

Janelle Knick

Dr. Glantz

Independent Study

Gender Portrayals in Disney's Classic and Remake Counterparts

Disney is a prevalent player in children's media. For the better half of a century they have produced films for children's entertainment, and Disney has quickly become a large and powerful media conglomerate. While in recent years Disney remade several of its classic Disney Princess films, the stereotypes within those films did not change to the extent that the modern Disney films did. The classic Disney Princesses were problematic for the exploitation of young children through displaying harmful stereotypes, and Disney has the chance to modernize and correct the errors in their classic films through the remakes. The question of whether or not Disney can or will make these changes is important when observing both the classic films and their remake counterparts; in addition, it is necessary to consider the implications of where the changes are happening or lacking. If Disney is actively making changes in order to create a less stereotypical picture of men and women in its more recent films, the remakes should differ immensely from their classic counterparts in order to match the present day perceptions of gender.

Disney's usage of the fairytales as a means of reaching wide, and young, audiences is not uncommon or unusual. Fairy tales have been used as a way to amuse and educate children for centuries, and Disney's creation of new and retelling of old fairy tales continues that tradition (Lieberman, 1986, p. 186). Most fairy tales have similar lessons embedded in them. Mainly they focus on specific roles that boys and girls are expected to perform, and through the telling of stories that demonstrate men and women following these expectations, they solidify the

requirements for membership in certain societies. Some of the requirements are positive; they teach children to follow the rules and help maintain order. However, when fairy tales focus on specific gender expectations, they tend to cause a larger problem since they create specific boxes for young girls and boys to fit in. Often, females in classic fairy tales, like those of the Brothers Grimm, teach girls how to be well mannered, respectable, and good housewives (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p. 714). A similar story is told for boys, except the expectations placed on them surrounds the idea that boys must be brave, outgoing, and intelligent. Children learn from a young age that “girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all[, and] boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky” (Lieberman, 1986, p. 188). The lines between the genders are rarely blurred, and the lack of acknowledgement of uniqueness gives children that do not fit into the presented image that fairy tales maintain the idea that they are abnormal.

The idea of causing dissociation between one and one’s gender is likely due to the fact that the expectations presented are often problematic for more reasons than just gender roles. Through fairy tales and the portrayal of girls specifically, women are taught at a young age that they are considered valuable in society for lackluster reasons. Princesses, or the female protagonists, are always portrayed as beautiful, and those that seek to cause them harm or undermine their authority, especially if they are women, are seen and described as ugly. Rarely, if ever, is there a situation where an ugly woman is rewarded and a pretty one defeated. By making the choice to connect beautiful as good and ugly as bad, children —specifically young girls— are taught that “beautiful girls are never ignored,” and “ultimately they are chosen for reward” over others (Lieberman, 1986, p. 187, 188). Furthermore, the distinction between ugly and beautiful can cause problems since girls that “[identify] with the [beautiful]... may learn to be suspicious of ugly girls” (Lieberman, 1986, p. 188). The distinction promotes and supports

competitiveness over beauty instead of intelligence. And girls that feel as though they are not beautiful feel left behind.

Disney supports and furthers these stereotypes since Disney's fairy tales "have been shown to portray some stereotypical depictions of gender" and other harmful stereotypes (England et. al., 2011, p. 556). Much like the original sources, "Walt Disney has set forth standards for girls on how to grow up into proper women in order to find their prince" (Sawyer, p. 3). In addition to continuing gendered expectations, Disney, and other modern fairy tales, promote and push marriage as an ideal for children, especially girls. Disney has "a common theme in classic ... films [that] suggests ... "happily ever after" should be one's ultimate pursuit" (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 515). Through Disney pushing nuclear families as normal and necessary, the mentality created makes it a necessity for girls to rush into finding their "prince charming" so as to fit the fast-paced narrative. This need to rush is only exemplified due to the fact that the first ten of Disney's classic Princesses —spanning the time frame of 1937-2010— have a median age of 16.8 at the time of their story and sudden romance and marriage. Young girls grow up with the belief that they need to find someone, and soon. In addition to the problematic speed that Disney Princesses push onto young girls in terms of finding relationships, "Disney films do not show the process of falling in love," instead, "Disney films ... feature courtships rather than preexisting romantic relationships" (Sawyer, p. 8, Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 515). By making relationships fast-paced and undeveloped, Disney and fairy tales teach young children that having someone to love is more important than being in love. Fairy tales teach young children through their classic tales that romance is necessary, and Disney films modernize and reaffirm this archaic belief through the lack of developed relationships and stereotypical expectations for genders.

The classic Disney films often contain all of the aforementioned critiques of fairy tales since Disney Princesses embody current societal expectations that are often negative. Disney's classic films follow a similar pattern of featuring "a central female character, the princess, and a male character who is romantically linked with the princess" (England et. al., 2011, p. 556). In the second half of the 20th century, Disney produced a plethora of animated classics that followed this pattern, starting with *Snow White* in 1937. Before the new millennia, Disney released an additional seven films, including *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992), which was the first Disney Princess film to have a male protagonist (England et. al., 2011, p. 563). These main characters, specifically those that are female, are all similar in their characteristics, motivations, and storyline. Very little change occurs throughout the films and their plots, and most of them promote similar expectations for women in particular. Early Princesses "such as Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella are characterized as overtly passive, obedient, and quiet" and these expectations do not change until later years where "princess[es] like Mulan, Pocahontas, and Belle begin to show signs of interdependence and strength as they slowly break the boundaries that once defined traditional gender roles of females in the 20th century" (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 513). In fact, Belle is the first Disney princess that shows interest in intelligent conversation and is capable of reading. Likewise, Gaston, the antagonist of the film, rejects both the concept of females reading and reading itself. These character traits twist the stereotypical expectations of the time. In addition, Belle is the first Princess to not experience love at first sight. (Sawyer, p. 10) Belle's behaviors and wariness toward love signals that Disney films do try to challenge certain expectations. However, it is important to remember that even if Belle challenges certain stereotypes, *Beauty*

and *The Beast* came out in 1991, which means Disney took 41 years after the first Disney Princess movie to make these changes.

Even then *Beauty and the Beast* contains problematic views, much like the other Disney films. Even though Belle and other later Disney Princesses fight the common stereotypes older Disney films promoted, like Princess' having a lack of intelligence and bravery, they still contain several values that are problematic. Of the four classics analyzed, *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992), all of them possess a love interest for the protagonist as well as mentioned or had a marriage in the story. Belle, despite not experiencing love at first sight, still has a love interest and acknowledges marriage as a part of her future. Merida from *Brave* (2012) is the first of Disney's Princesses to outright reject marriage and romance entirely as well as remain without a love interest. However, the idea of marriage is still pushed as part of the plot, and it is not until *Moana* (2016) that a plot line without marriage, the need for marriage, or even love for a woman is introduced. These dates are important because even though some Princesses fight the stereotypical expectations of love and companionship before the 2000s, they still promote the idea that "the goal of Disney heroines is ultimately love and marriage" (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 514). Thus, girls are constantly being shown that "marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale," and they should aspire to get married (Lieberman, 1986, p. 189).

In addition to marriage, many other stereotypes are pushed in *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992) through Cinderella, Aurora, Belle, and Jasmine's behaviors and characterizations. Firstly, female passivity is always present since "most heroines ... are entirely passive, submissive, and helpless" (Lieberman, 1986, p. 191). All four of the female characters aforementioned experience some sort of oppression that

they are unable to fully prevent or change. Aurora is cursed to sleep forever without the kiss of her true love, Cinderella is doomed to servitude by her step-family, Belle is trapped in a castle when she exchanges her freedom for her father's, and Jasmine is forced to marry a stranger to appease the law (*Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992)). In addition to the unfortunate situations that these characters find themselves in, Disney Princesses are often shown to cry in an overly dramatic way, and all four aforementioned characters cry in some way or another in their film. Of those four instances, three of the listed instances are caused by something related to men. Aurora sobs when she is told she will never see Philip, a man she just met, ever again, and Jasmine cries when she learns Aladdin, a man she just met, has supposedly been put to death (*Sleeping Beauty* 1959, *Aladdin* 1992). In comparison, none of the classic females' male counterparts experience a similar display of emotion. Despite several attempts on his life, constantly running from the law, and being faced by unlimited power in the form of both Genie and Jafar, Aladdin never cries or even shows the slightest inclination of fear (*Aladdin* 1992). These distinctions between female and male characterization reveals that the narrative Disney is pushing is the idea that females must be passive and emotional to contrast the strong male counterpart.

In addition to the expectation that women in Disney films are emotional and passive is the expectation that women are beautiful. As aforementioned, fairy tales place an extreme emphasis on feminine beauty, and the Disney classic further this point. In *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992), there are several instances where the female character is described as beautiful. Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* is granted three gifts by the good fairies; one of those gifts is the gift of beauty (1959). She is not gifted intelligence or any other practical skill; all she needs is beauty to be successful. In

addition, the movie itself is called *Sleeping Beauty*, drawing attention to the fact that Aurora is beautiful. Other than her beauty, there is very little that Aurora does. Aurora is the protagonist in *Sleeping Beauty*, yet she “only accounts for 18 lines of the dialogue and 18 minutes of screen time in the entire [movie]” (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 527). Aurora is the best example of the beauty and passivity that women are expected to fulfil. Despite being the title character, Aurora demonstrates that silence and passivity is best as it will help the plot to be furthered. Cinderella is another example of passivity because “after leaving her slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay home and wait” (Lieberman, 1986, p. 192). Her beauty is rewarded when the Prince sees her once and decides that she is the one who will fulfill his father’s dream of having grandchildren (*Cinderella* 1950). In addition to being beautiful, the physical characterization of Cinderella, Aurora, Belle, and Jasmine has “a focus on their sexuality” despite the majority of the girls being underage (England et. al., 2011, p. 556). Disney’s classic animation style portrays women with small waists and disproportionate bodies. Jasmine and Aurora, despite approaching their sixteenth birthdays, have fully developed bodies similar to that of Cinderella, who is nineteen. Through the descriptions and depictions of Disney Princesses as beautiful, they further the stereotype that women must be beautiful to be good and successful.

As is apparent, the Disney classics contain several problematic elements regarding gender expectations. In the past decade, Disney has participated in the remaking of several of its classics into live action films. In 2014 Disney released *Maleficent*, a live-action remake of *Sleeping Beauty*. In 2015 they released *Cinderella*, in 2017 *Beauty and the Beast* was released, and in 2019 the live-action *Aladdin* was produced. Since these films were produced in a more progressive age than their classic counterparts, the level of problematic stereotypes should be less present since, as previously discussed, Disney Princesses embody the societal expectations

of the time they were produced. It is important to note that Disney is not attempting to simply retell the stories that their classics did. There are major plot differences in each of the four aforementioned remakes. Cinderella meets her Prince, who is actually given the name Kit in the remake, three times before their marriage, where in the classic the two only interact once before the wedding (*Cinderella* 2015, 1950). The remake of *Beauty and the Beast* contains a scene where the two travel to Belle's old home through the usage of one of the magic items left by the Enchantress. Additionally, the remake includes the discussion of Belle's mother. (*Beauty and the Beast* 2017) The classic lacks both of these details. The live-action *Aladdin* introduces several characters that the classic does not have, rearranges several of the scenes, and gives the Genie a love interest and family (*Aladdin* 2019). Finally, *Maleficent* (2014) itself is a complete retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) from the perspective of Maleficent, the antagonist of the classic. These changes are all important to consider because they prove that Disney is not attempting to create carbon copies of their classics; Disney is attempting to rebrand their older films, and as a result of that fact, the newer remakes should contain several differences from the originals in terms of gender expectations, especially since Disney's newer, original films do challenge stereotypes.

Newer, original Disney films do contain major changes in regard to gender roles. As aforementioned, Disney has produced several films in the last decade that challenge the stereotypes of years past. Love at first sight is not as prominent as it once was since "modern Disney Princess films have shown a rapid progression in recent years toward more realistic portrayals of love;" most Disney Princesses, like Tiana in *Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010), develop relationships with their Princes prior to confessing their love (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 530). Romance and marriage have become "more realistic as

princesses and suitors from more recent films [have] more goals and greater obstacles,” and in some instances, like *Moana*, love is not even in the story (Hecht, 2011, p. 56). Female characters like Anna and Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) dismantle the ancient “true love’s kiss” trope by taking out the need for a male figure to act as the hero and giving that power to females. Disney has shown that they are capable of adapting their newer films with a progressive lens.

It is important to remember that the newer films are not the same as remakes since the remakes are drawing from a previous story; however, as discussed prior, Disney is not committed to a word-for-word retelling. With that considered, the remakes should contain newer, more progressive ideas, and they do. *Maleficent* (2014) is the best example of the remakes as it is a completely new perspective of the older tale. The film creates a narrative that, in most situations, removes males as important, positive characters. In *Maleficent*, Maleficent is the protagonist and the King, Stephen, is the villain. When the time comes for Aurora to be woken from her curse, Philip, the Prince, is unable to break the spell because the movie acknowledges that a day-old relationship would not be developed enough to produce true love. In addition to removing positive males and negative females, *Maleficent* gives Maleficent a backstory that allows her the emotional capacity to watch and care for Aurora to the point that she attempts to revoke the curse that she placed on Aurora when she was a baby. Without males in the picture, a positive female relationship is created between Aurora and Maleficent. In contrast with its classic, it is Maleficent that causes Aurora to cry before she is sent to the castle as she has just learned it was Maleficent who cursed her. In the end, it was Maleficent, not Philip, who broke the spell because, much like *Frozen* (2013), true love exists in many forms, not only romantic. These changes are all important because they give the women in the tale a power that they did not have in the classic.

The other remakes contain many positive changes as well. Belle from the 2017 remake is characterized as more independent and brave even when compared to her classic counterpart. The 2017 Belle attempts to escape the castle a handful of times despite her promise to the Beast since her freedom is more important to her than a promise to her captor; the opposite is true for her classic counterpart. Additionally, 2017 Belle never experiences an emotional breakdown despite the stress constantly being placed on her, and she even participates in the final battle between Gaston and the Beast instead of just watching like the classic Belle did. Jasmine, much like Belle, plays a more active role in her 2019 remake. At several points in the film, Jafar makes comments about how Jasmine cannot be the Sultan because she is a woman. Feeling silenced, the character is given a ballad to express her frustrations toward always being put down. Toward the climax of the film, Jasmine finally stands up for herself. She speaks back to Jafar, and in several instances commands him with an authority she did not have in the 1992 film. Much like Belle, Jasmine also participates in the fight with Jafar; she allows him to get close in order to steal the lamp from him before jumping off the balcony to give the lamp back to Aladdin. (*Aladdin* 2019)

All of these examples, for both Belle and Jasmine, show that Disney is making an effort to change their portrayals of women in their films; both women experience blatant sexism, and both actively and successfully fight against it.

Cinderella, in an interesting twist, makes several changes for the male characters. Prince Charming in the 2015 remake is given the name Kit, where in the classic he was only referred to as “Prince Charming.” Kit also becomes the first, and only, male of all eight films analyzed to show emotions through real tears. In the 2015 *Cinderella*, Kit’s relationship with his father is further developed through his father’s illness. When his father lay dying, Kit is overcome with emotion. He places his head in his father’s lap, curls into a fetal position, and cries as the camera

pans out above them. Kit's response is a natural response to a tragic moment in one's life, and it is time the media acknowledges that males, too, have emotions. If Aurora (1959) and Jasmine (1992) are allowed to cry over men they just met, then Kit is allowed to cry over his father's pending death. The inclusion of a more developed male character is positive because, as previously mentioned, males rarely are told they can experience emotions. Breaking stereotypes for both males and females are vital so all children can understand there is no one way to be male or female.

While the Disney remakes do contain multiple progressive changes in their films, several, undeniable stereotypes remain. Firstly, the focus on beauty remains. In *Maleficent*, the audience is taught that iron burns fairies. Maleficent, as a fairy, is burned several times by iron throughout the film, and while the mark fades relatively fast, red and inflamed marks are always seen after the initial contact. In a scene towards the end of the film, Maleficent finds herself under an iron net; the experience is clearly painful for her, but when she looks up at her attacker, no red mark develops on her face where the net rests upon her cheek. (*Maleficent* 2014) In this instant, it is clear that Maleficent's facial beauty is more important than the world's established rules. Additionally, in all of the four remakes, beauty is constantly mentioned; the Genie in *Aladdin* (2019) goes as far to sing "heard your princess was *hot*, where is she" when Aladdin arrives at the palace disguised as Prince Ali. Despite being produced in more progressive times, beauty is still important in these films and their plots. Additionally, none of the Princesses, or Princes for that matter, have any sort of physical imperfections despite being real people and not animated characters. All four of the female characters are thin or average weight with defined waists. In several instances, the women appear to have make-up on in a situation in which a person normally would not to further push the importance of beauty. Despite making changes in several

behaviors, Disney's remakes still push the importance of beauty; however, the usage of attractive, real people is more effective for establishing the norm onto dissenting members of society than the animated counterparts.

In addition to the continued importance of beauty, the Disney remakes do continue and worsen several gender expectations despite their best effort. *Cinderella* (2015) still portrays Ella as extremely passive. Per her mother's dying wish, Ella commits herself to "have courage and be kind" (*Cinderella* 2015). Through following her mother's wish, Ella is meek, and obeys the whims of her stepfamily. Much like the fairy tale this film succeeds, the Cinderella character is rewarded for being beautiful, kind, and passive. Through the rewarding of Ella for her actions, the film still implicitly teaches young girls that they must be kind to those that are cruel to them. Now, this philosophy is good to have; however, Ella clearly lets her mistreatment go too far. The line between being kind and being walk-over by those that seek to mistreat her is never drawn, and children seeking to mimic this behavior may likewise find themselves in harmful positions of possible mistreatment because they are too focused on being kind. Additionally, the remake of *Cinderella* promotes love at first sight and rushed love. While the Prince and Cinderella meet only once prior to their marriage in the classic, Kit and Ella in the 2015 remake meet three times; arguable, three is not much better than one. Their courtship still teaches children that real relationships do not require work or any sort of development before making a life-changing commitment. In trying to elongate the romance to make it better, the remake makes it worse by still actively portraying a rushed marriage as not rushed.

Other remakes have problems with marriage as well. Where Jasmine and Aladdin wait until a later sequel to get married in the 1992 version, the 2019 remake flashes forward to their wedding, again pressing the importance of marriage. Genie also gets married in this version, and

his marriage only adds to that importance. The 2017 Gaston presses the issue of marriage to Belle when he notes she is nearing the age of becoming a “spinster,” meaning she is passing the proper age of marriage (*Beauty and the Beast* 2017). Gaston’s words, and Belle’s lack of contradiction, implies that there is a time by which women need to be married. While Aurora is not engaged at the end of the 2014 film, Philp still reappears because despite the fact that he is not her true love now, she still needs to have some kind of relationship to validate her character. All of these examples show that the remakes continue to push the stereotype and necessity of marriage on females in particular. Even Belle and Jasmine, who in their remakes are given more power and authority, still succumb to the idea of union. The message created here is that even the strongest of women need some kind of romantic companion to be seen as good members of society. Disney needs to recognize that modernizing their films means removing elements, like marriage and the need for romantic companionship, that create particular expectations for girls and boys to follow.

Much like the newer films Disney has produced in recent years, the remakes do contain elements that challenge stereotypes of older mindsets. Female characters are given the chance to be brave instead of passive, the motives for females and their behaviors are becoming less about men, and in some situations, men are being given the chance to show emotions. However, despite progressive changes, “it is apparent that gendered stereotypes and behaviors are still very prevalent in the Disney Princess line, though their depiction has become more complex over the years” (England, et. al. 2011, p. 563). Recent movies have not moved away significantly from traditional gender roles and particular expectations; beauty and marriage are still crucial to the stories (England, et. al. 2011, p. 565-566). Despite offering chances for gender expectations to blur, “there remains a clear gender distinction in terms of roles” (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 529).

The problem with remakes, especially when compared to newer Disney films, is that they are not as progressive as they should or could be. Disney has shown that they are willing to produce media that challenges the norms society has, and Disney is clearly attempting to recreate their classics with newer twists. However, since the remakes still contain several problematic elements that other films erase, it is clear that Disney is changing the narrative in response to social change and not as a way to enact change themselves (Sawyer, p. 8).

If Disney was truly interested in retelling the classics in a way that made them more progressive, like other films that have been released in recent years, marriage and beauty would not be included or referenced to the extent that they were; that is why “these new films are ... just reiterating traditional romantic ideals in more dynamic ways” (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 516). The main characters can still have love interests and end the film together, but marriage does not need to be such an overhanging theme, especially when marriage is not for everyone and should not be presented as the norm. It is possible to cast attractive actors without referencing their attractiveness, hundreds of other films manage to avoid the topic. Constantly discussing a character’s attractiveness takes away from anything else they have to offer since the focus on beauty makes it seem as though they are only beautiful. The importance of beauty and marriage in fairy tale remakes are only essential to the plot because the producers and writers of the plot make it so, and this fact remains problematic. Disney attempts to make their stories “less fairy-tale and more realistic, but the message to” children has not changed (Hefner et. al., 2017, p. 530).

Despite Disney making efforts to produce media with progressive ideas, their remakes prove that they are not making these changes because they want to. In order for change to occur, the desired difference must be purposefully present in every film, and the change cannot feel

forced or awkward. Disney has the chance to completely remake their classic fairy tales into stories that little girls, and boys, could watch and relate too. They have the chance to fully twist the narrative into modern tales that remove the problematic elements. *Maleficent* is an example of this process, and that film shows that Disney knows that they can do exactly that. If Disney chooses to remake all of their classics, they should make an effort to modernize the fairy tale in ways they have proven as possible in order to retell an old story anew without losing the complete plot. Media is responsible for how children perceive the world, and it is time media companies start pushing progressive mindsets instead of following the politically correct changes. Disney is only as modern as its least progressive film, and unless they start making active changes to modernize their works, their failure to create change will negatively affect everyone.

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