

A REFLECTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN ‘CLASSIC’ DISNEY FILMS

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INTRODUCTION

Animated films are considered an important socializing agent for young children who apply the messages to their understanding of and interactions with the people and the world around them. Disney feature-length animated films are no exception; their dominant position in the children entertainment industry has ensured them as a powerful source of learning about societal constructions and of shaping adult identities, expectations and values across various generations (Towbin et al. 2004). Drawing in audiences of all ages, Disney animation is considered universal, wholesome and magical, promoting innocent fantasies. Until recently this view has gone uncontested; however, increasingly, it gave way to certain ‘disenchantment’¹ with Disney, experienced by audiences as well as emphasized by research. The more critical assessment follows the trend of re-negotiating the relationships between media and audiences, with audiences as consumers becoming wary of mainstream corporate media products and institutions.

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The message conveyed by Disney features, previously unnoticed or overlooked in favor of the colourful, musical and happy ending plots, contemporarily appear controversial, in particular gender messages. Thus, it is noteworthy to inquire into what gender messages Disney features convey and to what extent the fantasy world presented reflects the social and ideological ‘reality’ in which they are embedded.

What follows is a brief reflection on the construction of gender as well as its intersection with age, race, class and sexuality, in eight of the most celebrated animated films from the Disney’s Classics Collection: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) and *Mulan* (1998). Various, more or less systematic, rankings and classifications exist for Disney animated features, with every fan having his or her own. In this case, the criteria of choice distinguish features from the prolific period of the 1990s, with human protagonists (and partly anthropomorphic in the case of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*) and with plots centred around romance, which emphasise gendered interactions. Two earlier success features are included to allow the possibility of comparison. All the sampled features are potent sites for the creation, circulation and consumption of gendered images; nevertheless, the gender messages are a double bind. In some cases, they reflect progressive developments in gender relations, while in others they fail to adapt to societal changes in gender (in)equality. To provide a clear illustration of the construction of gender in Disney feature-length animated films, the present analysis will focus on gender visibility, gender roles and messages, gendered bodies, gender intersections and gender performance.

GENDER VISIBILITY

In the considered features sample, five out of eight protagonists are female (i.e. *Snow White*, *Ariel*, *Belle*, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* compared to

ⁱⁱ*The concept was introduced in the social sciences by Max Weber to refer to the devaluation of mysticism in modern secular society.*

Mowgli, Aladdin and Quasimodo). Even in the features with male protagonists, such as *The Jungle Book* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* the female counterparts/love interests, Jasmine and Esmeralda, are individualized and given extensive dialogue lines, even more so than early features' male counterparts/love interests, such as Snow White's nameless prince or Ariel's prince Eric. Nevertheless, numerically, across all characters in the sample, females are underrepresented. From Snow White living with seven male dwarfs to Pocahontas and Mulan being surrounded by armed groups of men, Disney females live in a 'man's world'. They are, moreover, mostly individualized through situations in which they interact with males. Their sidekicks are invariably male (e.g. Ariel's fish friend Flounder, Pocahontas's two pets Meeko and Flit or Mulan's Chinese dragon guardian Mushu) and, except for Mulan, female leads are deprived of a mother's presence or other positive female role models (Towbin et al. 2004).

This memorable, yet minority group of female representations gives way to a singular and rather coherent image of what being a female constitutes, despite the paradoxes it encompasses. They are young and attractive, both rebellious and demure, eager to defy expectations held on them but also eager to fall in love. Meanwhile, given their greater number and presence, male representations are more varied and less easily patterned. A comparison could be drawn to 'traditional' society expectations in which males enjoy a greater liberty of behaviour, while females' experiences are more restrictive. This is not only because of the legacy of the past in so far as the lack of equal opportunities in education and the labour market, but also due to the fact that men hold the hegemonic power of defining and regulating gender boundaries as well as the authority to sanction gender transgressions (Saltzman Chafetz 2006).

GENDER ROLES AND MESSAGES

The innocent promotion of beautiful and adventurous Disney princesses along with brave and charming princes might be hardly objectionable. Nonetheless, this oversimplification of the more developed gendered representations does accurately describe the construction of gender as a principle of binary division and captures the stereotypical nature of the

gender roles and messages reproduced in Disney features, especially in the case of female images.

A significant gender segregation maintained is the gendered division of labour. While leading and secondary male characters are portrayed in an array of occupations besides royalty, including miner, music composer/conductor, inventor, sailor, soldier, hunter/huntsman, vizier, governor, bell ringer and minister of justice, all of them related to the public sphere, females are restricted to the domestic tasks of keeping house – sweeping, cooking and washing, that is when they are not just ... being princesses.

In the *Jungle Book*, while the majority of the plot is set in the heart of the Indian jungle, ruled by male animals, in the last scene, Mowgli reaches the human village. What is emphasised as the mark of ‘humanity’, through the young girl’s song, are the ascribed gender roles, passed on from generation to generation:

“Father’s hunting in the forest
 Mother’s cooking in the home
 I must go to fetch the water
 ‘Til the day that I’m grown
 (...)Then I will have a handsome husband
 And a daughter of my own
 And I’ll send her to fetch the water
 I’ll be cooking in the home.”

Similarly strict gender expectations are straightforwardly described in *Mulan*, released thirty years later. The citizens of China must serve their Emperor, “A man by bearing arms/ a girl by bearing sons”. Considering the societal progress registered in gender (in)equality in labour force participation, the features’ division of labour, strongly skewed toward males, and the expectation of males as breadwinners and females as mothers become problematic.

Comparably, the indirect message of recent features, increasingly, is that of young women defying the pre-established social order. It is the young heroine’s independent-mindedness and nonconformity that mark the crucial starting points of the action in the plot. Their rebellion, mostly

against their fathers, symbols of patriarchal expectations, as well as their desire for adventure and expansion of their horizons, depicts them as empowering positive role models. Ariel rebels against her father's authority, Jasmine revolts against the law requiring her to marry, Pocahontas challenges her people's beliefs about the English, while Mulan decides to resist ascription. These female protagonists are also the ones who, for most of the screen time, are shown outside of the home/castle, compared to Snow White or Belle.

Even so, despite their most promising start, both Pocahontas and Mulan remain in the end in their domestic environments. Pocahontas has the opportunity to leave for London, yet she decides to remain with her people. Mulan is actually offered a position as a member of the imperial council, which she declines in order to return home to her family. Female characters' devotion to their families and their concern for their loved ones is at times a setback in claiming their independence.

One noteworthy illustration of conflicting gender role messages is Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the gypsy who earns money by dancing on the streets of Paris. She is identified from the start as an outcast, both due to her ethnicity and her lack of adherence to societal expectations. Her eroticism and economic independence, which escape the male ruling, end up stigmatising her as a witch, for which she is sentenced to be burned. On the one hand, the witch stigma carries from the villainess Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*. On the other hand, in Esmeralda's case, the witch label can be read as a more 'children friendly' alternative to the prostitute or at least erotic dancer. Her gestures are ostentatious beyond a G rating (for general audiences), including her winks and the pole dance performed in front of whistling men, while her apparel reveals skin at just the 'right places.' Despite or maybe because of her eroticism and independence, Esmeralda is a strong and empowered female character who stands up for her convictions and for the disenfranchised, including her gender.

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Disney features are also double bind as far as the intellectual abilities of their female characters. At first glance, mostly in earlier features, intelligence is dismissed as superfluous and possibly a dangerous quality in a woman. The most obvious is the villagers' ridicule of Belle's peculiarity, i.e. her intellectual initiative. "It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas, thinking", voices Gaston. Similarly, when Mulan asks her male colleagues' opinion about wanting "a girl who's got a brain/ who always speaks her mind", they unanimously answer "Nah!". Nevertheless, when considering the overall context of these messages, they appear as mistaken. This is most obvious in later features. Pocahontas shows "wisdom beyond her years" in resolving the conflict between the English settlers and the Native Americans. And it is Mulan's ingeniousness that distinguishes her above her male army colleagues, that saves all of them and, in the end, the Chinese Empire.

GENDERED BODIES

Most famous for animating classical childhood fairy tales and creating the theme park 'inhabited' by the characters of these stories, the Disney Company's standards have strived to promote wholesome values. Nonetheless, steering away from stereotypical representations of gendered bodies can prove difficult. Gender expectations get inscribed on (parts of) the body, which becomes a 'visible' physical means of shaping and controlling them (West and Fenstermaker 1995). This relationship between gender and the body is maintained by often exaggerating and commodifying the biological attributes of the two sexes (ibid.). Accordingly, the mainstream form of femininity rewards physical beauty and small bodies, while that of masculinity places value on physical strength and large body frames. Disney animated features call into question the masculine ideal; yet remain faithful to the feminine one.

In Disney animated features, male's unnecessary display of physical force and disgusting habits are derided. Men's untidiness and lack of proper hygiene is often mentioned, from the dwarfs failing to wash their hands to Mulan's "disgusting" male army colleagues, whom Mushu defends as "They're [just] men!". The hallmark of 'brawly' men remains Gaston from

Beauty and the Beast. Accepted by his peers as an intimidating specimen of “a man among men”, Gaston takes pride in his huge size, thick neck, biceps “to spare”, cleft chin and his “every last inch covered with hair” as well as fighting, wrestling, shooting and expectorating skills. Nevertheless, Gaston is also the villain of the story, the example of ‘how not to be’ and his patriarchal inspired advances are refused by Belle. In turn, accepted male love interests, from Ariel’s prince Eric to Mulan’s army captain Li Shang, display a more proportionate body frame and a mannered manliness, also dictated by their status as princes or elite combatants. Their heroic nature, saving the day and the girl, is of course also an intrinsic feature.

Physical appearance is moreover emphasised in females, as well as valued over and above their intellect or abilities. The construction of femininity is done from a male standard, appreciative of obedience and beauty. Disney’s earliest feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, conveys the message that a woman’s beauty is her most valuable resource, but also a source of jealousy and discontent. Belle’s name literary translates ‘beautiful’; “her looks have got no parallel” making her the object of desire of the village men and the object of envy for the women. Ariel’s lack of voice is no obstacle for winning Eric’s love; the sea witch Ursula makes evident that: “[Men] (...) don’t like a lot of blabber/ they think a girl who gossips is a bore.” The Chinese matchmaker in *Mulan* also agrees that “Men want girls with good taste/ calm/ obedient/ who work fast-paced/ with good breeding/ and a tiny waist”.

THE INTERTWINEMENT OF AGE, RACE AND CLASS WITH GENDER

The gendered representations in Disney features appear more problematic when considering that “all [animated] social exchanges [...] are simultaneously ‘gendered’, [‘aged’], ‘raced’ and ‘classed’” (West and Fenstermaker 1995:13). In accordance with their deemed ‘aesthetic’ role, female characters are often portrayed as very young and particularly younger than men. *Snow White*, *Ariel* and *Jasmine* are 16 years old, and it can be assumed that *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* are around the same age. Meanwhile their love interests are slightly older. The youngest male protagonist is Mowgli, yet even he appears older than the village girl he eventually follows. In addition, in

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earlier features such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Beauty and the Beast, older women are often depicted as haggard peddlers. Exceptions are Pocahontas’ grandmother Willow and Mulan’s grandmother Fa who appear wise, offer advice and guidance. Whether they are portrayed more favourably due to their ethnical background or not, these older women’s representations are more positive than older men’s. Belle and Jasmine’s elder fathers are portrayed as inept, clumsy, silly and almost childlike, needing their daughters to take care of them rather than the other way around (Towbin et al. 2004).

When gender intertwines with race, women’s image turns erotic while men’s dangerous, a contested double standard (Nagel 2003). While recent features increase the visibility of other cultural profiles, they achieve it by stereotyping the ‘exotic’ traits in women. The clothes of Arab Jasmine, the Indian Pocahontas and the gypsy Esmeralda cover less of their bodies, their waists are smaller and their eyes bigger, compared to their counterparts of European origin. Meanwhile, Chinese Mulan is even more fully covered and her feminine features downplayedⁱⁱ. This “tokenistic, objectifying, voyeuristic inclusion of [ethnically different] women (...) is at least as dis-empowering as complete exclusion” (Williams Crenshaw 1994:10). In contrast, racially diverse men are represented as displaying character faults such as thievery - Aladdin, the Arabs and the gypsies; narrow-mindedness and backwardness - the Chinese; or violence and lack of civilization - the Native Americans. The stereotypically racialised gender images would indicate support of the ideological apparatus that links gender and race in society (Nagel 2003).

Disney features explicitly problematise class in Aladdin, where Jasmine’s social status is higher than Aladdin’s, which, at first, impedes their union.

ⁱⁱ *It is not until the most recent The Princess and the Frog (2009) that Disney introduces an African American princess – Tiana, as the lead.*

The higher status also appears to give Jasmine less agency; due to her position in the social hierarchy she is required to marry at a certain age and with a certain social class. Meanwhile, in earliest features, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Little Mermaid*, the protagonist couple has the same social status of royalty, distinguished through their idleness from the other characters which appear working-class and in a variety of occupations. In later features, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *Mulan*, most of the leading male characters have higher statuses than the leading females, a situation mostly derived by the fact that women have no occupation.

GENDER PERFORMANCE

Starting with Butler's (1999[1990]) work, gender is understood as a performance, a set of codes, gestures and adornments used, rather than a 'real' aspect of individual identity. Disney features do their best not to confuse these gender codes by having female characters invariably wear dresses or skirts (aside from Jasmine, whose cultural background has her wearing a belly dancer pantaloon outfit) and sometimes even bows in their long hair. Gender performance proves most obvious in drag, a practice that debunks gender identity (Butler 1999[1990]). *Mulan*, the most recent feature in the sample analyzed, perfectly illustrates the point. *Mulan* appears as a tomboy from the start, defying the social expectations that her family and society have of her gender. Moreover, she goes on and actually successfully masquerades as a male. At one point she also convinces three of her male army colleagues to masquerade as concubines, granted "ugly con-

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ⁱⁱⁱ *Ursula* was actually modelled after the transvestite star *Devine*, and both she and the *Queen* (from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) represent favourite drag acts for the transvestite community (see Griffin, Sean. 2000. *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*. The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out. *NYU Press*).

cubines”. Mulan is aware that external appearances must be maintained, albeit they do not reflect one’s internal personality.

Aside from Mulan’s transvestite performance, there are elements of drag in most Disney villains. They display inverted gender behaviour as well as overperform their gender roles. On the one hand, male villains have exaggerated gender traits, such as Gaston; show effeminate sophistication, like Sheer Khan, the tiger in *The Jungle Book*; or are a mixture of both. Jafar, the vizier in *Aladdin*, has a deep voice and a square masculine profile, however he is slim, wears a long dressy robe and uses manipulation and magic to achieve his purpose, proving weak. Similarly, Radcliffe, the governor in *Pocahontas*, has a disproportionately large upper body and considers that “a man is not a man unless he knows how to shoot”, nonetheless, a closer look reveals traces of makeup on his eye-lids and bows in his two pigtailed. On the other hand, the Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* are rather accurate representations of drag, overdoing their ‘womanly’ roles, wearing excessive makeup, long hair and polished nailsⁱⁱⁱ. Moreover, Ursula waives her hips, puckers her full red lips and knows “not [to] underestimate the power of body language”. Representing the villains and the outcasts in the plots, these characters’ display of unconventional gender performance becomes immediately ridiculed, stigmatised and labeled as ‘wrong’. Audiences might gladly continue endorsing the polarisation of gender performance along the binary gender division, since conventionally it was considered unproblematic, its potential for stereotyping interactions and restricting identities remaining overlooked.

CONVENTIONAL GENDER PERFORMANCE – SUCCESSFUL HETEROSEXUALITY

When gender intertwines with sexuality, the result is a heteronormative ideal that aligns itself perfectly with the formula of magic, romance, marriage and thus a happy ending that Disney features promote. Re-emphasising the importance of female appearance above other qualities, Disney animated characters fall in love at first sight and between the first meeting and contracting marriage learn very little about each other. The Prince falls in love with Snow White just from hearing her song and laying eyes on her.

Even at his young age Mowgli falls in love with the young Indian girl on the spot, similarly after hearing her song and seeing her. The same happens between Ariel and Eric, with Eric firm in his decision to marry the girl whom he only saw a glimpse of, but whose song had enchanted him. The 'just a sight and a song' effect is less strong for heroines and their love interests of later features, such as Belle and the Beast, Pocahontas and John Smith or Mulan and Li Shang. These couples take more than a few moments of screen time to realize they are falling in love with one another and to weigh the possibility of a future together.

Love and marriage might remain seemingly innocent embodiments of heterosexuality. The same cannot be said though about more explicit signals, such as the stereotypical gaze of men on women's bodies. At young ages, children might not perceive sexualised images and gazes as such. In fact, these might only draw the attention of adult audiences. The similarity of Esmeralda's dance performance with that of a pole dancer; the fact that she is almost caught naked by Quasimodo when he stumbles into her tent; or the fact that Ariel stands most probably completely naked in front of Flounder, Sebastian and Scuddles right after she gets legs instead of her mermaid tail, might be missed by very young viewers.

However, the more explicit signs of men's stares, including enlarged eyes, popping out of their sockets, open gaping mouths and whistling are harder to miss or dismiss. Moreover, since men gaze equally at eroticised Esmeralda and virginal Belle, the avid gaze becomes not necessarily attached to the beauty of the object of desire, but to the performance of (heterosexual) masculinity (Martin and Kazyak 2009). Even the infantilised dwarfs spend a moment staring (less sexually) at sleeping Snow White.

A possibly dangerous precedent of heterosexual masculinity 'in action' is set by a fugitive scene in *Beauty and the Beast*. Despite the violent potential of the Beast, it is the more charismatic Lumiere (the anthropomorphic candelabra) that sets a bad example (Towbin et al. 2004). As he continuously woes the French maid feather-duster, there is one scene in which, coming out from behind a curtain, the feather-duster persistently says 'No, no, no', while Lumiere insists 'Yes, yes, yes'. The message of the scene requires little decoding and, again, might escape young audiences.

Nevertheless, its intent in a feature that has children as its target audience is highly questionable.

Just as males maintain their heterosexual masculinity, the young heroines, even if seemingly rebellious, ascribe to hegemonic notions of femininity, especially when interacting with males. They can be obedient and quite helpless when the romantic plot requires it. The reward for this proper gender performance is getting a man/husband; being worthy of marriage means adhering to traditional gender behaviors and patriarchal norms (Martin and Kazyak 2009). The best illustration is Mulan's both physical and psychological preparation to meet the matchmaker. The universal message Disney features seem to be transmitting to girls throughout their plots is that the purpose of women is to 'strike a good match'.

GENDER IN THE (HAPPY?) END

The happy endings in most of the discussed Disney features are marriages or the prospect of one in the near future. The tradition of the happy end does not in fact carry, as one would immediately tend to assume from original childhood fairy tales, most of which in fact would seem to encourage and support a conservative status quo, the reassurance that the traditional American values and society would not disappear. The successful formula for achieving it rested in the happy ending and in heteronormativity. Therefore, the marriage at the end could be read as a final symbol of the appropriation of women by men, supporting the traditional patriarchal understanding of gender, as a system of male dominance. Jasmine adequately captures the injustice of women being treated as "prize[s] to be won", with men deciding their future and exchanging their ownership from father to husband. Disney's happy endings prove to be romanticised reflections of a societal patriarchal social order with a gender binary.

As animated versions of fairy tales, Disney features polarise good and evil. Along the same binary they thus categorise appropriate and inappropriate gender images, behavior and codes. The present analysis aimed to show how Disney animated features, through their stereotypical gender construction and its reproduction across the features, could represent a

strategic and efficient means of 'naturalising' and giving legitimacy to gender categories and their intersections with age, race, class and sexuality.

The Disney features present highly gendered scenarios. Gender images increase in complexity across the features, nevertheless, the gender messages are double bind. Female characters are memorable yet underrepresented; prove rebellious and adventurous however they remain limited to domestic roles and spheres. Their ingenuity ensures a happy ending but they are still valued mostly for their appearance and eroticised when racially different. Male images in turn oscillate from heroic and mannered to disgusting and vigorous, and are awarded greater flexibility as far as their expectations of them. Moreover, the stigma of witch craft is still associated with female unruliness, whilst inverted or overt displays of gender behaviour are deemed villainous.

Disney's classical collections of animated feature length-films continue to be re-released periodically and enjoyed by children and grandchildren of parents and grandparents who were children themselves when first released. Although previously sheltered from criticism due to their universal association with childhood innocence and fantasy, Disney features are experiencing criticism for their formulaic gender images and scenarios, modelled after patriarchal gender expectations. In part, their messages become anachronistic due to their still registered success. That is why it is worthwhile to re-evaluate the relationship we have as audiences with Disney features, understanding the context in which they were first released and moving beyond the image of innocence created around them. Even if that leads to certain disenchantment as Disney fans.

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