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A 21st Century Fairy Tale: Disney Princesses and Perceptions of Gender

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<p style="text-align:center">A 21st Century Fairy-Tale: Disney Princesses and Perceptions of Gender</p>

"Disney's animated characters, songs, story themes and trinkets are true cultural icons, venerated across the world by staunch believers, adults as well as children, who live in massive urban centers and in tiny rural hamlets" (Faherty 1). For some, the Disney princess is the "princess of all princesses" (Do Rozario 34). As Bruce asserts, since the 1937 premiere of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, "Disney's princesses have become a directing force of young American girls' culture" ("Princesses" 7). Before determining whether this force is positive or negative, one must ask: does the portrayal of princesses in Disney movies affect girls' perceptions of gender and gender roles? To answer this question, one can turn to current research in the field of media communication. Despite differing opinions and findings, most researchers agree that some Disney princesses end up sending mixed messages in regards to gender while others are considered old-fashioned. Bruce points out that "as it has been fifteen or more years since the wave of criticism [on Disney princesses] hit its greatest height, it is now worth exploring the question again" ("Princesses" 8), especially with the newest wave of Disney princesses.

The research concerning Disney princesses exists, primarily, on two planes. Scholars using coding to analyze the gender portrayals and messages in specific movies, or they observe the effects of the movies on girls, either through watching play among younger children, facilitating discussion, or conducting interviews. This research can lead to critical implications, including the impact on the now-college aged Disney generation (Bruce "Role") and the LGBTQ community (Towbin).

Most researchers begin with the assumption that Disney princess movies "impart meaning and reflect social constructions of masculinity and femininity" (Baker-Sperry 717). This is usually due to the stereotypes that are presented in these films. In 2001, Faherty conducted an analysis of 19 classic Disney films, including princess movies and favorites like *The Lion King, 101 Dalmatians*, and *Toy Story* (2). In the sampled films, "Viewed quantitatively, female characters do not appear to be disadvantaged or to suffer negative consequences, as some critics have charged" (Faherty 4). This is to say that, according to Faherty, female characters are no more likely than men "to experience a social vulnerability" (4), yet this may have something to do with the fact that "males composed 63% [of characters] and females 28%" (3).

Towbin performed a similar analysis using coding software. This analysis, in contrast, was thematic on 26 Disney movies, not all of which were princess movies. However, they did determine male and female traits. According to Towbin's results, there are five common male characteristics: "Men primarily use physical means to express their emotions or show no emotions. Men are not in control of their sexuality. Men are naturally strong and heroic. Men have non-domestic jobs...Overweight men have negative characteristics" (28). These apply to men from *Cinderella's* Prince Charming to Kuzco in *Emperor's New Groove*, the newest movie Towbin analyzed from 2000 (20). The characteristics of females are stark opposites or portrayed negatively. From the study, it was found that "a woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect. Women are helpless and in need of protection. Women are domestic and likely to marry. Overweight women are ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried" (Towbin 30). Towbin and others show through their research that such "strongly gendered messages help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity" (England 565).

Now that the common viewpoints about the messages behind the portrayal of Disney princesses have been discussed, this review can turn to studies that focus on the messages behind specific movies. For the most part, the movies are divided into three categories. The oldest movies usually consist of *Snow White, Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, all of which were produced during the life of Walt Disney (Do Rozario 34). The next section, which will be referred to the as the middle movies, consists of movies created around or during the 1990s, ranging from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) to *Mulan* (1998). The latest phase of Disney princesses emerged with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), followed by *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013). Bruce recognizes that critics argue that "the Disney movies have been reinforcing the idea that women should play a subservient, passive role, and that the females who have taken the movies to heart have thus been taught that they should fulfill that passive role in society, not acting but waiting for a man to give them the perfect life" ("Princesses" 8).

Do Rozario concentrates on the first two categories of Disney movies, with specific emphasis on the early movies. She relates the princess to her time period's society. Snow White, for example, from 1937, "matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in times of high unemployment and poverty until she is found once again by her prince" (Do Rozario 38). In this, though, she is "subordinate to the male" (Do Rozario 39). Aurora, on the other hand, Do Rozario writes, as the last of the early period princesses, is a "prototype Baby Boomer…and wakes from the curse in the 1959 feature, her past metaphorically left behind, leaving her ready for the 60s" (38).

In a study with 148 first-graders, Baker-Sperry used Disney's *Cinderella* to assess children's viewpoints of gender in a traditional framework. In the 1950 movie, the women "are concerned with physical appearance of self or other and clearly understand this to have direct

impact on the ability to procure a suitable mate. Men in the tale fill traditionally masculine status roles: king, prince, and ambassador. The men have obvious social power; the women struggle to attain or maintain status on their own" (Baker-Sperry 718). It has what Baker-Sperry calls a "clear, traditional depiction of gendered expectations" (718).

As England found in her study of the early films, there were definite masculine and feminine traits. While the males were "assertive," "independent," and "brave," the feminine traits consisted of behavior that was "submissive," "affectionate," and "sensitive," or the character "was described as attractive," portrayed as a "victim," or "collapse[d] crying" (England 559). England and her coauthors concluded that "the first three Disney Princess movies…depicted in general more gendered attributes for both the princesses and the princes" in that the coding revealed these traits were presented through the films' characters (562). For example, Snow White "seemed to be chosen by [her prince] and obligingly fell in love" (England 563).

Research shows that the princesses of the middle stage weren't always so obliging. Do Rozario continues her analysis, finding that, in the middle movies like *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas,* and *Mulan*, the princess' function "is self-centered, direct to self-discovery and self-rule rather than obedience to dictated masculine or feminine roles" (Do Rozario 51). Do Rozario cites this assertion with the fact that "Not one Disney father wishes for a son or remarks on the absence, implicitly condoning the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter" (51).

Others, like England, are not so sure. The middle movies, she writes, "still retained messages that are reminiscent of traditional roles" (564). There was still some change from the early films, however. "Whereas the later princesses performed more active roles in the final rescues of the movies, the princes still performed most of the climatic rescues…Over time, the

princesses' roles have changed, however, from being completely passive…to assisting the prince in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*" (England 565).

Towbin's study takes a unique stance in that it specifically focuses on the portrayals of male and female sexuality, which also impact gender roles. She proposes that "unhealthy portrayals of female sexuality abound in Disney" (Towbin 36), specifically citing the middle movies like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin.* In the former, "the 'male' candlestick woos the 'female' broom; as she says, 'No, no, no,' he says, 'Yes, yes, yes.' This reinforces a societal assumption that when women say no, they really mean yes; or worse, that her refusal is simply irrelevant" (Towbin 36). The scene in *Aladdin* where Jasmine becomes a seductress "teaches children that one way for a woman to get what she wants from a man is to manipulate him with her sexuality" (Towbin 36). However, Towbin returns to *Beauty and the Beast* to cite what she considers the "most insidious message about sexuality" (36). She summarizes the plot, noting the Beast's abuse of Belle and the magical transformation because of her love for him. From this, "children learn that it is acceptable for men to abuse women. They learn that if women tolerate the abuse and continue to love him despite his abuse, she will eventually be able to change him into a loving partner" (Towbin 36). Lastly, Towbin turns to Ariel of *The Little Mermaid*. In this film, "the princess must sacrifice her very voice. The symbolism here is powerful. To win the love of the prince, she must forfeit her thoughts and intellect, her independence and identity" (Towbin 38). Towbin considers this "an apt metaphor for many Disney heroines: No one listens to their words" (38).

This, however, began to change with the latest installment of Disney Princess movies. England also analyzed *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and found that it presented mixed gender messages. Tiana had "a successful career" but it was "from traditionally feminine labor"

(England 564). Towbin also points out that, "the prince rescues twice and is rescued three times, a non-traditional gender portrayal, but the princess rescues once and is rescued twice, a more traditional gender portrayal" (564). She also pointed out that "A princess [had] not yet performed the final rescue without the involvement of the prince" (England 565). This, however, would soon change.

Wilde recently conducted an analysis of *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) in terms of the posters, trailers, and films themselves with "semiotic analysis using Propp's character theory" (137). *Tangled* continues the mixed messages about gender roles. In the poster, Flynn, "the male protagonist of the film" holds a frying pan, and "the fact that the male is holding a domestic object as a weapon juxtaposes the traditional domestic roles associated with women" (Wilde 137). Yet, Rapunzel is traditionally beautiful and she becomes "a contemporary princess in an all too traditional setting. She might not have waited for her prince to come and rescue her and have dreams of her own, yet a man stumbled across her tower, she accidently falls in love and her journey is reconciled through true love's kiss" (Wilde 140).

This all changes with the film *Brave*. First of all, on the promotional poster, Wilde notes, "Merida stands alone as a female protagonist, something that is new to the Disney princess narrative and the strong rendering of the image enforces attitudes of what it means to be brave" (140). In the trailer, she speaks to the audience and introduces herself, making her "the first princess to ever lead her own tale" (Wilde 140), as seen with the iconic line from the trailer, "If you had a chance to change your fate, would you?" (*Brave*). Merida, the princess, "defies stereotypical gender codes, utilizing themes of conflict and adventure. Merida is a princess that has found her voice and will rebel against anything she does not believe in, including" an arranged marriage (Wilde 141). In *Brave,* Merida is what Wilde calls a post-feminist princess

who is "a positive role model for children; she represents different attributes that have never occurred in previous princess films. She has a voice and uses it to gain her freedom" (143).

The latest Disney princess move took the world by storm and still has little girls everywhere singing "Let It Go." The 2013 movie, *Frozen*, has what Wilde considers mixed messages in relation to gender stereotypes and post-feminism. Anna, the "heroine with girl power" (Wilde 145), is predominant in the trailer and movie, and "dismisses old traits of passivity to embark on her journey to save Arendelle" (Wilde 146). Yet, despite the girl power message, the traditional love story gets in the way. Wilde notes that Anna's "post-feminist attitudes are compromised in the scene in which she literally falls for Prince Hans" (146). Anna, and *Frozen* as a whole, "dispelled stereotypical notions of the princess narrative" because she "performed the final rescue, without the involvement of a prince" (Wilde 147). Wilde concludes that *Frozen* teaches "true love's kiss does not always save the day, but acts of selfless love and family reign supreme. These are harsh lessons for children to learn; yet it propels the positive post-feminist message of empowerment" (147).

Now that it has been established that most researchers presume some effect, often negative, from the Disney princesses, this analysis can focus on studies that study the effects on young girls in order to see *how* they are affected in terms of the perception of gender.

In the article "Princesses Without a Prince", Bruce interviewed second and third graders, ranging from seven to nine years old, about their understanding of the Disney princesses. He "sought to discover if the girls had internalized any of the arguably anti-feminist messages of the movies" ("Princesses" 9). He questioned the children on their familiarity with the Disney princess movies, asking if they had seen specific movies, and then asked them questions. The majority of these questions dealt with their plans for the future. He noted, most "see themselves

as having a job outside the home. Such counters the general sentiment of the 1980s feminist criticism, which fears that girls would all sit around waiting for their Prince" ("Princesses" 14). However, Bruce notes that the jobs land in the two main categories of service jobs and appearance jobs, which are both almost always traditionally feminine and related to princesses. Bruce considers service jobs to be veterinarians, nurses, waitresses, and teachers. The appearance jobs include actress, singer, hair stylist, and dancer ("Princesses" 15). He concludes, "Girls today may not be looking for their Prince, but in some ways, they're still looking to be a princess" ("Princesses" 15).

Other studies look at the ideas of marriage. Two such studies are those conducted by Lee and Baker-Sperry. Lee worked with 10 Korean immigrant girls, ages five through eight, using group interviews. The girls had noticed that, "In order to get married, a princess tended to be forced to abandon her own decisions and desires, or her need for socio-familial rules in marriage. However, a Disney prince had a different story: he could usually marry according to his own will" (Lee 14). Lee notes, one girl asked, "'Why can't every princess have her own way in marriage?'" (15). Another answered, "There is a rule… only a man can be [someone] or do something" (Lee 15). Baker-Sperry's study involved 148 students in first grade. She asked questions, engaged in play, and physically sat with them (720). She noted that, "No child questioned Cinderella's desire to marry the prince" (721).

Baker-Sperry's study also spread over to gender roles in general. One child asked, "Does Cinderella have babies after she gets married?" Baker-Sperry asked what she thought, and the girl replied, "She should have babies, and she will change diapers, right?" Baker-Sperry replied with the question, "If they have babies, do you think the prince will change diapers?" The answer

was a resounding "no" (Baker-Sperry 722)! This seems to suggest that Disney Princess movies like *Cinderella* cause the reinforcement of traditional gender roles.

The results of Wohlwend's study show that this may not always be true. Wohlwend examined kindergartners' play in relation to the Disney princesses, and asked, "Do girls enthusiastically take up and replay stereotypical gendered narratives evoked by dolls, or do they revise stories and characters to produce counter-narratives of their own?" (3). One child "transformed Princess Aurora" from *Sleeping Beauty* "from victim to self-rescuer" (Wohlwend 19), showing the possibility that perception of gender is not just gained from external sources.

Most researchers agree that the portrayal of princesses in Disney movies does have some effect on girls' perceptions of gender and gender roles, yet the verdict is still out as to whether this is largely positive or negative, especially in relation to the newest princess movies. From this research, one can draw two critical implications, mainly related to the gender roles of adult women and the perception of gender in relation to the LGBTQ community.

Bruce notes that the college students in his second study "had grown up surrounded by Disney…if there were any long-term effects, they ought to be manifest now that the students were about twenty years old and entering their fully adult life" ("Role" 3). He used group interviews to survey 41 college students, 26 women and 15 men. They ranged in age from 18 to 22. The women recognized the stereotypes from these films, yet "anticipated have active, self-directed lives" (Bruce "Role" 13). In contrast, among the males, eight of them discussed future careers. Six of them wanted a wife and kids, while three stressed "that their wives would not be working" (Bruce "Role" 13). Bruce found that "Clearly the female subjects expect to have jobs and families and most of all choice, and notably, no male subject described a future for his wife in such complex terms" ("Role" 14). This leads one to question whether future research should

focus on males' perceptions of gender, as they, at least in this case, are the ones perpetuating traditional understandings of gender and gender roles.

Often, the discussion of gender is not complete without a discussion of the LGBTQ community. However, with Disney princess movies, there is not direct portrayal of any behavior that does not fit the hetero-normative mold. Towbin also tackles this issue in her analysis of *all* Disney movies, not just princess ones. She notes, "No same-sex relationships are portrayed in any of the movies. Given the stereotype in United States culture that gay men and lesbian women have opposite gender behavior, such a theme was examined. Five movies depicted negative portrayals of men with traditionally feminine traits," including *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas* (Towbin 34). She also cites that, "same-sex affection between men is considered disgusting and receives ridicule. In [*Beauty and the Beast*], after winning a battle, a male candle kisses a male clock on both cheeks, and the clock reacts with disgust" (Towbin 34). Towbin concludes, "Gendered stereotypes continue to be portrayed, and non-dominant groups are portrayed negatively, marginalized, or not portrayed at all" (34).

With research such as this, scholars have been trying to answer *how* the portrayal of princesses in Disney movies affect girls' perceptions of gender and gender roles. The Disney princess narrative may be a "tale as old as time" (*Beauty and the Beast*), but the verdict is still out as to their impact on girls' perception of gender. With new movies like *Brave* and *Frozen*, "For the first time in forever" (*Frozen*), Disney is both recognizing these critiques and changing the messages in their movies to show girls that they can "rewrite the concept of 'fairy-tale' for the twenty-first century" (Bruce "Role" 20) to be a happily-ever-after of gender equality.

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