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Let the Storm Rage On

*Gender Portrayal and its Development in Disney's Princess
Films from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to Frozen*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay examines gender representation in the 11 films that constitute the official Disney Princess franchise, with the addition of the film *Frozen*, and how portrayal of gender has developed through the decades, from Disney's first full-length animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Studies have shown that television plays an important part in how children learn gender roles. With The Disney Company leading the market for children's entertainment, their influence is extensive. There is already a substantial amount of research that has been done on Disney Princesses and the gendered messages that they convey, along with the influence that they have on young girls. However, very little has been written on the male characters in these films and how their (often) unrealistic portrayal sends a harmful message to both boys and girls about what it means to be a man and how men should behave. This essay looks at both the female and the male leads in all Princess films and attempts to demonstrate how the portrayal of gender, typical gender roles and patriarchal values have changed in the last 80 years. In the beginning, the Disney Princess (Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora) was a helpless, domesticated and submissive damsel that had no control of her own fate and obligingly fell in love with the first prince that came along. The modern day Disney Princess is a headstrong, independent and ambitious young woman, who stands up to patriarchy and its misogynistic values, and takes control of her own destiny. Similarly, the Prince has evolved from being a nameless, voiceless rescuer without any characteristics or dialogue, to an emotionally relatable and thoughtful young man, a companion and friend to the Princess, but with a journey and ambitions of his own, and romance being an option, not a necessity.

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Introduction

The dashing Prince leans over the beautiful Princess, touches his lips softly on hers and magically the helpless damsel wakes from her bewitched slumber and they ride off into the sunset for their happy ending. We all know how it goes. We grew up with this magical tale. For almost a century, little girls have dreamed about their true love's kiss while little boys have practiced fighting off the evil dragon in order to become the hero that rescues the distressed damsel.

Ever since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, the Walt Disney Company (hereafter referred to as Disney) has been a leading influence in the upbringing of children all over the world. Studies have proven the effect media has on how children learn behavior (Villani 392). Researchers have found that “exposure to gendered material may influence children’s gender role acquisition and expression” (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 557) and “heavy television viewing may contribute significantly to children's acquisitions of stereotypic perceptions of behavior and psychological characteristics associated with males and females” (Tonn 6 citing McGhee and Fruch 1980). According to Walsh, Fürsich and Jefferson, “Patriarchal ideology is so embedded in everyday discourse that it becomes normal to general audiences, and its presence easily goes unnoticed” (126). This is further maintained in a research done by Smith et al. on representation of gender in G-rated films, women only constitute 28% of all speaking characters (783). They continue to argue that parents may think that such films are perfectly safe for their children, however,

Repeated viewing of these films may encourage developing youth to accept the invisibility of females in media and/or fail to question whether stories about girls and women are worth telling. Such underrepresentation of females on screen can negatively impact both developing males and females. For girls, a lack of representation may affect their perceptions of importance or self esteem. For boys, exposure may subtly perpetuate the status quo and reinforce a hegemonic view of girls and women [...] the films may be systematically encouraging youngsters to see the world through a very narrow perspective. (Smith et al. 783)

Thus, considering Disney’s immense popularity in the animated film market, its films, and the characters in them, affect millions of children all over the world.

In recent years, especially after the rise of Feminism in the 1970's, critical voices have emerged, concerned with Disney's stereotypical portrayal of gender, race and sexual orientation, to name a few. The most prominent of these critiques has been on the gender portrayal of the Disney Princess and the message that Disney conveys to young children through their immensely popular animated films. In Disney's early years the Princess was pretty, kind, gentle and submissive, comfortably following the rules of a patriarchal society in order to find a handsome prince to take care of her. Although still pretty, kind and gentle, the Princesses have become more independent and self confident, taking control of their own destiny without the control of men. In addition to changes in characteristics, the most recent films, such as *Tangled*, *Brave* and *Frozen*, seem to have stopped focusing on the romantic aspect of the story. Although romance is usually still a factor, it seems to have become a sort of by-product of some other, much more exciting and adventurous storyline. This is most prominent in *Brave* and *Frozen*, where the actual love stories being told are between mother and daughter (*Brave*), and two sisters (*Frozen*). *Brave* even goes as far as leaving its leading character, Merida, unattached to a man at the end of the film; and for one of *Frozen*'s leading ladies, Elsa, the notion of romance is never even introduced.

As the Princess films are targeted towards girls, there has not been as much discussion on the gender portrayal of the male lead in the films, the Prince. In the first few films, the Prince usually played a minor part in the overall plot, sometimes only emerging at the end to provide the spellbound Princess with the required kiss, before riding away into the sunset with her, so completely devoid of personality that it took only one glimpse of the Princess for the Prince to fall in love with her. As time progressed and Western society began to reject traditional gender roles, the Prince was awarded more characteristics and by the turn of the millennium, he had become a relatively strong role model for boys to aspire to. Although there was still some room for improvement, the Prince was portrayed as an emotional being with a mind of his own. With the elevation of the Princesses, it would naturally be assumed that the Princes would continue to rise in accordance, e.g. by taking on some of the typically female gender roles, like keeping house or taking care of children, but that is rarely, if ever, portrayed.

This essay will look at the development of gender portrayal in the eleven full-length animated Disney films in which the characters from Disney's official "Princess Line" (princess.disney.com) appear as lead characters, with the addition of their latest

box-office hit, *Frozen*, as its leading ladies, Elsa and Anna, are rumored to be next in line for the induction (Mauney). Through critical analysis of the rendering of each Prince and Princess in regards to traditional and stereotypical gender behavior, patriarchal values and the messages being conveyed to young viewers, I will demonstrate how the portrayal of Disney royals, while still lacking in some aspects, has changed through the decades to provide relatable and independent role models for children.

Disney and Gender Development

In this essay, the list of analyzed films is categorized into three groups: Early Disney includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959); Middle Disney includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998); and Modern Disney includes *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013).

Early Disney

During the first wave of feminism, which began in the late 19th century and persisted until the 1960s', the main discussions were about opening up opportunities for women to take an active part in society and politics, which inevitably lead to the examination of the differences between men and women and how they were viewed (Rampton).

However, the influence of early feminism is rarely to be seen in Disney's earliest Princess films, made in the period from the 1930's to the 1950's, and they are bursting with gender stereotypes. This is not surprising, as the typical gender roles were still internationally accepted. Wilde found that although the films' titles acknowledged their roles as protagonists, the Princesses were "damsels in their journey, unable to survive or be happy without a hero" (136). Furthermore, the notions of female domestication and dependence are most prominent in these early films, and in fact portrayed as desirable by Disney, along with the concept of "love at first sight".

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

In *Snow White*, the Princess is frequently shown doing domestic chores. In the beginning of the film she is cleaning the palace, and although that is a chore that is

commanded to her by her evil stepmother, she seems quite content, singing happily and interacting with the animals around her. When she arrives at the dwarfs' cottage in the forest and upon seeing the mess that they have left, she immediately starts cleaning the house in the hope that the inhabitants will like her. She also uses her housekeeping skills as a bargaining point in order to be invited to stay with them. Eventually Snow White becomes a mother figure to the dwarfs, taking care of them in order for them to be able to attend to their mining work, and

...it was clear that men were not expected to do domestic work, nor did they have the ability to do so. When the princess cleaned the dwarves' house she stated "you'd think their mother would" and then she realized that they probably did not have a mother because the house was dirty.

(England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 563)

Snow White's housekeeping skills are the source of the dwarfs' affection towards her and she is rarely seen interacting with them in an intellectual way or taking part in anything that goes on outside the cottage.

The nameless Prince in *Snow White* was Disney's first "Prince Charming" and although he is significant to the storyline, as he is the one to save the day, he is surprisingly insignificant in characteristics. He does not have a name, other than "Prince", he has no dialogue, apart from his singing duet with Snow White at the beginning of the film and the viewer is never told what his back story is or why he shows up unexpected at her glass coffin. It is quite difficult to understand why Snow White would fall in love with him, apart from the fact that he is handsome and a Prince; it is as if he chooses her and she obligingly falls in love (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 563).

Cinderella

In 1950, thirteen years after Snow White rode off into the sunset with her nameless Prince, Disney unleashed their second Princess in the film *Cinderella*. According to some critics, this post World War II Princess represented pop culture's attempts to re-domesticate women after the war (Genz 30; Wilde 135; Stover 3), during which it became socially accepted, if not necessary, for women to leave the home to work. In *Cinderella*, the titular character is, again, pretty, kind and shown to compliantly complete the domestic chores forced on her by her evil stepmother. In fact, there is not one instance throughout the entire film where Cinderella is shown engaging in any sort

of intellectual or stimulating activities. Nor does it occur to her to leave her stepmother's house independently. It is as if Cinderella is patiently waiting to be rescued instead of taking control of her own life and rescuing herself. Moreover, out of the three early Disney films, the importance of physical appearance is most prominent in *Cinderella*. Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters are jealous of her beauty and therefore treat her the way they do, and make her wear ragged clothing. The Prince falls in love with her *at first sight*, entirely because of her physical appearance; they do not have any sort of conversation or dialogue to help build their affection for one another. As in *Snow White*, Cinderella is "chosen" by the Prince and submissively surrenders to him because of this. There is a dialogue in the film between the King and the Duke, which further suggests this as socially accepted. They are planning the ball and the King says that the Prince will surely find someone he likes at the ball, and when he does everything will be settled (*Cinderella*). They never consider that, perhaps, the girl would not like the Prince and object to marrying him.

Conversely, the figure of the Prince has evolved slightly in *Cinderella*, although remaining nameless (Prince Charming). The viewer gets tiny glimpses into the Prince's character, e.g. at the beginning of the ball-scene, where he has obviously caught on to his father's plans of his finding a wife. He yawns and seems bored; not altogether pleased with his father's scheming. The Prince is awarded a few lines of dialogue in one scene, when trying to convince Cinderella not to leave, but this is not significant enough to show any sort of character depth or roundness. The message being conveyed to girls here is that the only thing a woman needs to do to get ahead in the world is to be submissive, beautiful and put on a pretty dress. Similarly, boys are being told that if they wait patiently, everything will just magically fall into their hands and they should not have to work for what they want in life.

Sleeping Beauty

Like in *Cinderella*, the character evolution in *Sleeping Beauty* is only evident in the character of the Prince. It is finally here that the Prince has a name: Philip. In addition, he has considerably more screen-time and dialogue than his predecessors. We see him interacting with his father, King Hubert, standing up to him and declaring that he will not accept the King's choice of a wife for him, and when Hubert tells him that he absolutely cannot marry a peasant girl, Philip responds by telling his father to step out of the past (*Sleeping Beauty*, Do Rozario 38). He rides off on his own to find the girl he

met in the forest, not knowing her true identity. The viewer also gets a glimpse into Prince Philip's soul when he bravely fights and defeats the villainous witch, Maleficent, who has taken on the form of a dragon, in order to save Aurora with his true love's kiss. Do Rozario, however, argues that Philip is simply a vessel for the three fairies in the rescue, and that it is, in fact, they who do all the real work, i.e. providing him with weapons, saving him from Maleficent's dungeon, protecting him from arrows and stones and magically inducing his sword so that it lands flawlessly in the dragon's (Maleficent's) heart (40). Although this is all true, the important thing to consider in this context is that gender portrayal had slowly begun to change and Disney had started to give the Prince a little more roundness and character depth (Do Rozario 44).

Middle Disney

After the release of *Sleeping Beauty*, there was a 30-year period in Disney history where not a single Princess-film was produced. This period saw profound changes in social structure and a second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960's. This second wave saw radical women- only groups, like the Redstockings, who rejected the patriarchy that sought to keep them inside the home or in low paying jobs by throwing "oppressive" feminine artifacts like bras, girdles and makeup in the trash (Rampton) and according to many feminists, "the restriction to the domestic sphere became a punishment of self-oppression and idealization" (Wilde 136). Feminist organizations began working towards ridding society of all sexism, "from children's cartoons to the highest levels of government" (Rampton). The voices of change did not escape Disney, who, in this period, utterly abandoned their previous traditional gender portrayals, as discovered by England, Descartes and Collier-Meek: "a substantial change that Disney incorporated over time was the temporary discontinuation of domestic work as a symbol of femininity" (563). However, although Disney discarded the old and outdated image of the docile housewife, and the construction of the Princesses' happy ending shifted from finding "any prince" to "the right prince" (Stover 4), the extent of the Princesses' desires goes no further than actually finding him.

The Little Mermaid

With this mindset, Disney introduced their next royal couple, Princess Ariel and Prince Eric, in the underwater fairytale *The Little Mermaid* and, with it, a whole new set of gender related problems. Compared with the earlier Princesses, Ariel is a headstrong

and determined young woman. She is the first princess to challenge the traditional gender roles (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 564) and the image of the domesticated and compliant housewife is rarely to be found. Instead, Ariel is a rule-breaker and stands up to her dominant father in order to be with Eric, whom she saves when his ship is demolished by a storm. This is the first instance in a Disney Princess film where the Princess saves the life of the Prince, which England, Descartes and Collier-Meek categorize as a masculine characteristic (561).

However, this was as far as Disney went in regards to female autonomy, and their characters became influenced by a certain anti-feminist backlash that meant to disempower the female image in the late 80's (Stover 1). The focus shifts from the domesticated Princess of the early years to the message that physical attraction is more important than intellect. Towbin et al point out the powerful metaphor that occurs when Ariel willingly gives up her own voice in order to win Prince Eric's love: "To win the love of the prince, she must forfeit her thoughts and intellect, her independence and identit[y]: she must rely solely on her body to win his favor" (38). They go on to argue that this sets the tone for many of Disney's female characters (Towbin et. al. 38), which is interesting, considering that a third wave of feminism, which celebrates female sexuality as empowering, began to rise in this period. However, the third wave encourages women to embrace their sexuality as a way to break away from patriarchal oppression (Rampton), thus contradicting Disney's message, of having to choose either intellect or sexuality and not being able to have both.

Disney and *The Little Mermaid* have also been criticized for the motives of Ariel's actions, especially when compared with the original mermaid from H.C. Andersen's tale. Trites points out that the original mermaid's motive for wanting to be amongst humans came from her desire to have an immortal soul, something that a mermaid could only acquire by being loved so deeply by a human, that a part of his soul would flow into her, giving her access to Heaven. However, Disney completely abandons this beautiful tale by having Ariel sacrifice everything in order to be with a man she has never even talked to. Her other motive is to get away from her father, but the possibility of leaving without immediately becoming dependent on another man is never presented. Trites goes on to say that, "Since Eric kills the witch for Ariel and since Triton makes her marriage possible, Ariel does not solve her own problems [...] she is not self-empowered. She does not earn independence; her father only grants her the right to transfer her dependence to another man" (Trites).

Disney seems to be on the same track with Prince Eric as with Prince Philip from *Sleeping Beauty*, making him more relatable as a person. He shows both traditional and non-traditional gender behavior; he is emotional and affectionate, brave and fearful, and he shows physical weakness almost as often as he is shown to be physically strong (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 564). There are instances where he shows real emotions, e.g. when risking his life to save his dog from a burning ship and when he sits on the beach, tormented and melancholy, playing his flute and yearning for the mysterious woman that saved his life.

Beauty and the Beast

Beauty and the Beast is another Disney Princess film that sends a devastating and unhealthy gender message to young viewers. At first, Belle comes across as a strong and independent young woman. She does not follow the rules of her community and is not impressed by Gaston's intimidating methods of courtship towards her, or his visions of their future with her as his "little wife" (*Beauty and the Beast*), cooking and taking care of their six or seven boys. In addition, Belle is depicted as being intellectual, through her love of books, as well as brave, when she realizes her father is in danger and sets out to rescue him, ultimately sacrificing her own freedom for his (Towbin et. al. 38). However, in doing so, she places herself in a violently abusive relationship with the Beast:

[He] imprisons Belle, separates her from her father, rages at her repeatedly, and refuses to feed her unless she eats with him. Yet, eventually, Belle's love transforms the Beast into a prince. Given the prevalence of domestic violence in the United States, this message is alarming. From *Beauty [and the Beast]*, 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 et. al. 36)

Henry Giroux suggests that *Beauty and the Beast* could be read as a "rejection of hyper-masculinity and a struggle between the macho sensibilities of Gaston and the reformed sexist, the Beast". In this reading, the focus shifts from Belle, who becomes more of a "mechanism for solving the Beast's dilemma", and "Whatever subversive qualities Belle personifies in the film, they seem to dissolve when focused on humbling male

vanity. In the end, Belle simply becomes another woman whose life is valued for solving a man's problems" (Giroux).

Abusive behavior aside, the Beast himself is portrayed as unusually emotional when compared with his predecessors, as well as being bitterly angry at his destiny in life. He will not allow anyone to come close to him in the beginning, as is made evident in his raging attack on Belle when she wanders into a part of the castle that he has closed off for himself. However, in realizing his feelings for Belle, he begins to let down his guard. He is devastated when Belle leaves him to go save her father, and seems to have lost his will to live in the fight against Gaston. It is only when he sees that Belle has returned to him that his masculine strength comes back and he overpowers Gaston. In contrast to the Beast showing many traditionally feminine characteristics, England, Descartes and Collier-Meek argue that Belle is the first Princess to show "high rates of intellectual activity" (564), as she reads a lot of books. However, Disney uses this attribute to alienate her from the rest of her society and label her as strange (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 564). This is another harmful message to children; both girls and boys are told that it is strange and un-becoming in a woman to be educated.

Aladdin

The next Disney Princess film to be released was *Aladdin*, which, although essentially telling the same love story as before, took a significantly different direction than the previous films. This is the first film in the Princess series that focuses on events mainly from the Prince's perspective (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 563). Aladdin is clever, brave and physically strong, but also sensitive, loving and kind. Towbin et al also found that Aladdin was more likely to express himself verbally rather than physically, e.g. using his wit to outsmart his enemies, rather than violence, which is uncommon for Disney's male characters. However, by having him fall in love with Jasmine after only seeing her from afar and based solely on her physical appearance, Disney still enforces an unrealistic notion of people falling in love "at first sight" (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 565).

The leading lady of *Aladdin*, Jasmine, has similar characteristics to Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, being stubborn and headstrong, standing up to her father and rejecting the rules of her society. But Jasmine ventures even further by refusing to be objectified by the men around her, raging at them when she catches them doing so, declaring that

she is not “a prize to be won” (*Aladdin*). She is the first Princess to put into words the isolation and powerlessness that a Princess is faced with, and does so frequently throughout the film. There is a significant moment, when Jasmine has run away from the palace and sits in a crumbled building with Aladdin, both of them describing themselves as being trapped by their situation in life: Jasmine as a Princess, Aladdin as a pauper. The message that this scene conveys is that no matter how high a woman’s status is, she will never be in control of anything, while a man will have to conquer the world to be taken seriously. The significance of this scene is that neither Jasmine nor Aladdin accepts that this is how the world should work. This attitude contrasts the previous image of the compliant, obedient and domesticated Princess and the strong, silent Prince.

In *Aladdin*, for the first time in a Princess film, there is a positive and powerful message from a leading male character that both girls and boys can relate to. Aladdin tries to get what he wants the easy way, by lying, stealing and with the help of a magic genie. That, however, does not go as planned and he ends up getting himself into much trouble. It is only when he comes clean and starts relying on himself and his own resourcefulness that he manages to defeat the evil Jafar, save the Princess and liberate the kingdom. However, Disney cannot altogether abandon their gender stereotyping; the idea of the damsel in distress prevails, and there is also the fact that Jasmine is never seen engaging in intellectual activities and seems overly concerned with her physical appearance. Furthermore, Jasmine is literally the only female character with a voice throughout the entire film, the supporting characters all being male (Genie, Abu, Rajah, the Sultan, Jafar, Iago, the city guards) or genderless (the magic carpet). Almost all other instances where females are depicted show them in a sexual manner, either shaking their hips or batting their eyelashes. To some extent, the same is true about Jasmine, as there are scenes where she uses her feminine sexuality to her advantage, for instance to distract Jafar from noticing Aladdin when he tries to steal back the lamp (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 564). In spite of this, *Aladdin* marks the beginning of a new period in the Disney Princess films in regards to gender portrayal, especially the positive portrayal of the Prince.

Pocahontas

Disney’s *Pocahontas* introduced a Princess that was entirely different than the others before her. While continuing on the road that had been paved smooth by Ariel, Belle

and Jasmine by being headstrong and a rule-breaker, *Pocahontas* broke Disney's traditional "happily ever after" mold by not being married, or soon to be married, at the end of the film (Dundes 354), although that feat is slightly overshadowed by the fact that she was still romantically attached to John Smith (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 565). Furthermore, Towbin et. al. found that Pocahontas was valued more by her intellect than her physical appearance, "Pocahontas is portrayed as wise and strong; she teaches the stranger from England to understand her culture and the importance of the environment. She is valued by her culture for her intellect when she helps both the Indians and the English avoid a war" (30). This contrasts with earlier Princesses such as Belle, whose intellect is considered strange by her community, as well as the others who are valued only by their physical appearance and/or compliant manners.

However, there are critics who argue that Disney has, in fact, only disguised the traditional gender behavior with Pocahontas' confident character (Tanner et. al 357, citing Wiersma 2001). One of the key ingredients in Disney's romantic fairytale recipe is that the male and female lead fall in love in an unrealistically short amount of time and this is further portrayed in *Pocahontas*, as it only takes her and John Smith one day to fall in love, even in spite of the language barrier between them (Tanner et. al. 364; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 565; Towbin et. al. 38). Another issue that, at first, seems like a token of Pocahontas' independence, is her decision to stay with her people at the end of the film, instead of following the man she loves back to England. According to critics, the problem with this scenario is that Pocahontas' decision comes as a result of her community "needing" her, rather than her own desire to stay, and thus she fulfills a sense of obligation and self-sacrifice that is expected of her as a woman (Dundes 354; Towbin et. al. 24; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 565). Dundes also states that a better ending would have been Pocahontas staying behind for her own reasons, e.g. to assume a leadership role in her community or become a peace-activist; alternatively, she could have sailed away with John Smith, not only to be with the man she loves, but because of her desire to explore new worlds and adventures, and being a sort of ambassador of her people (361).

Not much has been written about John Smith himself, or the message that his character conveys to the film's young viewers. He is portrayed as a courageous and adventurous man, well respected within his community, but he is also a mass murderer of Indians. England, Descartes and Collier-Meek found that John Smith, along with Li

Shang from *Mulan*, has the most masculine attributes out of all the princes (564). Initially he has prejudice about the natives, referring to them as “savages” and that killing them is like a sport (Dundes 356). However, Pocahontas is able to change his mind and he comes to think of them as human beings that might actually have something to teach his own people. What is remarkable about John Smith is that he is the first Prince to be so open-minded that he is able to change his prejudiced opinions regarding the natives and their way of life. Disney also awards John Smith with a considerable amount of screen time, although not as much as Aladdin, but the viewer gets a chance to sympathize with him and look into his mind. Disney seems to have managed a certain level of equality between Pocahontas and John Smith. They are both able to partially break free from stereotypical gender roles and *Pocahontas* is a large stepping-stone on Disney’s journey towards gender equality.

Mulan

The last Princess film of the middle era, *Mulan*, was the first Princess film to actively, and rather satirically, challenge gender stereotyping. In the beginning of the film, the leading female character, Mulan, is being prepared to meet the community’s “matchmaker” by her mother and other women of her village. They dress her, groom her hair and paint her face, much to Mulan’s aversion, but she puts up with it for the sake of her family’s wishes. It is common practice for Disney to have characters convey their feelings and emotions through songs and *Mulan* is no exception. Throughout the makeover scene, the other women sing a song about how getting married would bring honor to her family. The abhorrent lyrics of the song are an obvious satire on traditional female gender roles, with lines such as: “With good fortune and a great hairdo / You’ll bring honor to us all”, “A girl can bring her family / Great honor in one way / By striking a good match” and “Men want girls with good taste / Calm / Obedient / Who work fast-paced / With good breeding / And a tiny waist / You’ll bring honor to us all”, as well as indicating that the women are for sale. (*Mulan*). It is interesting to consider that with this song, Disney is criticizing the very gender roles that they portray in the first three Princess films, i.e. obedience and domestication. However, it has to be considered that children do not have the maturity to recognize sarcasm and the real meaning behind it until the age of 9-10 years old (Glenwright and Pexman), and thus might not perceive the social criticism of the scene.

Mulan, compared to earlier Princesses, can only be considered a strong character and a relatively good role model for children, although some critics voice concerns about the motives behind her cross-dressing. In the beginning of the film, Mulan's community is trying to force traditional gender values upon her. She is reprimanded for showing intuition in a chess game, for speaking without permission and again for speaking in the presence of a man. Mulan does show strength and bravery by rebelling against these gendered rules, but upon closer inspection, Disney seems to have pulled the same trick with *Mulan* as with *Pocahontas*, i.e. disguising patriarchal values and traditional gender behavior with a rebellious, headstrong heroine (Wilde 136). England, Descartes and Collier-Meek find that Mulan takes part in activities that are stereotypically masculine, e.g. diplomacy and war; she is in charge of the climatic rescue, in addition to using intellect and physical strength to achieve her goals rather than her sexuality (like Jasmine): However,

Plot resolutions reflected traditionally valued outcomes for women, such as the princess being paired with the prince and choosing to return to family life rather than pursuing novel opportunities [and] while the traditionally masculine traits increased for [Mulan], it was not necessarily presented as a positive characteristic. (563-4)

This is evident towards the end of the film; after Mulan heroically rescues China and gains the respect of both her sovereign and her people, she arrives home, fearfully bowing and begging her father's forgiveness (one might wonder if a boy would have been depicted in the same way upon his return). However, Mulan delivers a powerful message to both girls and boys after her true gender is revealed and she has lost the trust and respect of her commanding officer, Li Shang. Trying to warn him of the impending danger she asks an important question: "You said you trust Ping [Mulan's boy-name], why is Mulan any different?" (*Mulan*). This important question inspires girls to demand respect and equality, and encourages boys to give it to them.

Li Shang is one of the more serious Princes. He is disciplined, has a great sense of obligation, and in contrast to the Beast, Aladdin and even John Smith, he hardly ever expresses his emotions or feelings. When Shang finds that his father has died in battle, he jumps on his horse and goes to war (Towbin et al 29), without showing any sign of grief. He is obviously very angry when Ping turns out to be Mulan but only dismisses her without much sentiment, and he is awkward and incapable of telling Mulan of his love at the end of the film. For the first time in a Disney Princess film, there seems to be

more of an emphasis on the Prince's physical appearance than the Princess's, as Shang is often portrayed topless, with several instances of Mulan gawking at him, and her sidekick, Mushu, referring to him as "pretty boy" (*Mulan*). Shang's strict manners earn him the respect of his subordinates quickly and he manages to train his bunch of "incompetent blockheads" into fierce soldiers. Initially he partakes in the sexist cultural ideology that is portrayed by Disney in the film, i.e. the song "I'll make a man out of you", which is sung by Shang and includes lines like "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons" (*Mulan*), but in the end he joins Mulan as an equal and a comrade in her final battle, proving that "Mulan" is in fact no different than "Ping".

Modern Disney

After *Mulan*, Disney took a break from the production of Princess films for a little over a decade and the change that these third generation Princes and Princesses underwent was in no way less dramatic than in the period between the early- and middle Disney films in regards to gender portrayal. By that time, the third wave of feminism had surfaced, opposing some of the constructs of the second wave, e.g. celebrating their sexuality as empowering, and readapting "the very lipstick, high heels and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression" (Rampton). In modern Disney, the previous themes of "love at first sight" and patriarchal values such as marriage and domestication have been utterly abandoned. Saladino argues that the Princesses "appear ready to achieve their goals without the need to achieve love in the end" (51) and that the Princes "come to them in the form of guides that [none of them want] for any purpose but as a means to their desired ends" (51). Furthermore, the male leads only take on the role of "Prince" after the Princesses fulfill the task that they set out to accomplish. Instead of feeling incomplete and helpless in their tasks until completed by love, the Princesses are entirely happy without a Prince, although some of them end up with one anyway (Saladino 50-51) as a sort of by-product of their individual journeys. Similarly, the Princes have become much more three-dimensional than before, sometimes blurring the lines of typical gender portrayal by taking on more feminine attributes. Like the Princesses, they are each undertaking a journey of emotional growth with the help of their female counterparts. They do not fall instantly in love with the Princesses, but develop their feelings through camaraderie and friendship. Although they are sometimes used for comic relief, they generally convey a positive message about what it means to

be a man; a message that is equally important for girls to understand as it is for boys to relate to. Furthermore, Disney has made an effort to market the recent films for both genders, e.g. by using neutral titles (*Tangled*, *Brave*, *Frozen*) that do not deter young male viewers (Law 21).

The Princess and the Frog

The Princess and the Frog was highly anticipated because it tackled many “firsts” for the Disney Company, such as being the first to star a black heroine, Tiana; the first to take place in the USA and the first where the heroine has a job outside the home. Additionally, the Prince, Naveen, is the first Prince since *The Beauty and the Beast* to be an actual royal figure. The racial and geographical issues in the film are subjects for further studies, while the Princess’s career ambitions are unprecedented in the previous Princess films and very interesting to consider in the context of gender development. Tiana is an exceptional cook and has a dream of becoming a chef at her own restaurant. In realizing her dream, she moves towards autonomy and self-reliance, and throughout her journey in the film, she is neither forced to give up on her dream nor love, as marrying Prince Naveen is an “added bonus” (Lester 303, England, Descares and Collier-Meek 563). Nonetheless, the complex gender messages in the film and the nature in which Disney presents Tiana’s career ambitions has been subject to controversy among Disney critics. They argue that Tiana’s desire lies in a career that involves traditionally feminine and domestic labor, like cooking, cleaning and serving, something that had not been seen since the early Princess films, and that her career ambitions are presented as a worrisome trait, because they “prevented her from socializing and pursuing romantic opportunities” (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 563). Further, Stover claims that although the film “presents tremendous female empowerment by allowing the black female protagonist to own a business, the film constantly reminds the viewer that Tiana inherited this dream from her father” (5), and that Tiana is feminized by seeking male parental approval (Stover 5). However, the predominant theme in the film is that your dreams will not come true by wishing upon a star (as Disney had hitherto maintained), but by working hard and not losing sight of your goal. As Tiana herself so aptly puts it, “You can’t rely on that star, you gotta have hard work of your own” (*The Princess and the Frog*). This is a lesson taught to her by her father, the first father of a Disney Princess to encourage his daughter to become whatever she wants.

The complexity of gender portrayal in *The Princess and the Frog* continues in the portrayal of Prince Naveen. For the first time, the Prince figure is “a bit incompetent, naïve, and unable to financially support himself [and] display[s] higher frequencies of [traditionally] feminine behaviors than [traditionally] masculine behaviors (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 563). He is also seen doing domestic work (mincing mushrooms), which is another “first” in a Princess film. The mushroom-mincing scene also has a significant reversal of gender roles, first when Tiana is put in the position of authority, stating, “Keep practicing [mincing] and I just might hire you” (*The Princess and the Frog*), and again by Prince Naveen’s pride in his accomplishments at such a traditionally feminine task (Mejia). Tiana’s father is also shown in a domestic setting when cooking for his family at the end of a long workday. England, Descartes and Collier-Meek found that Tiana and Naveen are more androgynous than their predecessors, that they are able to achieve their goals both together and apart and that their romance “developed over time as the characters interacted with each other, often overcoming obstacles together and fostering a friendship as well” (565), suggesting, like in *Mulan*, a more realistic relationship formation. In the end they are portrayed as equals who respect and support each other and this conveys a healthy message to young viewers of both sexes.

Tangled

Disney’s next Princess film, *Tangled*, is considered by some critics to be a form of “third-wave feminist consciousness-raising” (Saladino 60) because the heroine, Rapunzel, “models non-traditional behaviors and tendencies that challenge gender expectations” (Saladino 60). Although some elements of *Snow White* and *Cinderella* can be found in *Tangled* (e.g. the villainous mother-figure who forces the Princess to perform domestic labor), Wilde stresses that Rapunzel’s tale is different because the plot does not revolve around finding true love, receiving the proverbial kiss and marrying “the first man that walks into her life” (139), but her dream of adventure and experiencing the world. Wilde continues, stating that Rapunzel is not waiting for a Prince to save her, but uses him as a way out of the tower to show her the world, and while the earlier Princesses had little or no dialogue, “the oppression of female voice and feminine roles are challenged [in *Tangled*]” (139). Although the Prince, Flynn Rider, “narrates the tale, [...] the scenes depict Rapunzel as dominant” (Wilde 139). While this Disney Princess, like all before her, is attributed with a physical appearance

that falls under the patriarchal standards of beauty, the emphasis is on her strength as a person, not her attractiveness. Even though her long hair, which is a universally acknowledged symbol of feminine beauty, is central to the plot, it is not for aesthetic reasons but because of the magic power it possesses. Apart from having healing and rejuvenating abilities, Rapunzel frequently uses her hair to physically assist her, whether she is doing her chores or fighting bad guys. Wilde argues that the hair being used as a weapon “evokes the concept of an object of beauty, protecting herself through her physical appearance” (137), but as the primary function of Rapunzel’s hair is not aesthetic, she is not using her beauty for protection, in the way that Jasmine uses sensuality and seduction. As mentioned above, Rapunzel’s antagonist is the evil witch, Goethe, who kidnapped her as a baby because of the anti-aging powers of her hair. Rapunzel’s strength is further exposed when she stands up to and defies the woman who she thinks is her mother (and in fact the only person she has ever met before Flynn Rider) and confronts her. By doing so, and by refusing Goethe further use of her hair’s powers (*Tangled*), Rapunzel regains her consciousness and the control over her own life and body “illuminat[ing] a new sense of understanding about what a young woman is capable of doing. By standing up to oppressive authority, Rapunzel fights for what is rightfully hers: her freedom” (Saladino 82).

In recent years, Disney has become more apt at producing Princes with relatable characteristics and attributes than those in the earlier films, of which Flynn Rider, the Prince of *Tangled*, is a good example. He is charming, smart, and resourceful and has a good sense of humor, although it is implied that he is a bit of a playboy and a flirt in the beginning of the film (Garcia 86), often referring to Rapunzel as “blondie” (*Tangled*). Similar to Prince Naveen (and to some extent Li Shang and John Smith), Flynn has a back-story and is undertaking his own journey and emotional growth throughout the film. Like Naveen, Flynn initially serves as Rapunzel’s “guide” (Saladino 51), and he does not fall in love with her “at first sight”, like so many of the previous Princes, but develops his romantic attachment based on her personality and their friendship. Although initially annoyed with having to accompany Rapunzel to see the “floating lights”, Flynn evolves into a supportive and encouraging friend on their journey. He delivers a powerful message to young viewers after Rapunzel asks him what will come after she has fulfilled her dream and he answers, “you get to find a new dream” (*Tangled*).

Garcia states that both the Prince and the Princess in *Tangled* start out in their traditional and expected gender setting, but during the film there is a shift in the portrayal of gender roles:

Tangled portrays its main characters in a more realistic middle-ground of gender role expectations, with neither lead being hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine. As the film progresses, Rapunzel begins to take on some of the more masculine traits of Flynn Rider, and loses more of her extremely feminine characteristics. Flynn in return loses his masculine shell and slides more towards feminine attributes. (85-86)

An example of this is seen in Rapunzel's almost satirical use of a frying pan as her weapon. The frying pan initially links Rapunzel with domestication and patriarchal values, but it turns out to be an effective weapon that is used by both Rapunzel and Flynn throughout the film. This sort of shift towards gender equality contrasts the early Princess films, such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, where the Princess was portrayed as subordinate to the Prince, even though he only had a minor presence within the narrative (Zipes cited in Do Rozario 39).

Brave

In 2012, Disney teamed up with Pixar to produce the next Princess, in the Scottish highland fairy tale, *Brave*, the first film from Pixar to have a female lead. The independent and headstrong heroine, Merida, combined with a plot line that focuses on the relationship between her and her mother, Queen Elinor, immediately caught the attention of feminists around the globe. Finally, here was a Disney Princess that parents could not wait to introduce to their children and who challenged every single patriarchal value found in the franchise's previous films. The creator and co-director of *Brave*, Brenda Chapman, stated that she had created Merida "to give young girls a better, stronger role model, a more attainable role model, something of substance, not just a pretty face that waits around for romance" (Chapman). And Merida does just that. She is an adventurous young woman, highly skilled in rock climbing and archery, and throughout the film, she stands up to her mother, who is actively trying to mold her into the well-behaved and passive Princess that Disney had been portraying for decades, in order to find her a suitor. But Merida, not wanting to be a princess if that means giving up her individuality (Saladino 51), fervently rejects the notion of an arranged marriage and enters an archery tournament being held for three young men prospected to be her

suitors, declaring, “I am Merida [and] I’ll be shooting for my own hand” (*Brave*). By doing so she is fighting for herself and her right to decide her own future, making it clear that she will “rebel against anything she does not believe in, including to participate in an arranged marriage as a result of a competition” (Wilde 141). Merida furthers this point by saying that she is not ready to marry, and that she may never be, which is a compelling message to young viewers, especially girls, and one that Disney has never uttered so bluntly before; that happiness *can* be obtained without a man and that *not* wanting to marry is perfectly fine. As Saladino states, “The princess wants nothing more than to break free from the norms that society has prescribed for her” (88), and “Merida’s experience invites and enables women to think differently about themselves. In other words, as a film narrative that breaks down perceptions of women’s roles, *Brave* suggests moral messages about how the world ought to be” (89-90).

One of the most progressive elements of the film is the difference in Merida’s physical appearance compared to her predecessors. In the past, the Princesses have been made to fit a certain patriarchal standard of beauty. They have all been a bit oddly proportioned, with big eyes, luscious lips, perfectly groomed hair and tiny waists. Although Merida is slender, her body is more realistically proportioned; her eyes, mouth and face resemble a normal person, and her signature mane of red, unruly hair mirrors the fierceness of her character. She usually has her bow close by, hates being dressed in uncomfortable and confining dresses and upon entering the archery competition, she “physically and symbolically rips out of her dress that suppressed her from being her true self” (Wilde 143). In 2013 Disney suddenly introduced a new animated version of Merida in relation to her formal “inauguration” into the Princess line. The new image shows Merida wearing the very dress that had confined her in the film, her hair flowing in delicate locks, and holding her bow awkwardly behind her back. The message of discontent from fans was clear; they did not care for the way Disney “sexualized” Merida, not when the realistic portrayal of her body was one of the things that made her so popular and, “[f]rom this, Change.org ranked a petition of over 200,000 signatures in which Disney had to change the princess back into her original persona” (Wilde 143).

Perhaps the most interesting gender development in *Brave* is that there is no Prince. Merida never develops a romantic attachment to anyone throughout and remains single at the end of the film, which is a progressive leap for a company like Disney,

whose main selling point for the better part of a century has been the story of finding “true love”. Merida proactively faces her challenges alone “instead of waiting for her prince to save her (Wilde 142 citing Stone 1975). The male characters in the film are mostly there for comic relief, which is, in turn, a cause for concern. The only male-female relationship present is the one between Merida’s parents, Elinor and Fergus, in which Elinor has an obvious “upper hand”, as it is she who controls her husband and takes charge when it comes to dealing with the other clan leaders. Although the male characters are shown as respectful to women, they are comically portrayed as “dumb and emotionally unstable” (Wilde 142) and while they in no way resemble the Princes from the earlier films, their portrayal is neither realistic nor positive. It is clear that the female characters are becoming stronger and more powerful and, although this unfavorable representation of men is not present in the most recent film, *Frozen*, it is worth considering whether the company is planning on portraying such adverse male characters in the future.

However, the emphasis in the film is solely on Merida’s “journey of self-discovery and learning of how to fix a broken bond between mother and daughter” (Wilde 143). Saladino argues that by learning the right way of communicating with her mother, Merida ultimately obtains the power over her own fate, and “Elinor then recognizes Merida’s intentions and complies with her daughter’s request to choose her own path. Merida’s narrative contributes to a larger understanding of what it means to be a woman” (89). Wilde similarly states that “Merida 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).

Frozen

The most recent film from Disney, *Frozen*, was released in 2013 and has since become the most successful animated film in history, with a box office income of over \$1.2 billion (Law 18, Box Office Mojo) worldwide. The film “shatters all previous [notions] of gender role limitation” (Garabedian 24), with the exception of *Brave*, by introducing two strong female heroines, Queen Elsa and Princess Anna, and Law argues that the progressive way in which the film portrays women and their relationship is one of the factors in its enormous success (18). *Frozen* focuses on the relationship of two sisters: Anna, the headstrong, adorably naïve and dorky Princess; and her older sister, Elsa, the powerful but tormented Queen. Although the elements of romance and love are present

in the film, they are kept in the background and overtly challenged, and the concept of “love at first sight” is repeatedly questioned (Law 23), for instance when Elsa tells Anna that she cannot marry a man she has just met (Prince Hans), and when the male lead, Kristoff, is outrage at the same notion later in the film.

As mentioned above, *Frozen* introduces two heroines, each challenging patriarchal ideologies in her own way. According to Law, both are three-dimensional active and complex women; they possess flaws that are relatable and characteristics typically associated with male heroes, while also maintaining their femininity and appeal, sending “a strong message to audiences about what being a hero means” (20-21). Similarly, Wilde states, “Anna is not portrayed as an object based on desirability and physicality” (144), but depicts post-feminist attributes of self-confidence through her speech, for example by saying, “I know how to stop winter” (*Frozen*), as something that is good (145-146). Furthermore, Anna incorporates typically masculine characteristics such as bravery and strength, for instance by saving herself and Kristoff from wolves and snow monsters, and ultimately performing the final rescue without the involvement of a Prince (Wilde 145-147; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 565) while also choosing her sister over a man (Law 24). Although Anna initially forces the ideals of past Princesses and notion of “love at first sight” when meeting Prince Hans, the whole interaction between them is cast in a satirical light, and in fact, Anna takes the dominant role in their relationship and her frankness towards Hans is rather an indication of female autonomy (Wilde 146-147).

For the first time ever, a Disney Princess has progressed to the status of “Queen”. That is in itself a leap in gender portrayal, as the title “Princess” directly refers to “daughter of a King” and therefore “powerlessness”, but Queen Elsa is definitely not powerless. However, she is more tormented and isolated than Anna, by the magical freezing power she possesses, which she initially cannot control and has to keep secret in order to protect her sister. After her secret comes out, Elsa experiences a powerful moment of relief and empowerment brought forth in the song “Let it go”. The song is a defining moment for Elsa, but can also be interpreted metaphorically as the “Disney Princess” challenging patriarchal authority, as can be found in lines like “It’s time to see what I can do / to test the limits and break through”, “Here I stand / and here I’ll stay”, “I’m never going back / the past is in the past” and “The perfect girl is gone” (*Frozen*). Additionally, Elsa removes the gloves that keep her powers at bay, builds a castle, transforms her clothes, releases her hair and tosses away her tiara; all of which

symbolizes her freedom from patriarchal oppression. Law maintains that “[t]here is also a subtle nod towards Elsa’s burgeoning sexuality and womanhood when she chooses to embrace her new identity as the snow queen, complete with a self-directed makeover and a more confident, sassy gait” (21). Furthermore, there are certain similarities between Elsa and Merida (of *Brave*), as Elsa is not attached to a man at the end of the film, but Disney goes even further in Elsa’s case because the issue of marriage is never even introduced.

Disney also introduced a male lead in *Frozen* that is relatively different than in previous films. Although Prince Hans is an actual royal Prince, he does not hold the title of “Disney Prince” as it is put forth for the purpose of this study, as he ultimately turns out to be the villain. The role of Prince is therefore bestowed upon Kristoff, Anna’s helper and guide on her journey. Their relationship is one of equals, where gender roles intertwine and both of them take the lead (Wilde 146). For the first time, the Prince has a career that is not in some way associated with protecting (like LiShang) or conquering (like John Smith), and he is not a thief or an idle royal. Kristoff is dependent upon his job and ambitious about his career. He is also portrayed as domesticated when he is concerned about his sled being dirtied by Anna, asking her “were you raised in a barn?” (*Frozen*; Wilde 146). Furthermore, he becomes embarrassed in front of Anna when his troll friends sing a comical song about his shortcomings, as well as showing emotion at the sight of Elsa’s ice castle, saying “I might cry” (*Frozen*). In fact, Law states that:

Gender roles are flipped in numerous instances: Anna chooses to punch Hans herself; Elsa rules the kingdom successfully as queen; Anna is fearless and chooses to pursue Elsa herself; and Elsa transforms into a powerful woman who builds her own magnificent castle instead of being whisked away to one. (21)

She states that these are positive messages that show women as being in control of their own journeys and fates (21).

Frozen focuses mainly on the love between women and their journeys, teaching both girls and boys that women can save the day and are not dependent upon a man’s rescue or love (Law 24). Furthermore, the film “explores universal themes [...] particularly identity and the stigma of being different” (Law 21). By Anna’s choice to protect her sister from Hans rather than kiss Kristoff and save herself, Disney made her “the enlightened hero that they have been progressing towards for nearly 80 years” (Garabedian 24).

Conclusion

The Walt Disney Company has had an unquestionable impact on the market of children's entertainment ever since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Since then, the company has produced countless films and unforgettable characters that children around the globe know, love and imitate on a daily basis. For decades Disney Princesses have acted as role models for young girls and contributed to the immense wealth and success of the Disney Company. But with great success comes great responsibility, and according to the studies cited in this essay on the effects that television has on children (Villani 392; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 557; Tonn 6; Walsh, Fürsich and Jefferson 126; Smith et al 783), Disney's responsibility towards their viewers is massive.

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate how gender portrayal of male and female protagonists of the Princess films has developed in the three eras in which Disney was most prolific at their production. Furthermore, I have attempted to analyze the obscure messages that these films initially conveyed to young viewers in order to maintain the status quo of patriarchal values in society, and shown how the rendering of these messages has decreased significantly in the most recent films and thus produced realistic and relatable role models for children.

The early era of Disney Princess films saw Princesses that demonstrated traditional gender behavior that was socially accepted at the time. Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora are all submissive participants on their journeys through life, helplessly waiting for a man to save them from their unfortunate situation. They are frequently shown doing domestic work and although their evil stepmothers force it upon them, they are compliant and seem quite content. In Snow White's case, she uses her housekeeping skill as a bargaining point in exchange for shelter at the dwarfs' cottage. The Princesses' male counterparts, Prince, Prince Charming and Prince Philip, although significant to the plot as rescuers, are completely one-dimensional and mostly absent from the story, only emerging at the very end to perform the heroic rescue.

The films from the middle era of Princess films were produced under the influence of the second wave of feminism. The Princesses are no longer portrayed as domesticated damsels, but as headstrong young women who stand up to the rules that patriarchal society implemented on them. Ariel and Jasmine both fight patriarchal order in order to be with the men they love, Belle exhibits intellect by reading books; and

Pocahontas and Mulan avert wars, act as agents of peace and diplomacy and are the first Princesses not to be married or soon to be at the end of the film. However, each film presents obscure messages that promote patriarchal values for women, i.e. Ariel gives up her voice and her soul for love and ultimately only transfers her dependence from her father to her husband; Belle's "bookishness" serves to alienate her from her society and, more importantly, the plot of the film promotes domestic violence as something to be endured; Jasmine relies on her sexuality and skills of seduction rather than her intellect; and both Mulan and Pocahontas choose the traditionally valued outcome of staying at home out of duty rather than desire. Furthermore, the underlying theme of finding "true love" is still prevalent in all five films. The Princes, however, become more relatable characters, and are increasingly endowed with feminine characteristics, such as kindness, affection and fear.

As the last two films of the middle era were released a third wave of feminism had emerged, which swept through Disney like a storm. The modern era of Princess films has seen the first black Princess (Tiana), the first Princess to reject marriage altogether (Merida), and the first Queen (Elsa). The four films from this era all portray women who take control over their own destiny and have ambitions that have nothing to do with romance or love. Tiana breaks through all norms by having career ambitions and Rapunzel ventures out into an unknown world on a consciousness-raising adventure in order to figure out her identity. Furthermore, the two most recent films, *Brave* and *Frozen* revolve around the love between two women, rather than two men; *Brave* focuses on a mother-daughter relationship and *Frozen* concentrates on the love between two sisters. Furthermore, all the films, except *Brave*, portray strong male leads that act as relatable and realistic role models for boys. Each Prince has a journey of his own that he goes through, and although romance is still a factor in these films (except *Brave*), it plays a much smaller role than it did before, and only comes after both individuals have finished the tasks they set out to complete and is fuelled by friendship and camaraderie.

It will be interesting to see what Disney will do next and whether they will continue on the course they have taken in regards to gender portrayal. Hopefully, the storm that produced the most recent films will rage on into the future and procure more strong heroes and heroines for children to look up to, for today's children are the key to a future of gender equality.

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