

Fiery Feminism: Disney's Evolution from *The Little Mermaid* to *Brave*

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Disney is known for their enchanting tales that capture a wide range of audiences. The journey where people experience fairy tales coming to life, where magic takes flight, and dreams become a reality. The encapsulating tales of when the beautiful princess finds their prince charming and they live happily ever after. Where glass slippers and true love's kiss are ultimately expected. Each princess' unique story captures the audience, whether that's exploring under the sea like Ariel, or braving the outdoors like Merida. These captivating films which originated from classic fairy tales and folklore, have been a realm of escapism for many audiences. Although many believe that these films are intended primarily for the entertainment appeal, that is not always the case.

In analyzing the films, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Brave* (2012) through a feminist lens, the movies provide examples of what independence versus conformality can look like. Both of these films showcase princesses with strong moral values but illustrate how the princesses differ in appearance and their perceived role as a woman. A woman's place in society has been frequently reevaluated, causing multiple views and opinions on the concept of the "ideal woman." This can be evaluated through some of Disney's most popular Princess movies. When some of the classic Disney princess films were produced between 1930-1950, it was common for people to cage women with societal standards, oppressing their true nature. They were given "strict" guidelines to follow and many of those morals found their way into the films.

The evolution of Disney princess films from *The Little Mermaid* to *Brave*, allow for scholars to examine how impressionable the films are to younger viewers. These films become unintentionally educational to the young girls who watch them and provide them with a false sense of reality. Disney princess films can be viewed through a didactic lens because the films not only entertain but inflict moral values amongst their younger audience. Now as time moved on, women became more independent and that is also proven in many of the newer films that go against the norms found in the classic and transitional films. Disney's didactic approach has changed from *The Little Mermaid* to *Brave*, ultimately illustrating values and perspectives found within recent society.

In the context of this paper, the Disney Princess films released before the 1980s will be classified as "classics". The films released from 1989 to 1998 will be considered "transitional." All films after 1998 will be categorized as "modern." When breaking the films into this context the audience is able to evaluate the evolution of female growth and independence. In the "classic" films such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), the audience can see these women depicted as sweet docile creatures. Their presence and attitude follows closely to that of women found within the Victorian era. These women were supposed to represent the "angel in the house" motif that many Victorians were familiar with. Additionally, the Princesses in the "transitional" age began to show signs of independence, such as in *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). They began to pave the way for women



and defy the gender roles that were commonly found in the “classic” films. Movies such as *Princess and The Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) break the gender stereotype roles completely. These females are more independent and strong-willed. Characters are not as wrapped up with the idea of marriage and grows internally, without the assistance of a man. In each of these respected films, the Princesses are chasing after a dream rather than a man.

In many of the classic Disney Princess movies, the main heroine is often viewed as the “damsel in distress” character. This example has provided a generation of submissive women who realied on the assistance of a man to save them so they could acquire their “happily ever after.” These classic movies also almost always end in a marriage portraying the idea that all women must get married to become happy. Fast forward to recent years, Disney has begun to create films that put women in the role of a strong and independent character. We see a new generation born of females who want to be independent and do not view marriage as something that is ultimately needed in life.

To deepen the feminist analysis of the Disney Princess character type in *The Little Mermaid* and *Brave*, I will utilize Marcia R. Lieberman’s article “Some Day My Prince Will Come” as a framework. In her work, she discusses the detrimental impacts that television and films have on young children. She initially begins by providing context on how impressionable young kids are by stating, “Children are socialized or culturally conditioned by movies, television programs, and the stories they read or hear” (Lieberman). In this context, film and television producers need to be more conscious about the content that they provide to children. Lieberman illustrates that Disney plays a major role in popular culture and has a powerful influence on young girls. She specifically mentions the physical portrayals of the Disney princess characters. She ultimately discusses the concepts of “pretty privilege” and the overall standard of ideal beauty. These films provide strong elements of gender stereotyping, body image, and relationship expectations. Through this framework, the feminist evolution between the *The Little Mermaid* and *Brave* is examined.

In the transitional film *The Little Mermaid*, the audience witnesses a tale of a young girl fighting for a sense of independence. However, in the context of the film, Ariel is uneducated about what the “real world” contains and disobeys her father in order to achieve what she wants. The article, “The Disney Princess Dilemma: Constructing, Composing, and Combatting Gendered Narratives” by Joyce Olewski Inman and Kelly M. Sellers, discusses the common gender roles found in Disney films that are inflicted onto children. In this context, the authors value the strong-willed curiosity that Ariel presents but critiques her childish ways. As stated, “Disney heroine, Ariel, is presented as a teenager whose strength is only evident in childish willful acts, acts that are liberating only until she finds [her] true love” (6). They are depicting that yes, her acts of disobedience are inspiring to the younger generation, but they mean nothing because she, in the end, falls into the hands of the prince.

In continuation, for her to be on land, she gives away her voice, providing her with no way to defend herself. She surrenders her only form of communication, just to meet a man she

had just met. In the film, when Ariel's father warns her of how dangerous the "human" world is she responds with "Daddy I love him" (*The Little Mermaid*). Ariel has only met Prince Eric in an unconscious state but declares her love for him. Ariel wants to have independence, but she runs from the protection of her father to the protection of the Prince. Furthermore, in order to build the scholarly conversation around independence and Disney Princess films, I will use Rachel Michelle Johnson's graduate thesis as an additional framework, due to the lack of scholarly attention discussing this narrative. In Johnson's, "The Evolution of Disney Princesses and Their Effect on Body Image, Gender Roles, and the Portrayal of Love" she states, "Princesshood is bound with being weak, passive, subservient to males, dutiful, and incapable of living an independent life" (13). Ariel never truly established her own sense of independence, but believes that she has acquired it through marrying the Prince. Yet, the love found between Prince Eric and Ariel can be seen as superficial and shallow. Ariel's admiration for Eric begins with his charms and athletic demeanor, and Eric is infatuated with the beauty and voice of the woman who saved him. For each of them, personality does not play a key factor. Even though at the end of the film Prince Eric was tricked into falling in love with Vanessa, he was also encapsulated by her mere beauty. He ultimately left Ariel behind because Vanessa sang with the same voice that captured him in the first place.

Furthermore, as shown throughout the film, marriage to the prince is what ultimately brings Ariel her happiness. She fights for the entirety of the movie to acquire the happiness that she has been longing for. This ideal has begun to teach young girls that marriage and true love is where they will obtain true happiness. Johnson further elaborates on this topic stating, "They often have to overcome parental demands or leave their families and homes in order to marry and get their happily ever after" (17). Now, some women may find happiness through marriage, while others may choose never to marry. In classic and transitional films, marriage was seen frequently in every Disney Princess film until the release of *Brave* in 2012. In the modern film, Merida detests the idea of marriage and avidly fights her mother on the ritual. Merida is a girl who finds her happiness in archery and does not want to settle down with a man of her mother's choosing. During the courting process, Merida constantly rebels for a sliver of her own independence, teaching young girls that she is capable of the same tasks as a male. This is the era where female independence began to blossom.

Additionally, in the scene where the prospective suitors are shooting archery for a chance to win the hand of Princess Merida, the audience can witness the disdain that she is feeling at this moment. Previously that day, Merida's mother was prepping her for the event by turning her into what she deems a figure of beauty. However, in this, Merida is uncomfortable with the makeup and tight dress that she is forced into. Her mother even forces her to tame her wild curly hair, which in many beauty standards was not viewed as elegant, but rather messy. When the event finally arrives, Merida is uncomfortable and itching for a chance to prove her worth, even if that means disobeying her mother. After all the suitors fail to perform, Merida rushes to take a bow, rip out of the restraints of her dress, and let her wild hair free stating, "I am Merida, firstborn descendent of Clan Dunbroch. And I'll be shooting for my own hand" (*Brave*). Merida is defying

the relationship expectations that were so commonly found within many tales and films. This new plot allowed young girls to discover love and acceptance in a different light. At the end of the film, both Merida and her mother learn that familial love is more important. This was the first Disney Princess film where the princess did not marry the Prince.

Moreover, I argue that Merida is a princess that breaks all standards and can ultimately be seen as a revolutionary princess. Her character traits are ones not commonly found in classic and transitional films. Johnson elaborates on the traits stating, “She possesses many non-traditional feminine traits such as being free-spirited, adventurous, athletic, self-sufficient, and defiant” (23). Unlike the other princesses, Merida is more outgoing and more determined to be herself. She is one of the most strong-willed princesses and throughout the film, she constantly rebels against the traditional societal standards. Merida holds herself to a higher caliber and refuses to be tied down to a “traditional” concept.

When comparing the relationship ideals in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Brave*, there is a huge shift in tides. Ariel defies and angers her father, but only makes up with him at the end of the film when he realizes how happy she is with Prince Eric. Ariel and her father, King Triton, do not make up on their own accord. In *Brave*, however, Merida and her mother also get into a dispute with one another regarding different opinions on marriage. However, there is no overarching relationship bringing their bond back together, it is solely the growth between a mother and her daughter. Merida emphasizes to her mother that her dream is to “discover her own path,” while her mother’s dream is for her to marry. Delving deeper into the film one can see that the only way Merida was able to get her mother to see that marriage was not her dream, was to ultimately take away her human existence by turning her into a bear. In “dehumanizing” her mother, both were able to bond and understand what their relationship meant to one another. Through the film, Merida and her mother come to terms on what will bring happiness. Merida ultimately defies the common relationship expectations that are commonly found in classic and transitional films.

However, in the film, Merida may have been able to break free of the constraints of her mother and live the life she pleases, but Disney caged her back into the box of ideal beauty standards by changing her original animated style. Her introduction into princesshood removed her frizzy hair, classic bow, and ultimately her bust grew in size adjusting her overall body image. In Sarah Leo’s article “Online Fan Activism and the Disruption of Disney’s Problematic Body Pedagogies,” she discusses how in 2013 Merida was to be officially slated as a Disney Princess. However, she was unfortunately altered and adapted from her iconic free and wild self. For her induction, Disney animators took it upon themselves to reimagine her as more “ladylike” to fit the role of the iconic Disney Princess stereotype. With the redesign,

as thinner with a bigger bust and wore a more glamorous sparkly dress with a revealing neckline. Her face was narrower and covered in makeup. Her wild red curls were tamed and flowed luxuriously down her sides and back. And, perhaps most notably, the signature bow and arrows she carried had been replaced with a jaunty sash around her waste (Leo 1).

In this, Disney took away everything thing that made Merida exciting and inspiring to the younger generation of girls. The “new” Merida took away the idea of body positivity and proved to young girls that to be recognized they must be skinny and ladylike. According to Johnson, “Merida seems to be the first princess to truly challenge stereotypical ideas of beauty” (20). Disney received praise for finally creating a princess that did not fit the ideal beauty standards, yet still changed her appearance to fit the ideal standard of a woman. In doing this they are contradicting the whole concept of the movie, which is to be free and be oneself. Ultimately, the redesign was petitioned to be removed by an organization called A Mighty Girl. Their main purpose is dedicated to providing positive, powerful, and healthy representations to young girls. This petition ended up working and Merida was returned to her initial state.

Similarly, both *The Little Mermaid* and *Brave* shift the beauty standards that were commonly found in the classic films. In these classic films, many of the characters were portrayed with the traditional blonde and brunette hair. Ariel was the first princess to be drawn with the vibrant red hair that she is widely known for today. Merida further pushed this beauty standard with her head of curly red hair. Since many of the classic Disney films had women that correlated with the Neo-Victorian era, red hair was never viewed as the beautiful character in the tale. For example, in *Cinderella*, her “ugly” stepsister Anastasia is drawn with vibrant red hair. Ariel and Merida were a change in the story, showing that the elegant princess can be depicted with fiery red hair.

Lieberman further continues discussing how many of the Disney Princess films hold ideals such as “pretty privilege.” She states that “the prettiest is invariably singled out and designated for reward.” In many of the Disney Princess films, the characters that are depicted as “ugly” are almost always overlooked by the charming prince. One prime example is the classic tale of *Cinderella* who had two ugly stepsisters. In the classic fairy tale, the stepsisters are depicted as “ugly, cruel, bad-tempered older sisters to the younger beautiful, sweet Cinderella” (3). In this ideal, the beautiful girls are seldom ignored. They may ultimately be suppressed by “wicked” figures, but in the end, they are always chosen for reward.

Additionally, unattractiveness can stain a young child's image if the villains in these popular films are always depicted as grotesque. This idea can harm a young child’s perspective on how they interpret beauty. Lieberman’s article illustrates that, “If a child identifies with beauty, she may learn to be suspicious of the ugly girls” (3). In many of the classic Disney films, the villain is almost always depicted as ugly and menacing. For example, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula is defined as an ugly sea witch, and in *Brave* Mor’dù, the antagonist, is viewed as a horrid creature destined to kill. This idea can promote envy and divisiveness among young girls, who constantly want to outperform others who are considered “prettier” in society.

Beauty has been an ideal that many women have been chasing after for generations. Lieberman illustrates the detrimental effects that beauty has on young children when they watch Disney Princess films. As stated, “Beauty is a girl’s most valuable asset, perhaps her only valuable asset.” With the idea of “pretty privilege” women believe that they must be beautiful to obtain things in life. This is evident in the 2010 Disney film *Tangled*, where Mother Gothel

kidnaps young Rapunzel, because she harnesses the power to keep her young and beautiful forever. She is so infatuated with her beauty that it becomes her only priority. As stated in the film, “Rapunzel look in the mirror. You know what I see? I see a strong, confident, beautiful young lady... Oh look, you’re here too” (*Tangled*). Mother Gothel is self-centered and only cares about the beauty that she obtains through Rapunzel's hair. This trope is commonly found throughout other Disney Princess films as well. Both The Evil Queen and Ursula strive to find beauty within each of their respective movies by ultimately tearing down the designated “pretty” protagonist. However, according to the article, “beauty is a gift of fate, not something that can be attained” (4). The villains in each of these tales strive to acquire beauty but all fail in the end. Meanwhile, the elegant, sweet, and docile protagonist receives their happily ever after.

Happily ever after has been a prevalent theme found in many of the Disney princess films; however, the ultimate standard of happily ever after has changed perspectives since the classic and transitional films. In many of the classic and transitional Disney films, “love at first sight” is a common theme. This idea has provided unrealistic relationship expectations among young girls. The message that this theme sends is that when a man and a woman meet, they will instantly fall in love and get married. In the classic and transitional films, many of the Princesses sing about finding their “one true love.” In many of the classic and transitional films, all the Princesses care about is obtaining their “true love” providing the idea to younger children that this should also be a goal in their own life. *The Little Mermaid* revolves around Ariel acquiring a marriage with the Prince. In the film, the song “Kiss The Girl” is about convincing the Prince to kiss Ariel, so that they can live their “happily ever after.” The classic and transitional films follow the narrative of finding their happily ever after through romance.

Furthermore, this trope becomes almost non-existent in the modern films such as *Brave* and *Frozen*. *Brave*'s soundtrack closely follows the idea of freedom and following onesone's dreams. The song “Touch The Sky,” depicts Merida's desire to push herself and discover her sense of freedom. Additionally, *Frozen* ironically pokes fun at the concept of “love at first sight” when Elsa instructs her younger sister Anna that she “Can't marry a guy you just met” (*Frozen*). This idea has been a relevant theme found in many of the Disney Princess films. Veronica Hefner illustrates this in her article, “Happily Ever After? A Content Analysis of Romantic Ideals in Disney Princess Films,” how “23 of the 26 films researchers analyzed, ‘love at first sight’ was a prevalent theme” (2). This research concludes that many of the Disney Princess films provide unrealistic relationship expectations to young girls. *Frozen* even incorporates a whole song dedicated to ridiculing this trope.

Overall, from the classic and transitional films to the modern movies, princesses have begun to trade their glass slippers for flats. This transition has not taken away from the magic, but rather it has aided in the growth of dreams becoming a reality. Disney Princesses have evolved and began to find themselves without the assistance of the prince. The modern film *Brave*, has paved the way for a new wave of independent and self-reliant females that proved that they do not need a man to achieve their overall “happily ever after.” Merida ultimately

begins to break the standard of gender stereotyping, body image, and unrealistic relationship expectations compared to the classic and transitional films.

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