2016 in the media sector. *Brand Finance* defines a brand as “a marketing related intangible asset including, but not limited to, names, terms, signs, symbols, logos and designs, or a combination of these, intended to identify goods, services or entities, or a combination of these, creating distinctive images and associations in the minds of stakeholders, thereby generating economic benefits/value” (Forbes.com). With such high brand power and

“Disney” being a household name, it becomes important to analyze how gender is portrayed in Disney media that reaches such large audiences. According to authors Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark LaPointe, “as reflectors and creators of culture and cultural values, media are clearly implicated in the ways in which we understand and react to the concepts of gender, sexuality, and transgression” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe, 90). Disney movies and the creators who make them have the rare opportunity to create media that serve as both a reflection of the culture in which they exist, as well as establish new values and usher them into cultural existence. They have the power to set the “rules” of gender and cultural norms; establishing what is considered normal and accepted, and what is considered deviant and “wrong.”

It is difficult to avoid the culture that Disney creates, and the stories and characters that the Walt Disney Company creates are not immune to criticism. According to cultural critics and authors Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, “The risk is that the quick and sweeping visual cues deployed by Disney films not only create strong associations (for example, between moral virtue and youthful beauty) but leave an indelible impression on children’s consciousness” (Giroux and Pollock, 102). The portrayal of stereotypical characters employed by Disney poses dangerous implications in terms of perpetuating potentially negative stereotypes about certain groups of people, such as groups of people of different class, race, age, and gender, to name a few.

Because Disney is such a cultural force, creating and reflecting cultural values and beliefs, it becomes important to analyze the effects of the presence of males and females working in the company to create Disney movies, and as a result, Disney culture. Sociology and feminist studies professor Candace West and sociology professor Don Zimmerman discuss the process of gender construction, noting that “Doing gender means creating differences that are not natural, essential, or biological” (West and Zimmerman, 127). They conclude that in Western societies,

the “accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being” and “competent adult members of these societies see differences between the two as fundamental and enduring [...] and often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors that are prominent features of social organization” (127-128). American philosopher and gender theorist Dr. Judith Butler notes that gender is a performance and is “affected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame” (Butler, 526), dividing gender into two distinct categories: the feminine and the masculine.

The seemingly perfect, magical, and cookie-cutter world of Disney is not immune to the effects of gender stereotypes and differences; in fact, the makeup of the company reflects societal discrepancies in gender representation. As far as gender composition goes for the Walt Disney Company, as of April 2018, only three of the eleven members of Disney’s current Board of Directors are female, and only three of the fourteen people on the management team are female (thewaltdisneycompany.com). Christine McCarthy became Disney’s first female CFO in 2015, the Company’s most senior female executive ever (Fortune.com). According to businessinsider.com, within the top ten biggest media companies in the world, three companies have female CFOs: Ruth Porat of Alphabet, Christine McCarthy of the Walt Disney Company, and Susan Panuccio of News Corp. Companies are showing increasing female involvement and employment, with women in higher positions. While there is some female representation within the Walt Disney Company, there is still, at least in the positions with information available on its website, a heavy tilt towards males in positions of power within the company. It is changing, though. This is a significant difference from Disney’s early days, when women were only involved when they “copied the drawings on celluloid with ink and applied the colors” to Walt

Disney's masterpieces (Thomas, location 2724). Interestingly, after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*' enormous success and Walt Disney built a new studio, he needed to reduce spending. Disney "went to blow down rumors that had been circulating and to deny that the new studio fostered a system of class distinction. One of the rumors was that girls were being trained to replace higher-priced male artists" (Thomas, location 2724). Disney reasoned, instead, that "the girls were being trained to make them more versatile employees, to prepare for the future when men might be drafted, and to give women equal opportunities with men" (Thomas, location 2724). While women were given opportunities to be involved in the filmmaking process, they were largely absent from roles involved with creating the *stories* and developing the characters for the movies. They were involved in little more than simply what the characters *looked* like.

What could an increase in the presence and influence of female directors, writers, and producers mean for the future of Disney movies? In my analysis, I show that this increase in female presence in filmmaking roles is changing the ways in which female characters are portrayed. I examine three eras of popular Disney animated films and analyze three films from each era. The first era (1930s-1950s) includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The second era (1980s-1990s) includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992). The third era (2000s-present) includes *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016). Interestingly, there is a virtual absence of female directors, producers, and writers (with the exception of one female writer for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) from the first "era" of Disney animated films. In the second era, only *Beauty and the Beast* credits three female writers. The most recent era of Disney animated films involves a significantly higher number of females in directing and writing roles according to their IMDb pages; not surprisingly, *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana*

(2016) somewhat challenge Disney's common themes of "traditional" marriage and "traditional" femininity. For example, in *Moana*, there is an absence of a love interest/prince, in stark contrast to the first era, and even the second era, of Disney films, in which the traditional marriage plot between prince and princess takes center stage.

Of the three most recent films, I argue that a direct correlation can be drawn between the increase in female involvement in the filmmaking process and the erasure of a strict gender binary and accompanying stereotypes of gender roles. According to IMDb.com, two of the five producers of *Brave* are female, two out of four writers are female, and the story was created and directed by Brenda Chapman, the first woman to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature (IMDb.com). For *Frozen*, one out of the two directors are female – Jennifer Lee – who also wrote the screenplay and earned the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. Lee was also the first female director of a Walt Disney Animation Studios feature film and the first writer at any animation studio to become a director (IMDb.com). Only one out of the seven writers of *Moana* are female (IMDb.com), but Osnat Shurer produced the movie. According to Shurer, in an interview with IndieWire.com:

'Moana' is very different for us [...] It's set in Polynesia and it's a different style of being a hero. It breaks new ground. What she wants is to save her world. We've seen that a lot with male protagonists, but we don't see that much with female protagonists. If they save the world, it's on the way to Mr. Right.

Interestingly, *Moana* is the first Disney film in which the voice actor for Moana's character, Auli'i Cravalho, was the same age as her character during production: fourteen years old. While there have been many "firsts" for females in filmmaking roles, there have been accompanying "firsts" for the female characters, specifically the princesses, and shifts in the way the female characters are portrayed.

Background on Waves of Feminism

In their book *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance*, authors Charlotte Krollokke and Anne Scott Sorensen detail the differences in the first three “waves” of feminism, outlining the societal norms during each period of time and what each wave was fighting for. In the first wave of feminism, they write that the feminists’ activity “challenged the ‘cult of domesticity,’ which in those days dictated that a true woman’s place was in the home, meeting the needs of husband and children. Women were further required to be modest and to wield only indirect influence, and certainly not engage in public activities. So, when a woman spoke in public, she was, by definition, displaying masculine behaviors.” As a response to oppression, feminists fought for the right to vote, but underlying this call for action was still a widespread belief that “women and men are, in fact, fundamentally different and that women have a natural disposition toward maternity and domesticity” (Krollokke and Sorensen, 5).

The authors explain that the second wave of feminism started as a response to something that was now termed “women’s oppression.” In this second wave of feminism, women were beginning to fight the stereotypes and portrayal of the female, challenging the widespread and accepted assumption that “the way women look is more important than what they do, what they think, or even whether they think at all” (Krollokke and Sorensen, 8). The fight had shifted from simply the right to be treated equally legally by gaining the right to vote to now taking control over the feminine and the way it was portrayed. They note that “feminists staged several types of theatrical activism: crowning a sheep Miss America and throwing “oppressive” gender artifacts, such as bras, girdles, false eyelashes, high heels, and makeup, into a trash can in front of reporters,” and this was in response to the fact that “women were victims of a patriarchal,

commercialized, oppressive beauty culture (Freeman, 1975, as cited by Krollokke and Sorensen, 9).” *Sexual Politics*, by feminist writer and activist Kate Millet, was a popular book during this time, “in which she insisted on women’s right to their own bodies and a sexuality of their ‘own’—a sexuality that is disconnected from the obligations of marriage and motherhood” (Krollokke and Sorensen, 10).

According to Krollokke and Sorensen, third wave feminists were “born with the privileges that first and second wave feminists fought for” and see themselves as “capable, strong, and assertive social agents.” They also say that, “third-wave feminists are motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honor contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking,” and that “they propose a different politics, one that challenges notions of universal womanhood and articulates ways in which groups of women confront complex intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and age-related concerns.” They are also “venturing into male-dominated spaces with third-wave confidence to claim positions of power” (Krollokke and Sorensen, 16).

Summary of Analysis

I begin with analyzing nine Disney princess animated films with regards to their portrayal of love stories and marriage, the presence of overdetermined femininity, their portrayal of female villains, their use of grandmothers as vehicles for change, and lastly an analysis of to what degree each era of films corresponds to the feminist wave within the similar time frame. I end my analysis with introducing the fourth wave of feminism and to what extent the new Disney animated films embody the goals of the most recent wave of feminism, and what this could potentially mean for the future of not only Disney, but modern culture and gender stereotypes in general.

I chose to analyze *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, because they are the “classic” Disney animated princess films, and the only three princess films from the first era of Disney animated films. From the second era, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin* were chosen because they were the first three animated princess films released during the Disney Renaissance (1989-1999), although similar themes are present in other princess films from this second era, such as *Mulan* (1998) and *Pocahontas* (1995). For the third era, I chose to analyze *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*. Although films such as *Tangled* (2010) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) are excluded from being analyzed in this paper, they still exhibit the themes found in those that are analyzed in this paper. *Brave* was co-directed by Pixar’s first female director of a feature-length film, Brenda Chapman. *Frozen* is the highest-grossing Disney animated princess film of all time (businessinsider.com), and *Moana* is the most recent Disney animated princess film to be released. For the sake of keeping the number of films that I analyze from each era consistent, I have chosen to analyze only three of the films from each era. While I have chosen to only analyze three films from each of the three eras, other films from these eras also exhibit the gender themes and the common gender stereotypes found in Disney animated princess films from each respective era.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella* are the only Disney “princess” animated films released by Disney between 1937 and 1960, correlating with the first wave of feminism (late 1800s into the early 1900s). *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin* span a narrower time frame, but can be analyzed in congruence with the tail end of the second wave of feminism (1960s – 1980s) and into the very beginning of the third wave of feminism (1990s – 2000s). *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* were released in congruence with both the third wave of feminism, as well as the beginning of the fourth wave (2010 – present). The nine

princesses in these films (Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora from the first three movies, respectively; Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine from the second era, respectively; and Merida, sisters Anna and Elsa, and Moana from the third era, respectively) are among the most popular princesses across media, from the movies themselves, to the characters in the Disney theme parks, to figurines.

Deviation from the Traditional “Love Story” and marriage

In *From Mouse to Mermaid: the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, communications professor Elizabeth Bell writes that princesses in Disney tales “narrate and fulfill their destiny as marriage/reward for the prince/beast,” and are commodified in the marriage plot (Bell, 114). And not just marriage, but *heteronormative* marriage and relationships. In the first era of Disney princess films, this especially holds true.

At the start of the first era of Disney princess animated films, Thomas writes:

“by 1934 Walt was employing a dozen story and gag men, forty animators, forty-five assistant animators, thirty inkers and painters, and a twenty-four-piece orchestra, plus camera operators, electricians, sound men and other technicians. In the six years since the loss of Oswald the Rabbit, the Disney staff had grown from six to 187” (location 2973).

With the Great Depression still in full swing, it was easy for Walt Disney to find new artists for animation (Thomas, location 2973). Among a list of qualities that Walt looked for in his animators was “knowledge of story construction and audience values” (Thomas, location 2989). From the very beginning, Disney has served as a reflection of culture as well as a creator of culture. And it is for this reason why Disney had its first huge success with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Of Disney’s choice of first animated feature to make, Thomas writes, “his choice of Snow White was more pragmatic than sentimental. He recognized it as a splendid tale for animation, containing all the necessary ingredients: an appealing heroine and hero; a

villainess of classic proportions; the Dwarfs for sympathy and comic relief; a folklore plot that touched the hearts of human beings everywhere” (Thomas, location 2067).

All three movies from this first era of Disney animated films (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*) contain Walt’s “necessary ingredients,” involving princes who pursue the princesses, an evil villainess, and folklore plots that resonate with audiences. It is important to note that all of the stories in these movies were adapted from original works, molded to fit Walt Disney’s visions for American versions of the stories. But the main question is not what the formula for success is for these movies, but rather *why* this formula is so successful and so accepted by large audiences. In both *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princes ultimately “save” the princesses in the end by giving them “true love’s kiss.” The “love story” in all three movies is a romance between a male and female, a prince and princess. Also present in all three films is the idea of marriage as the ultimate goal of the monarchy. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White, for the entirety of the movie, is waiting for her true love to find her, as she sings at the beginning “I’m wishing for the one I love to find me today,” and the prince joins in her song.

In *Cinderella* (1950), the King hosts royal balls to find a wife for his son. Frustrated when none of the maidens fit the bill, he says that he cannot understand it and that “there must be at least one who’d make a suitable mother.” It is Prince Charming who orders the duke to find every maiden and have her try on the glass slipper that Cinderella left behind, and this ultimately “saves” Cinderella from her ruthless stepmother and stepsisters. At the end, the prince and princess are married and celebrated by the townspeople. In *Cinderella* especially, the Kings perpetuate the heteronormative agenda and arrange the marriages of the princes to princesses; the King in *Cinderella* can be heard saying that he is hosting these balls with the goal of finding a

wife for his son, “Just a boy meeting a girl under the right conditions. So, we’re arranging the conditions.” While understandably monarchical and explanatory by the time (1300s England), it further perpetuates the heteronormative agenda that was at the forefront of 1950s America.

In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Merryweather the fairy lessens the consequence of the curse of Aurora pricking her finger on the spinning wheel from death to slumber, saying “from this slumber you shall wake when true love’s kiss the spell shall break.” In *Sleeping Beauty*, however, Aurora spends time with Prince Phillip prior to falling into her slumber (they meet as children and then reconnect when Aurora is almost sixteen years old, contrary to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As is narrated in *Sleeping Beauty*, “Fondly had these monarchs dreamed one day their kingdoms to unite. Thus today would they announce that Phillip, Hubert’s son and heir to Stefan’s child would be betrothed. And so to her his gift he brought, and looked, unknowing, on his future bride.” The Kings’ goal from the very beginning was for Prince Philip and Princess Aurora to marry.

Ultimately, all three films of the first era exhibit Walt Disney’s recipe for a successful animated feature; the ingredients deeply rooted in heteronormative and traditional gender roles and stereotypes that audiences found and still find pleasing to watch because they were and are so deeply engrained in our culture. They are comfortable. They are familiar gender stereotypes that are still widely accepted and *expected* in today’s society, although potentially less so today than in that first era of Disney animated films, in the 1930s through 1950s.

According to Henry A. Giroux, in *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, the second era of Disney animated films is marked by the taking over of the Walt Disney Company by Michael Eisner in 1983, after a period of failures by the company following Walt Disney’s death in 1966 (Giroux, location 689-691). According to Giroux, Eisner followed

Walt Disney's example and "produced record revenues for the company through corporate expansion, aggressive advertising campaigns, and the creation of new licensing opportunities for Disney merchandise" and "established Disney as a major media outlet with the purchase of Capital Cities/ABC in 1995" (Giroux, location 689-691). These changes in the company reflect changes in the storylines of the movies created and produced by the company.

In terms of the second era of animated princess films (*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*), we start to see a deviation from the traditional love story (potentially due to a slight increase in the presence of female voices involved in the film productions) in terms of the princesses' role in the marriage plot, although all three films still feature a "love story" that is traditional: a romance between a prince and princess. This is perhaps due to the Walt Disney Company reverting back to a plot they know works after years of a lack of successful films.

In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), we still see the theme of the prince kissing the princess to save her (a scenario crafted by the villain, Ursula). Prince Eric must kiss Ariel to turn her into a human forever; she must receive a "kiss of true love." Although Ariel saves Prince Eric early on, Eric is ultimately the one to destroy the "beast," Ursula, who has grown into a giant sea monster. The film ends with Ariel and Eric getting married. This is a revolution from the original story by author Hans Christian Andersen. In Andersen's original story, the prince marries another princess, much to the little mermaid's dismay, and the sea witch does not display Ursula's inherent "evil." Instead, the little mermaid's body dissolves into foam when she throws herself off the edge of a boat in sadness (Andersen, 1836). Disney's need for a traditional love story and happily ever after ending resulted in altering the original story to better fit their repetitive plot;

Disney needed the prince and princess to marry to ensure that the audience would be comfortable with the familiarity of the formulaic Disney romance story.

In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), it is Belle who ends up saving the Beast – a reversal of the traditional prince and princess roles. Here, there is a change from the prince being the one who must declare his love to save the princess, to the princess having to declare *her* love to save the prince. It is Belle who must profess her love for the beast before the last rose petal falls, or else he will remain a beast forever. It is also important to note that at the start of the film, Belle is not a true princess; she is just another villager. Interestingly, as previously mentioned, *Beauty and the Beast* credits three female writers. The story also does not end with marriage. Ultimately, however, the traditional heteronormative love story still exists; at the end, Belle and the Beast, the prince and the princess, fall in love. Belle functions as the Beast's "reward" for learning to love someone and have someone love him in return. Belle is the Beast's subordinate; someone he captured and, in a sense, forced to fall in love with him.

In *Aladdin* (1992), Princess Jasmine is outspoken against her arranged marriage rules. Her father, the Sultan, introduces Jasmine to countless suitors trying to obtain her hand in marriage, but Jasmine refuses to be treated like a reward and marry against her will, following Belle's example of refusing to marry the garrulous and barbaric Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*.

SULTAN: Dearest, you've got to stop rejecting every suitor that comes to call. The law says you...

BOTH: must be married to a prince.

JASMINE: Father, I hate being forced into this. If I do marry, I want it to be for love.

SULTAN: Jasmine, it's not only this law. I'm not going to be around forever, and I just want to make sure you're taken care of, provided for.

Jasmine also acknowledges that if she must conform to these rules, then maybe she does not want to be a princess. Jasmine later defies her role as a commodity in the marriage plot,

addressing her father, Jafar, and Aladdin, saying “How dare you! All of you, standing around deciding my future? I am not a prize to be won!” Interestingly, in this film, it is Aladdin who has no royal background, whereas Jasmine is a princess. This is the first film in the selected works in which the “prince” figure is actually not a prince at all, and rather a “street rat.” While this may seemingly appear to be a reversal of roles of power between the prince and princess, Aladdin frees Jasmine at the end of the film, and it is Aladdin who ultimately defeats Jafar. Aladdin is the film’s true masculine hero, and the film ends with marriage plans made between Aladdin and Jasmine, although the marriage is not shown.

It is interesting to see this progression of deviation from the traditional love story in this second set of films; beginning to question and challenge the traditional heteronormative “rules” of marriage between a powerful prince and powerless princess. We see a difference in who is doing the saving, and therefore adding heroism (or rather, heroinism) to the repertoire of qualities of a true “princess.” Ultimately, however, the perpetuation of the heteronormative romance plot still exists; while the paths the characters take to get there may be different, the result is still the same. Because heteronormativity is still the result, these romance plots reify women as subordinate in the patriarchy.

The third era of Disney animated films has followed the taking over of the company by Robert Iger in 2005. According to Giroux, since Iger became the CEO, “the company has been colonizing the frontiers of new digital media. Its website, Disney.com, touted as giving children “easy access to all Disney businesses” while they watch videos or play games, has become the most popular entertainment Internet site among kids worldwide. One part innocence and three parts corporate experience seems to be the formula for the Disney magic that makes cash registers ring in approximately 220 Disney Stores, not to mention thousands of Walmarts, in

North America. Global retail sales for Disney products totaled \$11.5 billion in 2007” (Giroux, locations 691-700). It is nearly impossible to find a major retail store that does not carry any Disney-themed merchandise. This expansion of the Walt Disney company and its expansion into new technologies coincides with its drastically different and in many ways more open-minded creation of its animated films.

In *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*, the third era of Disney animated princess films, audiences begin to see the princesses more drastically deviating from this stereotypical Disney romance plot; Merida first goes against this tradition. In *Brave* (2012), the main “love story” is between mother and daughter, and their family. Her mother hints at potential love interests for Merida, even though nothing materializes. The construction of marriage is present and is what Merida’s parents wish for her as their marriage has been successful. However, for the first time, we see a lack of the princess ultimately falling in love with a prince, and Merida actively questions her culture’s tradition of arranged marriages and her roles and duties as a princess to get married.

According to the plot description of *Brave* on Disney.com,

Merida, an impulsive young lady and daughter to King Fergus and Queen Elinor, is determined to carve her own path in life. Defying the age-old and sacred customs, Merida's actions inadvertently unleash chaos and fury with the other Scottish Lords, and in the process she stumbles upon an eccentric and wise old woman who grants her ill-fated wish. The ensuing peril forces Merida to discover the true meaning of bravery in order to undo a beastly curse before it's too late.⁹

This plot description paints Merida in a nearly negative way, suggesting that *because* she is defying the age-old custom of marrying the son of Scottish Lord, *for this reason* she is cursed and brings danger to her clan. Because she does not want to get married and defies her mother’s expectations, she pays a price. Although the movie ends with Merida and her mother reconciling after a curse turns Elinor into a bear, the fact that Merida was subjected to a curse for denying the

betrothal to a Scottish lord is troublesome because it shows that it was frowned upon, abnormal, and deviant. Merida, as a female in her culture, is expected to want and accept a marriage to a male Scottish lord; although perhaps unintentionally, the movie pushes a heteronormative agenda. However, the fact that Merida defies this tradition of marriage at such a young age is a step in a new direction, and her parents are accepting of her choices in the end, showing an acceptance of new and different viewpoints.

In *Frozen* (2013), the “love story” is the bond between sisters. Although Anna is romantically linked to Prince Hans and Kristoff, promoting heteronormative relationships, this reinvention of “true love” and what that looks like in Disney movies is a significant change. In an interview with Fast Company, the world’s leading progressive business media brand, director Jennifer Lee explained how *Frozen*’s “love story” between two sisters came to be:

“On *Frozen*, we knew it was going to have something to do with an act of true love. We knew it was going to be a different kind of look at love. We knew the sisters were going to be there, but we didn’t know how we were telling the story. It wasn’t until I went back to the original story [Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*] and said, you know, the most exciting thing about this to me is the concept of the power of love over fear. I said, Anna represents love and Elsa represents fear, and this is how we play that out in the film. Everyone got it and everyone was on board.”

The movie pokes fun at the notion of princesses and princes expressing hopes of marriage moments after meeting, showing an acknowledgment of the unrealistic expectations set in place by the traditional Disney plot. This is evident when Elsa tells Anna, “You can't marry a man you just met” (*Frozen*, 2013), after Anna and Prince Hans seemingly fall in love after singing a song together shortly after meeting for the first time. This is in contrast to the growth and development

of Anna and Kristoff's romantic relationship, which, although still quite fast, happens over a longer period of time and over the course of many events.

In *Moana* (2016), there is a complete lack of any love interest. The "love story" is rather about friendship and family; the relationship between Maui and Moana is strictly a friendship. Also, there is a connection between the people and the earth from which they utilize resources. Interestingly, while there is an absence of perpetuating a heteronormative romance in *Moana*, there is also no mention of a non-heteronormative romance in any of the movies.

In all three of the most recent films, the main love stories are centered around familial love and friendship, rather than heteronormative male/female romance. Also, in all three of the most recent films, there is push-back by the princesses of marriage at such young ages, something that the original *Disney* films, due to the time period in which they were made or written, did not address. Although there have been strides to reduce the fervor of portraying the heteronormative romances and relationships of the "traditional" Disney romance story, we do not see Disney animated movies portraying non-heteronormative relationships. There may be a lessening of the intensity of the role of romance in the storylines, but when it does exist, it is still heteronormative.

Overdetermined Femininity and the Female as a Spectacle

In her analysis of media representations of female figure skaters and their femininity, feminist figure skating critic Dr. Abigail M. Feder writes in her essay '*A Radiant Smile from the Lovely Lady*': *Overdetermined Femininity in 'Ladies' Figure Skating*, that "the preservation of youthful beauty is one of the few intense preoccupations and competitive drives that society fully expects of its women, even as it holds them in disdain for being such a narcissistic lot" and that

“Ladies will be rewarded for being ‘stylish and gorgeous’ and punished for being too daring” (Feder, 65).

In the first two eras of Disney animated films, there is a focus on this preservation of youthful beauty, as all of the princesses’ ages fall between fourteen and nineteen (according to estimation); Snow White being fourteen (the youngest) and Cinderella nineteen (the oldest). Interestingly, the princes are no younger than eighteen; most are over twenty years old. From the very beginning, Walt Disney was concerned with making sure his princesses were youthful. When holding auditions for the voice actor of Snow White, author Bob Thomas writes, “Nor was Walt satisfied with the voices that he auditioned for the role of Snow White [...] none possessed the childlike quality Walt was seeking” (Thomas, location 2187). There was a certain sound Walt was going for when casting the voice roles of the princesses he created, suggesting that there was a certain way princesses, particularly youthful ones, should sound, in order to reflect their youthful appearance without being too childlike and immature.

The princesses are often talked about in terms of their appearance, showing that the princess is a spectacle. In *Snow White*, the magic mirror talks about Snow White’s beauty; “cheeks red as roses, hair black as ebony, skin white as snow.” The dwarfs also comment on Snow White’s beauty upon first seeing her: “what is it? It’s a girl! She’s mighty pretty – she’s beautiful, just like an angel.” Grumpy is the first one to say, “she’s a female, all females are crazy,” showing this juxtaposition for females being praised for their beauty while also being criticized for their personalities (although it is rare if Grumpy finds anyone he actually likes). In *Sleeping Beauty*, the film’s title literally includes the word “beauty.” Thomas writes that for the production of *Sleeping Beauty*, “The emphasis was on visual beauty and spectacular effects” for Walt Disney (Thomas, location 4844). Flora, one of the fairies, gives princess Aurora the gift of

beauty, as a choir sings “One gift, beauty rare, full of sunshine in her hair, lips that shame the red, red rose, she'll walk with springtime, wherever she goes.” The focus is on the beauty and the image of the princess, how the princess will be seen and gazed upon by others. In all three movies in this first era, the notion that youth and beauty will lead to love, marriage and happiness is very evident and prevalent.

In the second era of films, there is still a focus on youthful beauty, but there is an awareness that this is often the focus of princesses. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula, while convincing Ariel to trade her singing voice for human legs, sings “you'll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don't underestimate the importance of body language! Ha! The men up there don't like a lot of blabber, they think a girl who gossips is a bore.” Ursula hints that beauty is all that is important in the human world, suggesting that this is a focus of American cultural values in the 1980s and 1990s. While being “beautiful” is praised in society, that is all women are good for, and the minute they try to be anything more than a spectacle for others to gaze upon and speak their own mind, to claim themselves, they become undesirable in the eyes of society. Ariel is also treated as a spectacle once she is magically transformed into a human, eliciting responses that praise her for her beauty, while she lacks the ability to speak – she has literally been silenced while others praise her for her beauty. Upon seeing Ariel, Grimsby, Eric's manservant, says “Oh, Eric, isn't she a vision?” Eric responds by telling Ariel that she looks wonderful. Ultimately, though, “body language” alone is not enough for Ariel to be happy, and she regains her voice at the end of the film.

Beauty and the Beast begins with a lesson about beauty and age, as the narrator tells a background story about how a prince became the Beast;

But then, one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince sneered at the gift and

turned the old woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within. And when he dismissed her again, the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress.

The movie hints at the fact that because the woman was old, she was less beautiful in the eyes of the prince, placing an importance on youth and relating it to beauty. Belle is also described as beautiful, as the villagers sing: "It's no wonder that her name means beauty, her looks have got no parallel. But behind that fair façade, I'm afraid she's rather odd. Very different from the rest of us is Belle." The villagers also sing, "Look there she goes that girl is so peculiar, I wonder if she's feeling well? With a dreamy, far-off look, and her nose stuck in a book, what a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle." Because she reads and does more than just sit there and look pretty, she is thought of as "odd" by the people around her. Again, a culture that celebrates women for their beauty, but punishes them for thinking for themselves.

While there has been progress in the portrayal of some aspects of Disney animated princesses, overdetermined femininity and the perpetuation of the female as a spectacle still exist in the newer, more "progressive" films as well. In all three movies, the audience sees the female protagonists being "punished" for going against traditional feminine stereotypes and taking on more adventurous, daring, and stereotypically masculine characteristics.

There are many examples of this in *Brave*; at the beginning of the movie, Merida's mom constantly tells Merida how to act like a true Disney "princess." She says, "a princess does not chortle, a princess is compassionate, patient, cautious, clean, and above all, a princess strives for perfection" (*Brave*, 2012). She also says that "princesses should not have weapons," but Merida's father, interestingly, says that "princesses learning to fight is essential" (*Brave*, 2012). In this movie, we see Merida starting to challenge the traditional and stereotypical characteristics

of Disney princesses. She says, “I decided to do what’s right, and break tradition. [...] let our young people decide by themselves who they love” (*Brave*, 2012).

Overdetermined femininity is also present in *Frozen*; an example of this occurs at the beginning of the movie, when some of the villagers are talking about seeing Elsa and Anna: “Oh, me sore eyes can't wait to see the Queen and the Princess. I bet they're absolutely lovely” (*Frozen*, 2013) and “I bet they are beautiful” (*Frozen*, 2013). This shows that princesses and queens are still viewed as spectacles, as items of beauty to be judged by the male gaze (while there are not any male royals for them to be compared to, Prince Hans is not spoken about like Anna and Elsa are). While being part of the monarchy requires the element of being a spectacle, the stark difference in talk about the females and the males shows this focus of beauty on females. Elsa is also punished for her power; when she is young, she is forced to keep her powers hidden. Her father says, “we'll lock the gates. We'll reduce the staff. We will limit her contact with people and keep her powers hidden from everyone... including Anna” (*Frozen*, 2013). Although her parents were not trying to villainize Elsa, they do so indirectly. From the very beginning, Elsa is a victim of her powers, having unintentionally wounded Anna when were are young. Once her powers are exposed to the rest of the village, she is villainized out of the villagers’ fears of her powers and finds solace and repose in isolation, in the snowy mountains away from civilization.

In *Moana*, there is more of a lack of gender-based stereotypes discussed in the movie. Moana’s grandmother describes her as her “father’s daughter, stubbornness and pride” (*Moana*, 2016), which are, in our present and past American culture, more stereotypically “masculine” characteristics. She is also set to become the chief after her father, not a “princess” or “queen.” Also, interestingly, it is Moana’s father who does not want her to adventure out into the ocean,

whereas her mother is the one who enables her to do so. This is a reversal from *Brave*, when Merida's father was the one who wanted her to learn how to use a bow and arrow. There is also a conscious effort in the movie to be less discriminative with regards to gender. Maui, a demigod, describes himself as the "Hero of men. [...] sorry, sorry, sorry, and women. Hero of men and women. Both. All. Not a guy/girl thing. You know, Maui is a hero to all" (*Moana*, 2016). The movie also pokes fun at the stereotypical description of Disney princesses; this is evident in an exchange between Maui and Moana:

Maui: It's called wayfinding, princess. It's not just sails and knots, it's seeing where you're going in your mind. Knowing where you are by knowing where you've been.

Moana: Okay first, I'm not a princess. I'm the daughter of the chief.

Maui: Same difference.

Moana: No!

Maui: If you wear a dress and you have an animal sidekick, you're a princess. You are not a wayfinder, you will never be a wayfinder ...

What Maui is describing is the overdetermined femininity of the Disney princess.

However, it is discussed humorously, suggesting that the Disney company knows it is responsible for its stereotypical portrayal of femininity of princesses.

In his article in the *Washington Post* titled "Researchers have found a major problem with 'The Little Mermaid' and other Disney movies," author Jeff Guo discusses the issues with the portrayal of princess in Disney Animated Films, focusing on *The Little Mermaid* and how many were pleased with the resurgence of Disney princesses and a princess that seemingly is more independent than the original three princesses. Guo said that in the original three movies, more than half of the compliments that the princesses received had to do with their appearances. In the movies from the second era, that number dropped to 38 percent, and almost 25 percent dealt with their accomplishments, skills, and successes. In the most recent era of movies, the number of

compliments based on appearance dropped yet again to 22 percent, while 40 percent involved skills or successes (Guo, *Washington Post*). While there is still work that needs to be done, this trend does show that the focus on female appearance over personality and skill is declining, and as a result helping to lessen the severity of sexism and negative feminine stereotypes.

The Portrayal of Female “Villains”

According to Henry A. Giroux,

“Disney’s animated films produce a host of exotic and stereotypical villains, heroes, and heroines [...] Disney’s representations of evil and good women appear to have been fashioned in the editorial office of Vogue. According to a 2001 study of nineteen Disney films, female characters are ‘adolescents and young adults more than expected.’ The dearth of positive female role models in Disney films is a commonplace observation, and a 2007 study showed that when older women do appear, they are portrayed ‘in a particularly negative light’” (Giroux and Pollock, 101)

Disney’s villains provide an interesting aspect of the films to study, as more often than not, in these nine films, the villains are largely older women. When older women are present, they are often portrayed as villains. It is not until the female characters reach “elder” status that they return to benevolence. In the first era and into the second era, these older women are true, evil villains that the audience loves to hate and roots against.

In the original story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by the Brothers Grimm, the evil queen is basically the same character as in the Disney film. She does not exhibit humanity in any sense, and sets out to kill Snow White from the very beginning of the movie, when she learns that she is no longer the “fairest in the land.” While the Brothers Grimm version of *Cinderella* is a morbid one, Disney based its version of Cinderella off of the version by Charles

Perrault. In Perrault's version, the stepmother is described as vain and selfish, similar to the stepmother in Disney's film. In Perrault's version, and unlike the Disney version, the stepmother and stepsisters are forgiven in the end, and they reconcile with Cinderella; they are given *humanity*. Disney followed Perrault's lead yet again, choosing the story of *Sleeping Beauty* to turn into the next Disney animated princess film. But, like *Cinderella*, Disney made major changes to the plot. In that story, the evil fairy (Maleficent in the Disney film) is responsible for cursing the princess, but then is relatively absent for the remainder of the story. This is a stark contrast to Disney's version, in which Maleficent turns into a dragon and battles with Prince Philip.

In the first three films, it does not appear that changes were made to alter the female villains essence in any way, suggesting the acceptance of female villain portrayal and acceptance of villainizing older women in exchange for celebrating youth and younger women and girls. However, the fact that Disney changed the ending of *Cinderella* to leave out the reconciliation of Cinderella with her stepmother and stepsisters suggests that there was an active choice to omit the potential humanity from those characters; this may be due to the lack of female representation in the creation of the story. Similarly, in *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney's action to make Maleficent's role much larger and as a result more evil serves to further perpetuate the "evilness" of older female villains.

The Little Mermaid's Ursula is the only female villain from the second set of movies. In the original story by Hans Christian Andersen, the little mermaid visits a sea witch, who is responsible for turning her into a human in exchange for her tongue and voice. After that, however, similar to the original *Sleeping Beauty* story, the sea witch is close to irrelevant for the remainder of the story and plot. Again, the villainization of Ursula's character in Disney's

version of *The Little Mermaid* serves as a representation of the lack of females in the creative process of the story; taking away any potential for demonstration of *humanity* in the female villain characters.

Bell describes the “femme fatales” of older Disney movies (such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*), saying “These representations of the treacherous feminine are meant to represent demonic natural forces that, like a cyclone, threaten to uproot man from himself” (Bell, 115). Bell further writes that, “The pleasure derives from their power and authority as femme fatales, living and thinking only for themselves as sexual subjects, not sexual objects; the duplicity derives from the animated perfection that subverts their authority even while fetishizing it – these deadly women are also doomed women” (Bell, 116). As discussed above, in the first three movies, all three “villains” are older women. In *Snow White*, she is literally called the “Evil Queen.” The Evil Queen targets Snow White for no other given reason other than the fact that “The queen feared that some day Snow White’s beauty would surpass her own,” and she consults her magic mirror to ask “who’s the fairest one of all?” To which the mirror responds, “Famed is thy beauty, but hold, a lovely maid I see. Cheeks red as roses, hair black as ebony and skin white as snow.” After transforming into an old hag, and convincing Snow White to eat a poisonous apple, she falls to her death after being trapped on a cliff by the dwarfs.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent curses princess Aurora, and is the villain; her name literally means “causing or capable of producing evil or mischief.” She is described as being an older, evil witch who is jealous because she was not invited to Princess Aurora’s birth ceremony. After transforming into an evil dragon in an attempt to kill Prince Philip, who wounds her with his sword as she falls to her death off of a crumbling rock cliff.

In *Cinderella*, the villain is Cinderella's cruel stepmother Lady Tremaine, who orders Cinderella to do endless chores and does not allow her to go to the ball. The narrator describes Lady Tremaine as "cold, cruel, and bitterly jealous of Cinderella's charm and beauty," and "grimly determined to forward the interests of her own two awkward daughters." While her punishment is not death in the end, she is left in embarrassment without suitors for her two daughters. Again, this stark difference in endings (as in the original story, the stepsisters marry two guardsmen from the palace and reconcile with Cinderella) shows that the creators wanted the audience to dislike, and even loathe, the stepmother and her daughters; to feel no sympathy or empathy for them, as they represented the "evil" of the film. The audience knows that none of these female villains will triumph in the end – they are all doomed from the start.

The Little Mermaid's Ursula is the only female villain from the second set of movies, which possibly shows a change in the default villain as an older female. Sebastian refers to Ursula as a "demon" and a "monster," she has a deeper voice and a menacing cackle. The audience also knows that movie will not end well for Ursula. Ursula functions as a demonic natural force; using the water as her weapon to attempt to kill Eric and Ariel. She despises Ariel's father, King Triton, which leads to her anger and her ability to control the entire ocean and create a massive storm at the end of the movie. However, she is unsuccessful and is ultimately impaled by Eric, causing her death.

Each movie in the new era has its own femme fatale, but unlike the traditional female Disney villain (e.g. Cinderella's stepmother or Maleficent), these new characters are not actually truly evil. A common theme in the newest set of Disney animated movies is the presence of villains who are not actually completely evil; they show humanity and are not portrayed as inherently devious and cold-hearted. In *Frozen*, Elsa is painted as somewhat of a villain by the

townspeople, but is not the true villain of the story; that would be Prince Hans. Elsa sings “Let it Go,” and she shows her powers, which she tries to use for good, and the audience can sympathize and empathize with her. In *Moana*, the audience sees Te’Ka as being THE natural force of evil, but learns that Te’Ka is really Te’Fiti without her heart. In both cases, the female “villains” use natural forces, Elsa with ice/snow and Te’Ka with the earth, rock and fire, but they are not truly “evil.” Thus marks another shift in the ways in which natural forces are used, in a way that is not inherently evil.

In the newer movies, the women are also not doomed. In fact, they are celebrated. Bell writes that “Disney’s deadly women cast their spells, not only on their young women victims, but on the entire society from which they are excluded” (Bell, 117). In the first six films, the villains end up fighting against not just the princesses, but the princesses friends, family, and love interests as well. This is also seen in *Moana* and *Frozen*; in *Moana*, Moana and Maui team up to try to bring an end to Te’Ka, and in *Frozen*, Arendelle sends a crew to go find Elsa and capture her. However, they are not the same as the “bad guys” as in earlier Disney movies. They are not the stereotypical “femme fatale,” because they are “good” at heart. The audience is not rooting against these women. And, in *Brave*, one could argue that Merida’s mother is the “femme fatale” (and not the villain), but by the end she and Merida reconcile and sort out their differences.

Bell writes:

The fated doom of the predatory, animated femme fatale is always marked by two events: the collective and unified efforts of all other characters in the films, and the upheaval of natural forces – rock slides, ocean storms, and cliff precipices. Together they reestablish the control and stability of the cultural and natural order in the destruction of the transgressive feminine (Bell, 118).

In *Snow White*, the Evil Queen falls to her death off of a cliff in the presence of the dwarfs. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Philip is given a sword from the fairies that allow him to kill Maleficent in a fiery chaos. In *Cinderella*, interestingly, all are present for the stepmother's undoing, but Cinderella is actually the one to "save herself" by presenting the glass slipper. In *The Little Mermaid*, there is a massive storm present at the time of the major battle scene at the end of the film.

These natural disaster events are present throughout the most recent era of Disney animated films as well. In *Brave*, a rock cliff is used to kill Mor'du, the cursed bear that threatens Merida's clan; Elinor, Merida's mother, is responsible for loosening the rock, which ends up falling onto Mor'du, killing him. In *Frozen*, Elsa uses ice and snow. In *Moana*, nature, rocks, islands, fire and water are used *by* Te'Fiti. In all three recent films, these natural forces are *used by* the female "villains," who are not actually true villains at all, almost as a reclamation of power and to show that there is goodness inside of them. Of the earlier films, *The Little Mermaid* is the only film in which the villainess uses natural forces; she causes the massive storm that ultimately leads to her own doom, but is not doing so for good.

Over the course of the three eras of animated films, there is a change seen in the way the female villains are portrayed: from being pure evil and ruthless to misunderstood and good-hearted. There is also a shift in the way natural disasters and forces are used; first used *on* the villains to cause their demise, to being used *by* the villains to reclaim power and respect from the people around them. Ultimately, this shows a shift both in how older female characters are portrayed, showing their humanity, as well as allowing them to take control of power and use it in a way that is not demonizing and in a way that should be feared by society.

The Use of Grandmothers as Vehicles for Change

On the use and purpose served by grandmothers in Disney films, Bell writes:

These grandmothers have potent powers and manifest their magic in ‘Disney dust,’ those colorful sparkles that mark good magic in the Disney lexicon. As protectors and guides, Disney grandmothers appear and produce magic and service at crucial moments of transition in the world of women: childbirth, sexual maturation, and marriage (Bell, 119).

In the older movies, the “older” women function similarly. While there is not an old woman character helping Snow White, Cinderella’s fairy godmother arrives when Cinderella is going to go to the ball to meet her future husband, the prince. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the three fairies are present when Aurora is born and then again when she is sixteen years old and is about to prick her needle on the spinning wheel. After the fact, she is kissed by Prince Philip, and ends up marrying him, living “happily ever after.” In *The Little Mermaid*, we do not see an old woman *helping* as Ariel changes (in the original story, the little mermaid’s grandmother is present and explains to her that humans have a shorter lifespan than mermaids, but have souls that live forever). There is also an absence of *any* older female characters in *Aladdin*, neither helping Jasmine or serving as a villain. In *Beauty and the Beast*, however, Mrs. Potts serves as this grandmotherly vehicle for change, guiding Belle through her stay at the castle.

Interestingly, Moana’s grandmother aids in her travels and in her moments of courage; her spirit also appears before Moana when she is having doubts about returning the heart of Te’Fiti. This signifies a shift from an importance placed on the stereotypical big moments in the female life cycle to be more focused on adventure, individuality and finding oneself. In the earlier films, the climactic events occur around “womanhood” and maturation into adulthood, such as in *Sleeping Beauty* when Aurora is cursed to prick her finger on a spinning wheel on her sixteenth birthday. In newer films like *Moana*, there is a twist on the “coming of age” plot line.

More often than not, the female characters are destined to become rulers (Elsa to become queen in *Frozen* and Moana to become chief in *Moana*), and around the times that the princesses are set to become leaders, the main events of the stories take place.

Waves of Feminism and their corresponding Disney Animated film eras

We see the idea of the ‘cult of domesticity,’ which “dictated that a true woman’s place was in the home, meeting the needs of husband and children” (Krolokke and Sorensen, 5), at work in the first era of Disney animated films. In *Snow White*, Snow White bargains with the dwarfs, saying “if you let me stay, I’ll keep the house for you. I’ll wash, clean, and cook.” In addition, Grumpy is constantly negatively referring to Snow White’s womanhood, expressing his disdain by saying things like “humph, women.” In *Cinderella*, a main plot theme in the story is that she must clean and do an endless number of chores for her cruel stepmother. And in *Sleeping Beauty*, the three fairies ask “who’ll wash, and cook?” as if those are the most important roles for women, when they are deciding how they will raise Aurora in the woods (to be fair, those are legitimate questions for the fairies to ask, considering they have never had to do those tasks before). Similarly, the fact that princess Aurora was sent to live in seclusion in the woods with only the three fairies to take care of her can function as a literal example of women being forced into silence and out of the public eye, not to be heard.

In *The Little Mermaid*, we see the oppression that the second wave of feminism fought against demonstrated when Ursula is trying to convince Ariel to take her deal and turn her into a human in exchange for her voice:

Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation,
 True gentlemen avoid it when they can.
 But they dote and swoon and fawn,
 On a lady who's withdrawn.

It's she who holds her tongue who gets her man.

Here, Ursula is pointing out that women who look pretty and remain quiet (and stick to their wifely and motherly duties within the home) are women who will be accepted by society. Ariel literally has her voice taken away when she goes to the human world. In *Beauty and the Beast*, we also see an extreme version of a male chauvinist in Gaston, Belle's relentless suitor. Gaston says many things that perpetuate the notion that the female should be silent and her place resides in the home, as a mother and a wife. He says, "It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas and thinking," as well as, "Here, picture this: A rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire, and my little wife massaging my feet, while the little ones play on the floor with the dogs. We'll have six or seven." Here, Gaston is detailing his vision of a perfect life, one in which his wife will dote on his every need and will also produce many children and serve as a dutiful mother. We see Belle is disgusted by Gaston and what he says, functioning as a feminist in her own way. In *Aladdin*, we see Jasmine completely denying her father's and her many suitors' attempts to arrange a marriage for her. She expresses her frustration, saying, "I've never done a thing on my own. I've never had any real friends. I've never even been outside the palace walls." Jasmine is frustrated with the fact that she has lived a life of relative solitude because she is a princess, and must be married to a prince against her will. Jasmine is actively challenging the traditional role of the Disney princess as a wife and mother, as a princess for the prince, as a stereotypical feminine figure.

Interestingly, in this second set of movies, there is more "teaming up" of the princes and princesses to defeat the villain; Ariel and Eric are both present to defeat Ursula, Belle and the Beast are both present at the castle when Gaston is defeated, and Aladdin and Jasmine are both present for Jafar's demise. However, Prince Eric is the one to drive the ship's mast into Ursula's stomach, the Beast is the one to knock Gaston off of the ledge, and Aladdin is responsible for

putting Jafar into the lamp. In these three films, although the princess is present and plays a more active role in the demise of the villains, the princes are ultimately the ones to close the deal.

It is in this third era of Disney movies where we start to see more significant shifts in the portrayal of femininity, in alignment with ideals of the third and fourth waves of feminism. This can be seen by the dramatic increase in the presence of female filmmakers and females in writing and directing roles in the newer films. Consequently, the characters they create and the storylines they employ usually call into question these preconceived stereotypes about what womanhood is and what it means to be a woman. In *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*, the shift of the traditional love story shows this stepping away from the traditional accepted concepts of the feminine; these princesses are no longer interested in being a wife or mother figure; rather, they embark on adventurous journeys to complete their missions and “save” their worlds or kiss the princesses to “save” them; something that, in the first three films and somewhat in the second three films, was done mostly by the male characters and princes.

The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Future of Disney

According to Kira Cochrane in her article from *The Guardian* titled “The fourth wave of feminism: meet the rebel women,” the fourth wave of feminism has since stemmed from the third, second, and first wave and is marked by the use of social media to spread feminist ideals and ideas. It expands upon the focuses of third wave feminism, adding an emphasis on fighting rape culture and sexual harassment and assault. She also notes that children are exposed to feminist ideals and concepts at a much younger age, cultivating a generation of children who are aware of the gender disparities that feminists are trying to fight. For the future of Disney movies, this could mean seeing even more drastic changes in the way the princesses are portrayed,

resulting in both its function as a creator of culture and a reflection of culture as it simultaneously attempts to meet the demands of an increasingly feminist population.

Interestingly, author Jeff Guo of the *Washington Post* points out that the female characters in the second era of Disney films actually have less dialogue than not only their male counterparts, but also less than the princesses in the first era of films; he says *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* are 50-50, 60-40, and 71-29 female-male dialogue ratios. This is a stark contrast to *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, where the men speak 68, 71, and 90 percent of the time, respectively. Despite Jasmine going against the grain in terms of the traditional marriage plot in *Aladdin*, it is still a heavily male-dominated film. To be fair, however, *Aladdin* is the title character, and therefore should be expected to receive the most dialogue. However, Jasmine is considered to be one of the major Disney princesses, so seeing how she is represented in the film becomes important. And, what does this say about the amount of dialogue allotted to Ariel and Belle, who are technically the title characters in their respective films? Interestingly, for the most recent films, while women have 52% of the lines in *Brave*, they only have 41% of the lines in *Frozen*, even though the two main characters are two sisters (Guo, *Washington Post*).

Krolokke and Sorensen add that the understanding of gender is “a discursive practice that is both a hegemonic, social matrix and a ‘performative gesture’ with the power to disturb the chain of social repetition and open up new realities” (18). Disney also has the power to change the stereotypes of gender and disrupt that chain of social repetition. Guo says that while there is still a way to go, Disney “has been making visible efforts to inject feminism into its movies” noting that there has been a shift towards more androgenous princesses portrayed in the company’s animated films.

Conclusion

While there is still much work to be done to completely eradicate stereotypes about gender, and specifically, femininity, this most recent era of films stands a force to be reckoned with in terms of its changes from the original era of Disney animated films. It shows that Disney is willing to adapt to shifts in cultural values and beliefs, and as a result, potentially function as a model for society on how to get rid of stereotypes. It functions as both a receiver of culture and a creator of culture, and it can serve as a valuable tool for pushing agendas of gender equality, although it will take time.

For all three of the latest movies, especially *Brave* and *Moana*, the themes of challenging the traditions of the cultures they exist within is an interesting turning point in Disney animated films. This may teach young people and children to question and challenge established cultural norms, to be themselves and do what they want to do. Bell writes that princesses are “Thrown into situations in which they participate in, but do not engineer, their own rescues,” and “they conclude their adventures with only their circumstances altered; their characters remain fundamentally unchanged. Since the films do not empower their characters, they cannot possibly empower their audiences.” (Bell, 143). This is where these new movies challenge old Disney traditions; in all three movies, the characters *are* empowered. They are not left for a prince to save. In the end of *Brave*, Merida remains unmarried and her choices are accepted. In *Frozen*, Elsa’s powers are accepted and embraced by the people of Arendale after she uses them to save Anna. Moana is able to save her island by completing her journey to restore the heart of Te’Fiti. In *Frozen*, Anna is saved by Elsa, her sister. Queen Elinor is saved by Merida. The village of Motunui is saved by Moana. All three show a deviation from the notion that all princesses are

good for is to marry a prince, and these changes do correlate with the increase in female representation in filmmaking roles.

Across the board, there does seem to be a shift in the portrayal of feminine characters and “princesses” in Disney Animated films, with each era becoming increasingly more “feminist.” As a greater proportion of the population in current American society becomes more and more feminist and promotes a more open-minded culture, Disney can serve as a vehicle to both reflect a more open-minded culture and also create it, using its characters to break stereotypes and norms that have existed in American society for so long; stereotypes not only related to gender, but to class, race, and age as well. Disney has the power to tell stories of *all* people.

WORKS CITED

1. *Aladdin*. Dir. Ron Clements. Prod. Ron Clements. Buena Vista Pictures, 1992. Film.
2. "Aladdin" (1992). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
3. *Beauty and the Beast*. Dir. Gary Trousdale. Prod. Don Hahn. Buena Vista Pictures, 1991. Film.
4. "Beauty and the Beast" (1991). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
5. Bell, Elizabeth. *From Mouse to Mermaid the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana U, 2012. Print.
6. *Brave*. Dir. Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. Prod. Katherine Sarafian. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012. Film.
7. "Brave." *Disney Movies*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
8. "Brave (2012)." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
9. Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* (1988): 519-31.
10. *Cinderella*. Dir. Clyde Geronimi. Prod. Walt Disney. RKO Radio Pictures, 1950. Film.
11. "Cinderella" (1950). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
12. Desowitz, Bill. "Meet the 'Moana' Producer Who Helped Disney Animate Female Empowerment." *IndieWire*. N.p., 03 Nov. 2016. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
13. De Villeneuve, Gabrielle-Suzanna Barbot. *Beauty and the Beast (Illustrated with Interactive Elements)*. Harpercollins Publishers Inc, 2017.
14. Dill, Kathryn. "Disney Tops Global Ranking Of The Most Powerful Brands In 2016." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 18 Feb. 2016. Web. 11 Mar. 2017.
15. Feder, Abigail M. "'A Radiant Smile from the Lovely Lady': Overdetermined Femininity in 'Ladies' Figure Skating." *The Drama Review* (1994): 62-78.
16. *Frozen*. Dir. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. Prod. Peter Del Vecho. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2013. Film.
17. "Frozen (2013)." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
18. Giroux, Henry A., and Grace Pollock. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. Print.
19. Giroux, Henry A., and Grace Pollock. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. Amazon Kindle E-book.
20. Guo, Jeff. "Researchers Have Found a Major Problem with 'The Little Mermaid' and Other Disney Movies." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 25 Jan. 2016. Web. 13 Mar. 2017.
21. *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2017.
22. Krollokke, Charlotte and Anne S. Sorensen. *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance*. SAGE Publications, 2005.
23. Li-Vollmer, Meredith and Mark LaPointe. "Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film." *International Journal of Media and Culture* (2003). 89-109
24. Lynch, John. "The 50 Disney movies that made the most money at the US box office." *Business Insider*. 04 May 2018. Wed. 13 May 2018.
25. Maloney, Margaret C, László Gál, and H C. Andersen. Hans Christian Andersen's the Little Mermaid. Toronto: Methuen Children's, 1983. Print.
26. *Moana*. Dir. Ron Clements. Prod. Osnat Shurer. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2016. Film.

27. "Moana (2016)." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
28. Perrault, Charles, 1628-1703. *Cinderella*. Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1973/1972. Print.
29. Roberts, Daniel. "Disney's New CFO Is Its Highest-ranking Woman Ever." *Fortune.com*. N.p., n.d. Web.
30. *Sleeping Beauty*. Dir. Clyde Geronimi. Prod. Walt Disney. Buena Vista Distribution, 1959. Film.
31. "Sleeping Beauty" (1959). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
32. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Dir. David Hand. Prod. Walt Disney. RKO Radio Pictures, 1937. Film.
33. "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
34. *The Little Mermaid*. Dir. Ron Clements. Prod. John Musker. Buena Vista Pictures, 1989. Film.
35. "The Little Mermaid" (1989). *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
36. "The Walt Disney Company." *The Walt Disney Company*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Mar. 2017.
37. Thomas, Bob. *Walt Disney: An American Original*. Disney Editions, 1994. Amazon Kindle E-book.
38. Zimmerman, Don H., and Candance West. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* (1987): 125-151.
39. Zipes, Jack. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987. Print.