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COM361: Film Genres

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A Slow Process: Disney's Feminist Movement

Disney, an iconic, international staple known all around the world, claims to a part of the feminist movement with empowering and strong princesses. Take Princess Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989) for example: an outspoken, young girl who wants to see more of the world and go against her father's authority. Her character was introduced thirty years ago, so one could argue that Disney has been on the feminist train for years now. Disney princesses challenge traditional gender roles at a very slow and limited pace.

There is a misunderstanding with what a feminist character looks like. Comparing it to traditional roles, where women are expected to be passive, beautiful, and thin. In the article, "Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender," by Julia Woods, it states that "...women are portrayed as...younger and thinner...passive, dependent on men...the rule seems to be that a woman may be strong and successful if and only if she exemplifies traditional stereotypes of femininity-subservience, passivity, beauty, and an identity linked to one or more men." (33) This can be directly translated to the Disney princesses I am studying.

Going further into my analysis of Princess Ariel, Disney does a couple of things right for the character: she is outspoken and goes against her father's (a man's) authority, she is not satisfied with the world she is given and seeks out more for herself. Her want for freedom comes

from meeting a human prince, Eric, when she gets a glimpse of the outside world. To pursue him, she gives up her voice to be with him. In order to get her freedom and voice back, a man must fall in love with her. This is setting up a very unhealthy ideology for the audience. The setbacks of Ariel's character overpower the positive aspects, not making her a very progressive character.

Moving forward nine years, *Mulan* (*Mulan*, 1998) is introduced, and is still seen today as one of the most iconic feminist Disney characters of all time. She is a very courageous and brave person who is both physically and mentally strong, not only for herself, but for her family's honor. Disney messes up in still including a goal of falling in love, and Mulan has to disguise herself as a man to join the war, but this can be dismissed as a cultural expectation.

Princess Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009) is one of the first modern-day feminist Disney princesses, as well as being the first black princess. Tiana is a feminist icon in certain ways: she is very independent and hard-working, she has a dream of opening her own restaurant, and never dreamt of marriage. When she first meets Prince Naveen when he is in frog form, she kisses him for the right reasons. She kisses him to help him return to his human form, not to become a princess herself. As the movie progresses, the feminist ideology fades. Tiana gives up her life-long dream of opening her own restaurant to marry Naveen. Even though she eventually gets her restaurant, it's with the help of Naveen.

A year later, *Tangled* (2010) introduced Rapunzel, who is a fairly intelligent and resourceful character. She, alike Tiana, dreams of seeing the lights, and not of marriage or a prince. However, Rapunzel falls in love with the first and only man she's ever met, Flynn Rider. In the scene where Rapunzel escapes the castle for the first time with Flynn's help, she goes through a series of emotions; a very common representation of women. It is normal for women

to be perceived as emotionally unstable and physically incapable. When Rapunzel first leaves the castle, she sings a song of excitement, but quickly worries about what her mother would have to say. This is followed by a series of conflicting emotions, making her appear extremely unstable and incapable of making a decision for herself.

The final, and perhaps most feminist Disney princess I looked at was Moana (*Moana*, 2016). There is no love interest or idea/question of romance for the entire duration of the film. Moana is a very independent and outspoken character who wants to do things for herself, to prove to herself, family, and island that she is powerful and capable enough to take over her father's position as ruler and chief. Moana is the first Disney princess to fulfill a "normal" body-type, however this is not completely a positive thing. While Moana has a little bit more of a normal body type, it is reflecting what is expected of women of the time. Body positivity came into light by the end of 2015, but with that came the expectation that women are curvy with big hips and chest, and a small waist. This body type is what Moana fulfills – not an average body type. Another positive and modern thing Disney does is mock traditional male gender roles by overexaggerating Maui's cockiness, need to feel superior, and overconfidence. Nonetheless, Moana still needs his help throughout her journey.

A commonality between all of these princesses was how thin and how sexualized the princesses are. "Disney films specifically have been shown to portray some stereotypical depictions of gender. An examination of six Disney heroines found a focus on their sexuality and the "exotic," particularly in characters of color (Lacroix 2004). The author cited numerous examples of both sexism and racism in the films, specifically noting the heroines' extremely pale skin tones, small waists, delicate limbs, and full breasts." (England 556) Even though they're all very thin, they still have an hourglass figure. In addition, they all hold some sort physical beauty.

In contrast to the women that obtain power on their own in Disney, like Ursula, and Cruella de Vil, who are both unattractive, evil people, the princesses hold immense physical attractiveness. This is telling the audience that if a woman is successful by herself, she is unattractive and unwanted. However, if she is attractive and appealing to a man, she can hold power with his help. A quote from the article, "Playing Princess: Preschool Girls' Interpretation of Gender Stereotypes in Disney Princess Media," written by Julia Golden, encapsulates the problem with these princesses, no matter how female-forward they are or not: "...the defining traits of the majority are self-sacrificing and innocent ingénues whose happy ending depends on the discovery of their one true love." (300)

There's a foundation Disney has created to open the possibility to making a completely feminist character, especially with the most recent princess, Moana. However, Disney has been making these gestures for the last 30 years, so why can't they let go of these traditional gender roles? As far as personality and morals go, Disney does not seem to be lacking in the feminist department, however the idea of a realistic, average body type, so far, does not seem plausible. Disney has been the staple for romance, princes and princesses, and beauty comes with that. Royalty has always been tied to the expectation of beauty. Disney holds this traditional image of princesses, and people do not like straying from tradition. The thought of change scares people, and since Disney is such a powerful and massive business, they cannot threaten their status.

Disney has attempted on their non-commercial, smaller platforms to instill more equality in their work. For example, in the children's show, *Doc McStuffins*, lesbian moms were introduced, and Disney received a lot of backlash. On a more popular platform for older children and preteens, they tried again on the show, *Andi Mack*, where they made two of the main characters homosexual, setting them up to date. This received an equal amount of backlash. This

created such an uproar that a petition was made to take the shows off the air. Since they received so much negative feedback with their smaller platforms, attempting to introduce it to their staple and iconic characters, like princesses, may receive higher levels of backlash.

As fans progress, so does Disney. This is important to note, especially with *Moana* being released. Around the time Princess Moana was introduced, feminism and female empowerment was a widely talked about thing, especially on social media with the prime age/era of Disney princess fans (late teens, early 20s). With this also came a huge wave of body positivity, hence why Moana is not as thin as the other princesses. While her character is still curvy and sexualized, it is a step in the right direction. I believe Disney is at this difficult crossroad with trying to navigate how to keep their younger audience happy while also keeping the older audience engaged. In the book, *Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World*, author Carl Hiaansen, makes an important point about Disney as a brand and business, “the secret weapon is trust. Disney is the most trusted brand name in the history of marketing. It hooks us when we’re little and never lets go...” (13) he also goes on to say, “middle America completely trusts Mickey with sex, violence, and occasional unwholesomeness, as long as it’s mildly entertaining.” (14) The image of Disney with these princesses, romance, and happy ending are staples that people know and love to be a part of the brand.

Disney, being the empire it is, has captured such a large audience, which in theory would mean they can portray whatever they want. However, it’s important to remember that since the creation of Disney, almost everything, especially in big-selling princesses, has been nothing but heterosexual and hegemonic ideologies. For example, all Disney princesses fall in love with a man, they dress and act accordingly for the male gaze, and male’s aggression is something overlooked and seen as normal, because it’s what the audience knows. Going back to my earlier

point, people don't like change, especially with the icon that is Disney. Perhaps there is a real foundation with *Moana* established, but Disney could be moving at a much faster pace than they have attempted.

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