Engaging Feminist Ideology

Lizzie Walje

**INTRODUCTION**

What occurs when the lines between “fairy tale” and reality become increasingly difficult to discern? Disney usually markets their films as being fictitious, and this subsequently allows for them to make content that is potentially detrimental, while maintaining that the messages in their films are fantasy.

Gendered issues effect everyone, regardless of where they position themselves on the binary. So many of these issues are engrained so deeply into our identity, that it can be difficult to understand why they matter. However, when a company is as large and influential as Disney, it can be argued that any choice they make can be potentially impactful.

In reflecting about feminist issues in Disney’s universe, I will make necessary connections between feminist critique, and Disney’s shortcomings as it pertains to gendered representations. I will then add my commentary on material we have looked at over the course of this unit. This essay will make real world connections, and aims to critically view Disney’s portrayal of women.

**ANALYSIS**

To begin, I’ll establish what it means to be a woman in the Disney universe. Women in Disney are usually reduced to one of two roles, villains or princesses (heroines), both of whom have rigid characteristics that are oversimplified as either “good” or “bad”. According to Sam Higgs, the “good” women in Disney are usually portrayed as those who exhibit traditional feminine characteristics. When looking at the original trio of princesses, Cinderella, Aurora, and Snow White, there is a clear life’s focus that ultimately serves as an epicenter of their lives, domesticity.

“These women may occasionally lament their domesticity, but it’s their lot in life and they live it with a song in their heart.” (Higgs, 2016). While the aforementioned women live in less than ideal circumstances, it seems they remain able to get an inexplicable joy from, of all things, housework. For instance, when Snow White is finally able to escape from the Evil Queen, her first order of action is to clean the Dwarf’s home (Higgs, 2016) Furthermore, audiences have learned very little of Snow White’s interests besides, well, her desire to clean. Which arguably is less of a personality trait and more of a basic function of homeowners. We learn nothing of Snow White’s intimate inner thoughts, nor do we see a woman battle with the reality of escaping a bleak, life threatening circumstance.

Despite these film’s abilities to make the most mundane of activities appear glamorous, with flowery music, high-key lighting, and an adorable menagerie of grandiose settings (Higgs, 2016) these women are not fully actualized until they meet their prince. Yes, it’s a near indisputable Disney truth that women are only self-actualized when they meet a prince and consequently escape poverty. “Marriage is the true savior to these women…each sing about dreaming of their true love before anyone has said a word” (Higgs, 2016) If this seems antiquated for modern day, that’s because it is. Even so, a large part of a woman’s trajectory in American society is to still abide by these traditional norms. You get married, you have 1.5 children, and you achieve your “happy ending”. You find a man who can take care of you, and in response you show your affection through non-emotional, but still female centric avenues, like housework. Statistically speaking, women who work full time, and are in two parent households, are still more likely to partake in child rearing care.

But what becomes of the women in Disney films who do not fit into this tightly constructed box? They are the “others” or the villains, and they usually demonstrate more traditionally “masculine” traits. These women are also single and almost always jealous of their adversary’s beauty. These are women who have considerable wealth and influence, but are marred by dark colors. They are normally conventionally attractive, yet men still fear them (Higgs, 2016). The messages being sent then become abundantly clear. While the pursuit of power for men is more often viewed as admirable than it is greedy, the pursuit of power for women is far more insidious, and usually denotes a moral failing.

I’ll tie in a real-world example for consideration. In the 2016 United States election, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton became the final two presidential candidates. Donald Trump encompasses a traditional alpha male, and is lauded for his brashness, assertiveness and his often-anti-establishment rhetoric. He is domineering, but this is a trait that we societally view as a positive for men. Whereas Hillary Clinton, also a deeply flawed candidate at best, experienced far more sexist criticisms. Both candidates are seeking arguably the highest position of power in the U.S, both candidates have questionable practices, but instead of focusing on these legitimate concerns, many chose to antagonize Clinton for being power hungry, too emotional, or even bringing up her husband’s affair as a method of taunting. Societally, we are still struggling to view women as legitimate leaders, and Clinton was often probed with questions about her marriage, family and role as a grandmother, disproportionately more than President Trump.

Shifting gears, I will now briefly discuss how men still drive female narratives, even if they are not billed as the main protagonist of a story. This problem is omnipresent in the princess films. However, the problem itself seems innocuous enough and is not made implicitly obvious, therefore, the necessity of male sidekicks seems innocent. Bethmann expertly describes the role of sidekicks as, offering advice and making princesses conscious of threats they face. Through their dialogue they offer advice, voice questions the princess may be asking themselves internally, serve as a translator between characters and are often the first to notice a change in a situation. (Bethmann, 2017). Essentially, sidekicks are the reason women are able to progress through the storyline. Ironically, in Western society, women are often tasked with being the sidekick to men, but not in the same way that Bethmann describes. Women are likely to take on the role of the emotional “soundboard” having to often carry men’s emotional baggage for them, because traditionally we don’t encourage men to process and reflect on their emotional issues. Women are often not seen as equals or even advisors to their romantic partners, essentially it is their responsibility to regulate their emotional problems so their husband or significant other can achieve success.

Whereas the men in Disney films are apt to add the more logical spin to certain scenarios, and guide princesses to ultimately achieve their goals. Unfortunately, without the help of a male companion, many Disney princesses would never have the opportunity to get their “happily ever after”. Ironically, the men in these sidekick roles are still not revered like the stoic and distant men who run kingdom’s in Disney films. The rulers are the alpha males, and the sidekicks are betas. Bethmann explains in the film *The Little Mermaid,* howAriel’s father, King Triton, is highly revered. Triton is muscular and strong. He is met with a grandiose entrance, whereas sea crab Sebastian is small and physically insignificant. The crab is unable to maintain control of his carriage, flailing about. Even so, despite Sebastian playing a significantly more proactive role in the film, he does not have the traditional appearance of revered manhood. (Bethmann, 2017). So yes, even when they are placed in passive roles, men still pull the strings to advance a film forward.

This line of thinking is dangerous to both men and women, as it establishes that men, also fall victim to being categorized. Even more dangerous however, is the idea that Disney princesses are unable to steer their own success without a necessary male companion. Of course, it is natural and admirable to seek help from friends and mentors, however the constant barrage of instruction from these sidekicks is not an example of teamwork or a pooling of mutual ideas. As Bethmann describes, “The men who surround and support each Disney princess keep them on track to success….[maintaining] the gender power structures” (Bethmann, 2017) Is there not room for a princess who works independently? Who is able to show the proper cognition to complete a heroes’ journey in spite of others? It’s a difficult subject to breach, particularly when these movies appear to be tales of female empowerment on the surface.

**CONCLUSION**

To summarize, Disney has made noticeable progress in their portrayals of both male and female characters since the release of some of these earlier films. However, it is important to realize that there is still a considerable amount of work to be done in the portrayals of both female and male characters. Human beings are extremely nuanced, they are rarely ever reducible to simply “good” or “bad”. Adulthood brings autonomy which in turn brings immense periods of trial and error. Disney males and females need more complex portrayals. Disney characters should ideally show a variety of different emotions, and exist on a spectrum that doesn’t view certain traits such as relentless ambition as admirable for men, and off-putting for women. It is my hope that as time progresses, a new normal will emerge for men and women, where they are able to be viewed as interchangeable equals. It is a slow and often jarring process, but the normalization of independent female heroines will hopefully be a step in the right direction. Disney has the power to make this a reality.

References

Bethmann, J. (2017, Spring). The Disney princess sidekicks: Men still necessary to the Disney

princess narrative. *Media Report to Women*, 6-11.

Higgs, S. (2016). Damsels in development: Representation, transition, and the Disney princess.

*Screen Education*, 83, 62-69.