

## **“Did They Send Me Daughters When I Asked for Sons?” : Fortifications and Confrontations of Gendered & Social Hierarchies from Disney to Miyazaki**

**by Joseph Giunta**

Children’s films, which often evoke nostalgia for adults and allow children to escape to fantasy worlds, are sometimes difficult to analyze due to the inherent pleasure these pictures elicit. As Kristin Thompson remarks, spectators may actually resist a close examination, fearing that it might diminish their gratification.<sup>1</sup> However, the pedagogical function of this genre across cultures cannot be ignored. Henry Giroux, in his challenge of Disney, notes how parents are concerned with how substantive media culture has become in “regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms and conventions that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions.”<sup>2</sup> In this case specifically, defining what it is to be a child and what is expected of children is of the utmost importance in these movies. By either representing and reinforcing or resisting and transforming established social hierarchies, children’s films, and as Richard Dyer remarks of entertainment media in general, are “responding to needs that are real, at the same time also defining and delimiting what constitutes the legitimate needs of people in this society.”<sup>3</sup> Concentrating on financially successful animated features that quickly entered into and remain in the realm of popular culture, this examination of films by Disney and Studio Ghibli director Hayao Miyazaki that comprise over five decades of history assists in establishing both studios’<sup>4</sup> discourse with gender hierarchies and analyzing their progression in comparison/contrast to evolving cultural ideologies. These interactions, which facilitate audiences’ comprehension of these corporations’ particular positions, anticipate the films’ instrumentalization of fantasy as an edificatory device or recognition of childhood subjectivity.

By examining how the central female characters either reinforce constructed gender hierarchies within their animated worlds in Disney’s *Peter Pan* (Clyde Geronimi,

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Kristin. “Implications of Cel Animation Technique” in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Stephen Heath and Teresa de Laruentis. London: Macmillan, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Giroux, Henry. “Public Pedagogy and Rodent Politics: Cultural Studies and the Challenge of Disney” in *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2. Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1998. 253-266.

<sup>3</sup> Dyer, Richard. “Entertainment and Utopia” in *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2 ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 220-232.

<sup>4</sup> Though Miyazaki himself is not a stand-in for the entirety of Studio Ghibli, as a founding member, figurehead, and representative in the public eye of Ghibli’s larger mission, I will be referring to Miyazaki and the two films explored in this work as part of a ‘studio,’ in the same vein that the various directors of the two Disney films examined here are proxies of Disney’s overriding ideologies.

Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, 1953) and *Mulan* (Barry Cook, Tony Bancroft, 1998) or resist them in Miyazaki's *The Castle of Cagliostro* (Miyazaki, 1979) and *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), these two studios' divergent gender politics and pedagogical imperatives emerge, mapping across this hierarchical spectrum. Parsing two Disney films from their massive library of animated features that stand out in terms of their longstanding popularity, trajectory of social progression in terms of gender treatment, and particular focus on female protagonists, these selections, from *Peter Pan* in 1953 and *Mulan* released more than four decades later, demonstrate Disney's larger reflection of conservative, Western adult ideologies and morals and how they are imposed upon and educate young girls on their designated role in society. Along with Miyazaki's initial entry into the sphere of animated children's features with *The Castle of Cagliostro*, is *Spirited Away*, Japan's highest grossing film all-time and often the film first referenced anytime Miyazaki is discussed colloquially. They exhibit Miyazaki's recognition and respect of children's subjectivity and agency while featuring female protagonists with incredible depth who discover society's expectations of them through adventures filled with hardship and self-discovery, divested of Disney's adult moral compasses or belittling edificatory ideology.

Discussing classical cinema, Miriam Hansen points out the "hegemonic mechanisms by which Hollywood succeeded in amalgamating a diversity of competing traditions, discourses, and interests."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Walt Disney Productions, "with its cultural hegemony on the fairy tale film,"<sup>6</sup> has succeeded in integrating a literary history of fairy tales with their trademark animation style and updating these tales to coincide with contemporary, normative American values. Though Disney's prepotency over fairy tale cinematic adaptations has certainly diluted from their once unequivocal authority, with Miyazaki's oeuvre, Švankmajer's *Alice*, and various international Hans Christian Andersen transformations introducing aesthetic, social, and ideological experimentation,<sup>7</sup> Disney's library and newly touted works still prevail over the genre in terms of both scholarly research and popular culture.

By questioning the role Disney "plays in shaping childhood identity, public memory, national identity, gender roles, or in suggesting who qualifies as an American,"<sup>8</sup> Giroux also points out the massive power of a corporation like Disney to

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<sup>5</sup> Hansen, Miriam. "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Modernist Vernacular" in *Reinventing Film Studies* eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000. 332-350.

<sup>6</sup> Brocklebank, Lisa. "Disney's 'Mulan' – the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" in *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 14, No. 2. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2000. 268-283.

<sup>7</sup> See *Fairy Tales Films Beyond Disney: International Perspectives*. Jack Zipes, Pauline Greenhill, and Kendra Magnus-Johnson. New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Giroux, 262.

“monopolize the media and saturate everyday life with its own ideologies.”<sup>9</sup> Once Disney’s constructed image of bringing happiness to audiences across the globe with their ‘timeless classics’ has been embedded into the public psyche, though, it is difficult to analyze their troubling relationship with the treatment of gendered social hierarchies. Focusing on constructed concepts of gender reinforced by a patriarchal tradition, Disney films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), *Cinderella* (Geronimi, Luske & Jackson, 1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959) associate female “passivity, victimization, charm and physical beauty” as “necessary precursors to marriage and fortune.”<sup>10</sup> Though undoubtedly a troubling characterization of female characters, Disney’s unique brand name association with the notion of childhood innocence<sup>11</sup> has prevented general audiences from noticing the “unconscious of patriarchal society” that “has structured film form,”<sup>12</sup> which Laura Mulvey cogitates on cinema at large but has also persisted as a surreptitious strategy since early Disney works. While feeding into viewers’ alternatives, dreams, and fantasies, Disney is “attempting to establish standards of deviant and normal sexuality and appropriate sex roles.”<sup>13</sup> These “appropriate” roles delineated by Disney, an unending attempt to represent the ‘universal’ child, take center stage in *Peter Pan*.

One of the few Disney adaptations that have not become *the* definitive text, *Peter Pan*, adapted from J.M. Barrie’s play, was well known at the time of the animated film’s release, having been performed in a series of theater runs across the country. Disney’s filmic adaptation, however, comes during the postwar era, when Hollywood was concerned with “the powerful image of the nuclear family, defined gender and sexuality.”<sup>14</sup> *Peter Pan* was no exception, and although it did create a fantasy adventure space where children could escape, it also reaffirmed values of family and traditional gender roles. As Susan Ohmer notes, Disney’s approach to certain characters, such as Peter, Wendy, and Captain Hook, “represent a conscious effort to update the Disney style to appeal to a new generation of children and to adults adjusting to postwar

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Lieberman, Marcia. “Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale” in *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* ed. Jack Zipes. New York: Routledge, 1987. 185-200.

<sup>11</sup> Giroux, 257.

<sup>12</sup> Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 833-844.

<sup>13</sup> Klinger, Barbara. “History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies” in *Screen* Vol. 38, No. 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 107-128.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 121.

culture.”<sup>15</sup> Though much of the film’s narrative takes place in the fantastical realm of Never Land, the film serves to reinforce traditional conservative ideals of gender and family, reflective of contemporary social values. The film’s villain, Captain Hook, stereotypically embodies the Disney role of the evil ‘Other’ – non-normative, queer, and not conscious of the traditional values of society. Though a male character in the narrative, Hook, with his brightly colored waistcoat and long, curly hair, is detailed to seem effeminate. Along with other Disney villains, included but not limited to Ursula (*The Little Mermaid* [Ron Clements & John Musker, 1989]), Jafar (*Aladdin* [Clements & Musker, 1992]), the Evil Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), and Governor Ratcliffe (*Pocahontas* [Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg, 1995]), Hook is not simply a ‘villain,’ but also a threat to the normative and traditional values upheld by contemporary society, and must be punished for his atypical behaviors and depiction of sexuality. Because of this, Disney purposely solidified Peter’s identity as male – in many of the previous iterations, he was sexually amorphous. Played by women in the theatrical version and left ambiguous in Barrie’s original text, Walt Disney himself insisted the Peter be marked as a boy, to reinforce a traditional gender hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> Originally “an effort to shore up Peter’s sexuality,”<sup>17</sup> Disney transforms the tale into one of adventure that affirms normative family values. Further fortifying these values is the character of Wendy, whom, examined today, represents very rigidly conservative gender roles and the expectations of young women by adults.

Wendy, the oldest child of the Darling family, has been threatened by her father to be kicked out of the nursery, separating her from her younger brothers, John and Michael. Claiming that Wendy has simply “gotten too old,” Wendy, in reality, must move out of the nursery because she is entering puberty and her parents don’t want her around her two little brothers. Travelling to Never Land to escape her fears of growing up, Wendy instead learns about motherhood. A moral not present in the original text, Disney adds this wrinkle to the story about women’s place being in the home, fulfilling the role of maternal nurturer, and returning to the domestic space. Throughout her adventures in Never Land, Wendy is taught about normative gender roles, whether it is from the Native American woman in the blatantly racist “What Makes the Red Man Red?” song (it is embarrassment over sexuality that makes the ‘Red Man’ red, for clarification), or by her jealousy over Peter’s interactions with Tinker Bell, Tiger Lily, or the mermaids. Wendy’s romantic desire for Peter, by the end of the film, transforms into

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<sup>15</sup> Ohmer, Susan. “Disney’s Peter Pan: Gender, Fantasy, and Industrial Production” in *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination* eds. Allison Kavey and Lester Friedman. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009. 151-186.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 176.

a desire to be maternal – Wendy travels to Never Land to escape puberty, but instead learns about and is thrust into motherhood and traditional gender roles. *Peter Pan* is not actually about Peter. Although he is the object of desire by seemingly every female character in the narrative, he does not learn a lesson, remaining in an eternal state of childhood. The film is about Wendy and the fulfillment of not her wishes, but the wishes her parents have for her – their desire for her to transition to a normative, female adulthood. Though Wendy’s newly cultivated maternal outlook could have been forced upon her by the film’s adult presences, Wendy instead discovers it herself on her journey through Never Land, manipulating both Wendy and the young female viewers into a false sense of agency. *Mulan*, on the other hand, represents a new approach to the role of women and the notion of the ‘Disney princess.’

A work emerging from the ‘Disney Renaissance’ period, *Mulan* attempts to balance more progressive values with the old Disney ways of traditional, conservative, normative values. More engaged with contemporary issues and reflective of the American ‘culture war’ conflict, Disney responded by producing more family friendly films. Striving to be tolerant of progressive social values without engendering conservative audiences, films of this period (*Aladdin*; *Lion King* [Roger Allers & Rob Minkoff, 1994]) show gradual maturation in their treatment of gender hierarchies bereft of radical advancements, crafting reliable safe spaces for viewers of all ideologies amidst politically charged ideological dissension. However, in many of these films the heroines still conform to traditional gender roles, as Lisa Brocklebank notes of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 1991),

For, while both Ariel and Belle deviate from the gender stereotypes of previous fairy tale films by following their own unconventional desires, they yet conform, in the end, to the comic culmination of marriage... perhaps the only way for Disney to transcend these ambivalences is to transcend gender itself – in effect, to literally make the heroine a hero.<sup>18</sup>

While *Mulan* is condescending toward Asian culture at best, with its amorphous “Asian/Chinese-ness,” caricatures of the matchmaker and grandmother characters, and complete desecration of the original source text, it does make strides in terms of its representation of gendered social hierarchies. From the onset of the film, “the conventional binaries of an exclusively male heroism and a conventionally female heroism”<sup>19</sup> are established, and all of the musical performances throughout the movie

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<sup>18</sup> Brocklebank, 272.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 274.

are obsessively about gender. By clearly demarcating (at times, overstating) gender as a construction and as performance, this allows the film to deconstruct these traditional roles yet still focus on Disney's classic journey of self-identity that all its protagonists must endure. Even though, as Brocklebank observes, "Mulan's inability to meet social expectations reveals the discrepancy between the individual and her socially allotted role, and, in so doing, exposes gender behavior as a socially scripted role,"<sup>20</sup> by the end of the film *Mulan*, having refused an offer by the Emperor to sit on the imperial council, returns home to that same socially scripted role, assumedly becoming the wife of Captain Shang.

It appears, with *Mulan* and many of Disney's recent releases, there is a way to both "ostensibly protest against the established order" yet "paradoxically serve to protect and strengthen that same order, in effect, serving as safety valves which ultimately uphold the order and hierarchy."<sup>21</sup> Though certainly more progressive than Disney's earlier animated features, the studio's Disneyfication process still drives the narrative, changing *Mulan*'s original text's concept of filial piety, an important Confucian virtue of respect for one's elders (why Mulan went to war), into the simple individualism for which Mulan has to find her true self and form her own identity. By shifting the center of *Mulan* from an important Chinese principle to yet another iteration of Disney's classic plucky American teenager who experiences a dangerous yet fulfilling passage of individual identity, the film becomes obsessively about American conceptions of gender, and not at all about the actual culture of China. While Disney does genuinely "attempt to offer a positive portrayal of a female heroine" and even perhaps "instigate a definitive breaking away from past paradigms of female heroines,"<sup>22</sup> the only way Mulan can break these traditional gender hierarchies is by transcending gender itself, cross-dressing as a man to become a soldier.

Admittedly, at the end of the film she performs the male role, not simply successfully, but vastly more superiorly than the array of hodgepodge soldiers assigned to Captain Shang. Mulan cannot succeed by performing the socially constructed role for women (most evidently witnessed in her despoliation of the matchmaking ritual), so she takes on that of a man instead. However, even with her outstanding performance as a man, this fantasy is circumscribed by her own returning to the socially acceptable role of a wife to a high-ranking officer. It seems as though Disney's princesses can never be heroines in isolation – they must always fit into a defined social role, even after breaking out of that same traditional gender hierarchy. As Montserrat Rifà-Valls remarks,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 275.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 278.

Consumer orientation through Disney's pack of princesses is based on a perverse appropriation of classic stories and the recreation of stereotypical "feminine" identities reproducing sexism and the heteropatriarchal logic through the representation of the princesses in the same way – they are identical, they desire the same man.<sup>23</sup>

Taking a backseat to the pre-existing value system that structures the way in which children (and by extension, adults) are supposed to experience and evaluate fantasy, this containment instrumentalizes fantasy, and in doing so, manages children's pleasure by rendering it in a socially acceptable, didactic form. Though Disney's slow progression toward more tolerant attitudes cannot be slighted and represents some amount of malleability in their values, the same traditional, conservative gender hierarchies prevail in the end. Turning toward the progressive side of this gendered social hierarchical spectrum, Hayao Miyazaki represents a more controversial, straightforward approach that is respectful not only of children and their view of the world, but also his female lead characters.

Cinema's ability to educate the public and shape the vulnerable minds of developing children allows it the privilege of influence. While Disney takes advantage of the children's film genre to represent and reinforce traditionally normative and conservative gendered social hierarchies, Miyazaki does the exact opposite, openly resisting these traditional gender constructions and creating characters and narratives that are not dependent on romantic coupling for closure, fully conscious of the gender politics in his animated films. It would be irresponsible to continue without distinguishing Miyazaki, though an indispensable cog in the greater machine that is Studio Ghibli (founded upon the success of Miyazaki's 1984 feature *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*), as an individual artist who has comprehensive creative control over his cinematic worlds, while Disney and its artists conform to a particular corporate ethos founded upon classically American ideologies of individualism and patriarchal norms. Though his movies could be viewed as highlighting simple concepts, Miyazaki's commentary is engaging highly debated social issues in Japan, from the relevance of the Shinto religion to the harmful destruction of the country's environment by a rapidly evolving industrial empire. Though simple, his films are not simplistic – they leave more complicated themes up to the spectator to explore. Viewers can bask in the visually

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<sup>23</sup> Rifà-Valls, Montserrat. "Postwar Princesses, Young Apprentices, and a Little Fish-Girl: Reading Subjectivities in Hayao Miyazaki's Tales of Fantasy" in *Visual Arts Research* Vol. 37, No. 2. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 88-100.

intricate and beautiful fantasy worlds Miyazaki constructs, or instead choose to dive into the symbolically complex representations onscreen. In these narratives, “work and power relations generate exchange, fairness, and opportunity – far from the difficulties, impossibilities, and alienations of post-Fordian capitalism.”<sup>24</sup> Diametrically opposed to Disney’s depiction of female heroines and princesses, Miyazaki, as Susan Napier notes, is able to deconstruct the notion of women as submissive and limited to the home by exhibiting women who “remain completely outside the misogynistic patriarchal collectivity that rapidly becomes the foundation of premodern Japan.”<sup>25</sup> From San, a vicious young warrior raised by wolves and protector of the spirits occupying the forest space in *Princess Mononoke*, to Kiki, a neophyte witch who leaves home to fulfill her apprenticeship and battle identification issues with her transition to adulthood in *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, Miyazaki’s cinematic heroines are self-sustaining and not defined by their relationships to male protagonists. By depicting self-empowering women across his body of work, Miyazaki is able to break the conservative depictions of female roles in children’s films and create narratives truly about children, not adult expectations for children.

Released nearly two decades prior to Disney’s *Mulan*, it is extraordinary to witness Miyazaki’s introductory animated feature exhibit more progressive ideologies and intricately developed female characters than *Mulan*, especially given Japan’s exceptionally structured and socially conservative roles in which women were expected to follow patterns of orderliness, propriety, civility, and acquiescence.<sup>26</sup> Miyazaki’s directorial debut and only comedy, *The Castle of Cagliostro*<sup>27</sup> resists the gendered social hierarchy with the characters of Clarisse and Fujiko. While Clarisse could easily be written off as another damsel in distress (and another princess figure), her character has much more depth. After the opening credits of the film the protagonist master thief Lupin III and his partner, Jigen, are passed on the road by Clarisse, who has just escaped from a gang of the Count’s thugs. Managing to sneak out of the castle whilst trying on wedding dresses, she demonstrates that she is more than capable of taking care of herself and proves this innumerable times throughout the film. Although Lupin is constantly endeavoring to save Clarisse, he never does so successfully. In fact, at the conclusion of each of these incidents, it is Clarisse who ends up saving Lupin’s life: after they escape from the thugs at the beginning of the film and tumble down a cliff, Clarisse

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>25</sup> Napier, Susan. *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*. New York: Macmillan, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Lebra, Takie Sugiyama. *Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> This film was originally distributed through Toho, as its release came before the founding of Studio Ghibli. However, from 2012 forward, the film’s re-releases have been under the Ghibli umbrella.



leaves Lupin on the beach so her handlers don't also capture him; after escaping from the wedding, she saves him from being killed by the automatic weaponry set up in the castle; near the end of the film, she pushes the Count off of the clock tower as he was about to kill Lupin, both saving Lupin and nearly thwarting the Count's evil plans of stealing the Cagliostro treasure. Lupin's countless efforts to save Clarisse become parodic, undoubtedly criticizing classic folktales' requirement of princesses being saved by heroic male figures. At the end of the film, when Clarisse is finally freed from the Count's clutches, an attempt at passion with Lupin is quelled when Lupin kisses her on the forehead instead of on the lips, upending the expected romantic coupling of a damsel in distress tale.

Fujiko is an even further departure from normative depictions of gender roles. A spy who has infiltrated the Count's castle as an unassuming secretary/assistant – mocking another traditional feminine character type – Fujiko is actually a well-trained, professional criminal and burglar looking to uncover this hidden treasure for her own gain. By disguising herself within clichéd femininity, she is easily looked over, clandestinely closing in on her prize until Lupin shows up. Within the narrative, she also saves Lupin on multiple occasions, as well as assisting Inspector Zenigata in uncovering the counterfeit operation taking place in the castle's basement and riding off into the sunset with the said counterfeit plates stolen from the castle. Her prior failed relationship with Lupin is also atypical for a children's film. She informs Clarisse of this past, in which she is both friend, enemy, and lover, with Fujiko deciding to break it off. In her camouflage bodysuit and armed to the teeth with an assortment of firearms, Fujiko is the epitome of the empowered female, proving herself more than capable on numerous occasions throughout the film. However, as remarkable as these female protagonists are, Miyazaki is able to provide audiences with an even more complex depiction of an empowered young girl in *Spirited Away* with Chihiro.

Miyazaki's 9<sup>th</sup> animated feature, released over two decades after his debut film, *Spirited Away* follows Chihiro's "trajectory from near dissolution to arguable empowerment,"<sup>28</sup> as viewers witness her evolution from an overindulged child into an emboldened and conscientious young woman. Initially presented as "whiny, sullen, and self-obsessed,"<sup>29</sup> Chihiro does not resemble a heroic character. However, Napier argues that "her self-absorption, nerves, and fears make her seem far more 'real' than most of the female characters in previous Miyazaki films."<sup>30</sup> As Dyer observes of cinematic

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<sup>28</sup> Napier, Susan. "Matter out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki's 'Spirited Away'" in *The Journal for Japanese Studies* Vol. 32, No. 2. Washington: The Society for Japanese Studies, 2006. 287-310.

<sup>29</sup> Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

universes, “To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience.”<sup>31</sup> Whether these “real experiences” are legitimately real or simply imagined, these fantasy landscapes must be based in realism in order to be conceivable to audiences. Rather than crafting another Disney-princess-like female heroine, Miyazaki presents viewers with a child very similar in attitude to many youngsters around the world – he understands and respects children’s worldviews. Inspired by a lack of young female heroines for 10-year old girls in shōjo manga (Japanese comics aimed at the teenage female demographic),<sup>32</sup> Miyazaki created a coming-of-age story in which Chihiro realizes her own value in society by virtue of her personal revelations in the spirit world. As Chihiro struggles with her own liminality, she simultaneously is the mediator for the troubled spirits that enter the bathhouse, constantly helping her nagging boss Yubaba save her business from destruction while earning the respect of her fellow bathhouse workers. After nearly becoming a spirit herself during her initial entrance into the spirit world, Chihiro, for the remainder of the film, must find her own identity as she struggles to save her parents and Haku, as well as accomplish the slew of tasks thrown at her by Yubaba. “These early identity threats,” Napier notes, “presage a major theme in the film, the threat to and the need to recover one’s authentic identity.”<sup>33</sup> By taking advantage of her growing confidence, memory, independence, and ability to quickly assess and recognize situations, Chihiro is able to overcome her own childish attributes and grow as an individual.

Two particular episodes in the film highlight Chihiro’s evolving sense of self. As both a human, looked down upon by the rest of the bathhouse spirits, and the “new girl,” she is given the most arduous tasks at the bathhouse, having to run the gauntlet and experience a sufficient amount of workplace hazing before earning the respect of her fellow laborers. Her first task, bathing a hulking Stink God, whom is later revealed to be a polluted river god, is accomplished with flying colors, to the delight of Yubaba and the applause of her coworkers. However, an important visual metaphor occurs during Chihiro’s struggle with the Stink God. Before discovering the bicycle handle (“thorn”) protruding from its side, “she herself is plunged into the filthy bath water, hinting that Chihiro needs to confront her own impurities in order to grow and ultimately transcend the liminal state.”<sup>34</sup> In order to develop a true sense of self, Chihiro needs to confront her own vices in order to save her parents from their excesses. The second major issue Chihiro is tasked with is removing No Face from the bathhouse in

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<sup>31</sup> Dyer, 229.

<sup>32</sup> “Interview: Miyazaki on *Sen to Chihiro to no Kamikakushi*.” Trans. Ryoko Toyama. Team Ghiblink: Nausicaa.net. 21 July 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Napier, “Matter out of Place,” 300.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 302.

his all-consuming state. After reprimanding him for his inappropriate behavior, she gives him half of her magic dumpling. After consuming this, No Face begins to chase Chihiro out of the bathhouse, regurgitating all of the food and workers he consumed during his stay. Napier comments on Chihiro's growth to this point in *Spirited Away*

Chihiro's ability to contain this excess (she not only calms down No Face but manages to lure him away from the bathhouse to help rescue Haku) attests to her increasing empowerment, both in terms of confidence and in moral and spiritual growth, since she is brave enough to stand up to No Face and self-sacrificing enough to offer him the magic talisman.<sup>35</sup>

Chihiro, amidst the chaotic situations she is thrown into, whether of her own accord or in the line of duty for Yubaba, is able to handle these increasingly difficult tasks with success, as she begins to understand more about herself in the process.

In her discussion of *Spirited Away* in relation to environmental ethics, Weeraya Donsomsakulkij observes Chihiro's evolution, growing up "from being a spoiled kid to being an understanding and responsible young woman."<sup>36</sup> Chihiro's own personal growth and development takes place during a series of rescuing other spirits, whether it is the river god from pollution, No Face from his own gluttony, Haku from his forgotten past, or her parents from their overindulgence. When formulating the character of Chihiro, it is apparent that "Miyazaki has created a character who, when confronted with absence and despoilation on both personal and cultural levels, ultimately rises to the challenge."<sup>37</sup> Not only is Chihiro able to save herself from her own liminal state, but she also rescues others from their own faults or negative outside influences. As Napier concludes, "It is finally up to Chihiro to create presence out of absence, not only to recover her own vanishing self but also to help others recover their own genuine subjectivities."<sup>38</sup>

Instead of forcing morals upon young audiences or serving any educational purpose, Miyazaki's films simply illustrate the process of maturation. "He does not submit the subject of childhood to the idealized view of the adult, nor does he project the evolutionary and holistic view of developmental psychology and child-centered

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>36</sup> Donsomsakulkij, Weeraya. "Spirited Away: Negotiation between Capitalism and Reminiscent Environmental Ethics" in *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities* Vol. 2, No. 3. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 147-151.

<sup>37</sup> Napier, "Matter out of Place," 310.

<sup>38</sup> Napier, *Anime From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 186.

pedagogies.”<sup>39</sup> Chihiro leaves her parents, participates in the economy, battles issues of confidence and self-identity, and eventually becomes comfortable with who she is, with a small amount of assistance from others. Though taking place in the spirit world, *Spirited Away* is a children’s film about working, both as an occupation and on self-identification, and real life. Chihiro “is a heroine, but not the Mulan type. In fact, she is the one who saves her parents and brings down the whole mess, without resorting to weapons, battles, or force. It’s another way of fighting.”<sup>40</sup> Chihiro fights for her parents through a journey of self-discovery, in which she learns important life lessons, understands that she can handle almost any task alone, and is now ready to move into her new house and whatever life throws at her in the future.

Each of these four films, though animated and intended predominantly for children, can also be classified as ‘family films,’ a term often employed in scholarly studies of the children’s genre, because they address the child and adult audiences by the inclusion of elements specifically for the adult faction of these films’ cross-demographic appeal, whether in the form of religious, political, or social criticism, bawdy innuendos, or simply aged cultural references unfamiliar to younger spectators. These quotations represent yet another way both studios employ realist aesthetics within the inherently irrational mode of animated filmmaking, allowing Disney and Studio Ghibli to imbue contemporary social and political ideologies into these fantastic universes, regardless of their position on these contemporary spectrums. While Disney highlights social and cultural norms of the time, reinforcing normative conservative values, Miyazaki is more engaged with questioning and/or criticizing them, directly addressing current and controversial trends in his films. Miyazaki’s appreciation and recognition of the ‘children’s’ aspect of the children’s film genre results in sincere attempts to create accurate depictions of children and their unique worldviews. Disney, by comparison, under the guise of moral edification, imposes upon their young audiences the adult values and morals expected of them.

From forced motherhood to self-empowerment, Disney and Miyazaki are able to plot points across the spectrum of gendered social hierarchies. Though both respond to contemporary social, cultural, and political trends, they take different approaches when it comes to either representing and fortifying or confronting and criticizing the traditional, normative, and conservative gender roles and politics of their times. Both studios are able to produce vast and beautiful fantasy realms based in realism using ever-evolving animation techniques, but the treatment of these gender stereotypes points to different positions taken up along the spectrum of gendered social hierarchies.

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<sup>39</sup> Rifà-Valls, 95-96.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 96.

Reflecting two disparate ends of the children's film genre's ability to educate malleable young minds about society and the social behaviors expected of them, Disney utilizes the fantasy space to discipline children with the conservative Western ideologies adults insist upon them while Miyazaki allows minors to discover their own social roles through journeys of self-identity and discovery. This genre, as an edificatory tool to either reinforce normative societal roles or resist conventional gender hierarchies, is monumental in impressing upon young spectators the expectations society has for them as they enter important developmental years. By fortifying the status quo or confronting traditional social structures under a cloak of innocuousness, children's films have a responsibility to recognize these evolving minds and allow them to flourish without adult or socially prescribed ideologies. Miyazaki's privileging of his heroines' agency, allowing them to embrace anomalous paths and forge their own roles in society, arguably prioritizes his oeuvre as ideal for fostering young minds.

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