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Juliana Garabedian

James Madison University

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Animating Gender Roles: How Disney is Redefining the Modern Princess *Juliana Garabedian*



A prominent voice in the entertainment industry, Disney impacts many facets of society, including how we define gender roles. For the past 80 years, America's younger generations have taken social cues from their favorite animated movies, learning to act like their favorite princes and princesses. Over the past few decades, Disney has broken through the concept of the damsel in distress and transitioned to represent and even advance modern feminist ideals. From likable protagonists to prominent images and popular products, the movies reinforce the gender roles they present because children learn to imitate the characters during playtime.

The idea of being a princess is not a novel fantasy; it has been around for centuries. The difference now is that becoming a princess is as easy as purchasing a tiara and hosting a princess-themed birthday party or buying a Halloween costume and playing pretend. Disney, one of the most recognizable names in the entertainment business, capitalizes on this desire to be royal and markets the Disney brand as the true American lifestyle through popular product lines such as Disney Princess. In *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, Annalee R. Ward writes that “generations are now raised on Disney fairy tales, and original story lines are forgotten or dismissed as not the real thing. Disney rewrites the original tales for its particular version of American values” (2). For years now, America’s younger generations have been taught to think and act according to their favorite princesses and/or princes, ultimately learning social cues as they imitate their favorite animated movies.

Between 1937 and May 2014 Disney released 684 theatrical features, 11 of which are labeled as part of the Disney Princess line. *Frozen’s* Anna is in the process of being recognized as an official princess (Smith). This paper, divides the princesses into three categories with regard to how their movies display gender roles: Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression. These three waves parallel the feminist movement, showing how Disney has progressed during the past five years from accepting social cues for gender norms to redefining them.

Once Upon a Time

The Pre-Transition category covers the years from 1937 to 1959, a period Charlotte Krolokke, an assistant professor of the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of Southern Denmark, defines as a part of the “first wave of feminism” (7). Disney developed the first three princesses—Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora—during a time when women were confined to the stereotype of homemaker, with only 39 percent of American women working by the end of the Pre-Transition period (Bureau of Labor Statistics). These gender roles are visibly affirmed through the actions of each princess and show a period of Disney’s compliance with what was expected of a predominantly male centered society.

Pre-Transition	Transition	Progression
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i> (1937)	<i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)	<i>Brave</i> (2012)
<i>Cinderella</i> (1950)	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (1991)	<i>Frozen</i> (2013)
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i> (1959)	<i>Aladdin</i> (1992)	
	<i>Pocahontas</i> (1995)	
	<i>Mulan</i> (1998)	
	<i>The Princess and the Frog</i> (2009)	
	<i>Tangled</i> (2010)	

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White is portrayed as a naïve princess who depends on her seven male friends and a prince for survival. What could have been the story of a young girl’s personal discovery turns into the portrait of women’s domesticity: Snow White cleans the home of seven men, accepts a gift from a stranger without the permission of her male friends, and requires true love’s kiss from her Prince Charming in order to survive. *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* have equally disheartening plots—both require the heroism of the male prince other than the potential heroine—and contribute to the gender stereotypes of the time period rather than progressing the women’s movement toward equality.

As Time Went On

The Transition period of the Disney princesses represents the aftereffects of the second wave of feminism—defined by Krolokke as the late 1960s to the early 1970s—and reveals a new step toward progression in the definition of gender roles in the United States (7). In the second wave, the primary concerns were “documenting sexism in private as well as public life and delivering a criticism of gendered patterns of socialization” (Krolokke 11). These patterns, which are most evident in the period’s first three movies, center around a female protagonist experiencing the need to be free of societal bonds. In the end, however, her happily-ever-after depends on her return to the role expected of women, be it docile princess or subservient wife.

The first movie of the Transition period, *The Little Mermaid*, centers around Ariel, a sixteen-year-old mermaid princess, who is curious about the world outside her kingdom in the ocean. Ariel’s inquisitive nature, desire for adventure, and bravery represent Disney’s progression of the independent-woman gender role, but the movie ultimately falls back on to the princess-needs-prince plot so familiar during the first wave of feminism. Three years after Disney’s first attempt at progression, the 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* falls short for the same reason: the prince is the hero, not the female lead. While Belle escapes the norm as a woman who enjoys reading, speaking her mind, and acting bravely to save her father, she is reduced to a dependent character when she should have been the heroine.

The same problem lies in *Aladdin*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Tangled*, all of which center around the female lead trying to break out of her gender role and follow her own path rather than the one defined for her. In *Aladdin*, Jasmine rebels against the traditional role of a woman in Agrabah. She wishes to marry the man she loves and to avoid an arranged marriage, but without the help of Aladdin and Genie, her assertion of opinion would have lasted only until her marriage, when she would have been limited to the whims of her husband. *The Princess and the Frog*, set in New Orleans in 1912, centers around Tiana, Disney’s first African-American princess, who dreams of opening her own restaurant. Her role as a strong, determined woman is a credit to Disney’s interpretation of the modern woman. However, her plans and title also depend

on her marriage to Prince Naveen, not the strength of her character.

The last movie in the Transition, *Tangled*, tells the story of Rapunzel, an effervescent teen who doesn't want to be imprisoned in her tower—arguably a hint at breaking through the gender barrier—and longs to go on an adventure to see the lights of Corona. While her intent is admirable, she relies on Flynn Ryder to lead her in the right direction. The ending, however, is where this movie differs from the previous seven; Rapunzel makes the heroic sacrifice to save Flynn, but the male hero controls the outcome. When Flynn cuts off Rapunzel's magic-infused hair to save her from a life of slavery to Mother Gothel, he makes the ultimate sacrifice, knowing that without it, he would die. In the end, Rapunzel saves her hero with the magic of her tears, and viewers are left thinking that her crying is her act of true love, and it pales in comparison to Flynn's, who seems like the ultimate hero rather than Rapunzel.

At Long Last

Even though the third wave of feminism began in the mid 90s, Disney did not truly break the princess pattern until *Brave*, which was released in June of 2012. Debuting two years after *Tangled*, *Brave* offers a new version of the female protagonist and breaks the pattern of a princesses' fairytales depending on a man for a happily ever after. Merida, Princess of Clan Dunbroch, is a wily, independent girl who refuses to be confined by the bonds of marriage or have her fate be determined by someone else in an athletic competition. Most notably, she is remembered for saying, "I am Merida. Firstborn descendant of Clan Dunbroch, and I'll be shooting for my own hand" (*Brave*). While other Disney princesses rebel against their own stereotypes, Merida takes action in fourteenth-century Scotland, a time and place where women were known to be strong-willed and—as the movie's title suggests—brave. In her story, Merida's journey to right a wrong she commits against her clan sends her on a personal discovery to learn what is important in her life, and she ultimately realizes that sacrifices have to be made in the name of family. Merida's heroism is why *Brave* signifies a turning point for Disney. No longer is the studio accepting or reinforcing societal norms; instead, by labeling Merida as a true hero and not a dependent female counterpart, it is endorsing change through the power of suggestion.

Frozen, the most recent Disney Princess movie, shatters all previous of gender role limitations by incorporating two strong female leads, Princess Anna and Queen Elsa. Following the adventures of Anna as she selflessly goes off in search of her sister, *Frozen* centers around the idea of family. Even though Anna travels with three male companions—Kristoff, Olaf, and Sven—she does not depend on them and chooses in her last moment of life to protect her sister from Hans rather than kiss

Kristoff and save herself. In the end, Anna's act of true love saves her rather than her love for a male lead, making her the enlightened hero that Disney has been progressing toward for nearly 80 years.

Playtime with Disney

One reason Disney is so successful at influencing gender roles is its ability to sell products that coincide with its movies. According to Forbes' 2011 list of best-selling character merchandise, the Disney Princess line ranked number one, making \$1.6 billion (Goudreau). In their 1974 *The Psychology of Sex Differences*, Eleanor Emmons Jacoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin introduced the term "self-socialization." Their survey of available evidence led them to suggest that parental modeling plays a "minor role in the development of sex-typed behavior" in children (300). Instead, children's self-directed imitation has an important function in sex role conceptions, which may be "cartoon-like—oversimplified, exaggerated, and stereotyped" (364). This suggestion that "children's choices of whom to imitate plays a key role in their gender development" and opens up room for interesting applications when it comes to Disney (Zosuls et al. 827). Disney simultaneously encourages the purchase of Disney-themed products to further the shelf life of the brand while producing a story that can be imitated through play, which have a major impact on the younger generations.

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According to Christine Macintyre's *Enhancing Learning through Play: A Developmental Perspective for Early Years Settings*, children experience sociodramatic play between the ages of three and four years old, meaning that they "enact

all the roles they see around them and demonstrate detailed understanding of their perceptions of mummy, daddy...and even characters in their favourite stories" (24). When children reach age five, they transition from acting to empathizing with their characters, meaning that when they emulate their favorite prince or princess, they pretend to embody their characteristics (Macintyre 25). Karen E. Wohlwend, a Literacy, Culture, and Language Education professor at Indiana University, states, "During play with Disney Princess toys, children reenact film scripts and expectations for each princess character, quoting memorized dialogue or singing songs from the films as they talk in-character while playing with dolls or while using princess accessories" (58). This means that children take social cues from what they see on screen, so playing with figurines after a movie has created a concept reinforces these ideas through repetition.

Take for example a child given both Cinderella and Anna dolls. For hypothetical purposes, let's say both dolls come with the outfits worn in the movie. Cinderella would have worn the rags while working for Lady Tremaine, her evil stepmother, and the ball gown from when she meets her prince. Anna

would be adorned in her rosemae coronation gown and her sturdier travel outfit. A little girl or boy playing with both these characters would imitate each differently due to what he or she knows about the character from the movie. If the playing children follow the ideas depicted in the animated films, they would portray the Cinderella doll as a damsel in need of a savior or a dance partner, depending on the outfit chosen, but the Anna doll could be used as both a figure of beauty and action. She could be the heroine of her own story, and a second doll would almost be unnecessary for the playtime to be successful. Stephanie Merry, a writer for *The Washington Post*, represents the majority opinion on why Princess Anna is seen as the modern princess:

Anna is much more of a contemporary rom-com heroine [...]. She's clumsy, awkward and a bit of a dork (although she does a mean robot). But, refreshingly, she's no damsel in distress, not even during the film's late scenes, when she finds herself in a desperate situation.

Princess Anna is just one example of how, over time, Disney movies have progressed to reflect more modern ideals. Women are now seen as in control of their destiny and rarely define themselves as in need of a partner for survival. Now, when children play, they are mimicking these roles and are embodying these lessons through imaginative interactions.

Happily Ever After

From early on, the Walt Disney Company has been capturing the essence of American ideals and the ever-patriotic idea of following one's dreams. Children grow up with Disney movies and learn life lessons through acting, playing, and memorizing themes that range from staying true to your heart to staying true to your family. It is in these values that young children can discover their true role models, and it is up to the Disney writers to instill positive, progressive concepts to keep children from reverting back to more traditional gender roles.

Because of its work with *Brave* and *Frozen*, Disney has shifted into the Progression period, which is an opportunity to shatter the glass ceiling and push past traditional gender roles for women. By abandoning the princess-needs-prince pattern, Disney is moving beyond one of the formulas that made its company worth over \$159.04 billion—as of October 2014—to change the stereotype of the modern heroine (“Walt Disney Enterprise Value”).

The modern Disney princess is independent, brave, and heroic, and contemporary audiences need to see strong female leads who can stand alongside their male counterparts. By doing so, Disney encourages the idea of equality between genders and helps build a universal acceptance of the concept of defining oneself not by how one is born, but by his or her own actions.

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