Claire Polak

Cody Hunter

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<center>The Redefining of the Disney Princess:</center>

<center>An Analysis of the Evolution of Feminism in Disney Films</center>

The first Disney princesses could hardly breathe without the help of a man, while the more recent Disney princesses provide a far more accurate representation of women in society today. The Disney princesses have evolved throughout time, and these princesses often represent how society believes women should act. These princesses are divided into different categories based on the time during which the movie was produced, and they adapted as the perspective of feminism changed. The current definition of feminism can be defined as the "advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex; the movement associated with this" according to Oxford Dictionary. However, when talking about the different stages of feminism, Rachel F. Moran states that feminism has only existed since the 1800s, and this first wave of feminism mainly focused on women's right to vote instead of complete gender equality (Hofstra 223). While the Disney princesses in the past lacked most of the modern day feminist traits, there is now a much more prevalent debate about whether the current Disney princesses really act in accordance with the modern day definition of feminism. These movies drastically affect young children especially young females, thus it is extremely important for parents to realize which values they are instilling in their children. Oftentimes parents do not think twice about sitting their children down to watch a children's movie; however, research has shown that this could be a mistake as discussed in "The Shattered Slipper Project" by Caila L Cordwell (Cordwell). Young girls look up to these princesses as role models which in turn affects how they behave and how they view life. Parents want to instill a sense of independence and feminism in their daughters,

but these Disney princesses are not quite as feminist as members of society have been led to believe. It is true that the princesses have evolved based on the standards of the times during which the movies were produced, but they have not reached the right level of feminism that today's young girls require. Although Disney has moved away from the more stereotypical and delicate versions of princesses presented in the past, they have not reached the perfect balance of having a feminine princess that is completely independent while achieving her goals on her own.

The portrayal of princesses in Disney films shifts with the changing of times and cultural beliefs alongside the different waves of feminism. In Cassandra Stover's article, "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," she discuses the evolution of the Disney princess especially in response to World War II. She describes the past princesses as "voiceless heroines who performed conventional gender behaviors like housekeeping and nurturing" (Bell, Haas, and Sells 1995). She then discusses the cause of the shift in the type of Disney princess: World War II. During the war, there were no Disney princess movies produced, and Disney was forced to change their approach as women became involved in the workforce. This was the first time most of the female population in the United States began to actively fight for their equality. Women had evolved to look up to women such as Rosie the Riveter instead of solely aspiring to be a loving wife. After this, Disney began to have pre-feminist women in their movies in accordance with the pre-feminist movement post World War II. This is represented by Belle saying "I want so much more than they've got planned" and Jasmine stating, "I am not a prize to be won" (Stover 4). Although this represents great change, these princesses were still not content with just themselves. As Stover states, "Disney's rhetoric shifted from any prince to the right prince" (Stover 4)." This viewpoint results from the fact that American society at the time did not support the fact that a woman could exist without a husband as discussed in "How Second-Wave Feminism Forgot the Single Woman" by Rachel F. Moran (Moran 223). Married, white, middle-class women were the core of the second wave of feminism because it gave them a chance to have independence alongside the happy

family life (Moran 226). Since the population of single women was insignificant compared to the number of married women, they were often overlooked. These cultural shifts appear in the behaviors of the Disney princesses as well because they want to be independent while also finding the perfect prince. By doing this, Disney moved to represent a more independent women without making them truly independent.

The cultural shifts associated with feminism so drastically affected the portrayal of princesses in Disney films that these princesses can be broken into many different categories. In "Damsels in Development REPRESENTATION, TRANSITION AND THE DISNEY PRINCESS" Higgs breaks it down into three categories: The Classical princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty), the Renaissance Princesses (Belle, Arielle, and Mulan), and the Revival Princesses (Rapunzel, Merida, and Tiana). In this article, Higgs takes the approach that the ideal Disney princess has changed while staying the same over the past eight decades. Higgs makes the point that "Disney Princesses act as allegories for the dominant representations of women at the time of each film's production" (Higgs 63). He discusses how even though the Renaissance and Revival princesses were more adventurous and independent, Disney still kept them on the outskirts of society by having people looking down on these women for having opinions of their own and viewing smart women as abnormalities. Although there has been a lot of progress in the Disney movies, Higgs ends with the realization that the hardworking and independent qualities of the Revival princesses "are weakened when they exist in a society where they are not the norm" (Higgs 69). This is illustrated in *The Princess and the Frog* when Tiana longs to be a successful business woman. Although this is very progressive, when she expresses her desires, her entire community thinks she is crazy. The more recent releases of *Frozen* and *Brave* are discussed in Juliana Garabedian's "Animating gender roles: How Disney is redefining the modern princess." She discusses how the past princesses all ended up with princes except for the most recent movies released. She argues that Disney "shatters all previous gender role limitations" by having two strong princesses in the movie *Frozen*

(Garabedian 24). Although she has a solid point and this movie represents great progress, simply having two princesses is not enough to make a movie feminist. There has been progress over time with the Disney princess movies, but none have been proven to be completely feminist yet.

Modern day Disney princesses may not be quite as feminist as society has been led to believe. When compared with the princesses of the past, the new princesses display great change, but they do not perfectly represent feminism in the new world. In her article, "The Point of a Disney Princess Isn't Her Talking Time" posted in TIME, Darlena Cunha discusses how Disney princess movies still have sexist viewpoints. She discusses how Disney has evolved into men speaking more and more often than women, which may be making a step back in the women's portrayal in these movies instead of a step forward. She argues that we need a broader analysis to determine female empowerment in the Disney princess movies. Most people simply look at how the princess acts, but it is also important to take into consideration who the movie is focused on.  She proves her point by giving the examples of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Frozen* having men talking more than women. The only recent movie with women talking more than men is in *Brave* due to the conversations between the mother and daughter. She admits that the women are not as passive as the princesses before her but ultimately critiques Disney for how much more men speak than women. While Disney has made progress in how the princess acts, they have evolved for the movies to be more focused on the men. In addition to the shift in talking time, Disney continues to represent a completely unrealistic body type of the princesses. In "Magical Manes and Untamable Tresses: (En)Coding Computer-Animated Hair for the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," Caroline Ferris leader discusses the problems with how Disney constructs their princesses. She refers to a person working on constructing the princesses for Disney who says, "Historically speaking, animating female characters is really really difficult, because they have to go through these range of emotions, but you have to keep them pretty" (Amid Amidi 2013). His casual reference to these challenges reinforces the problem of female representation that continues to plague media production. Even with the much more common acceptance

of women as equals in society, people still expect feminine beauty and bodily perfection from the princesses. Software engineer Kelly Ward discusses how the princess's hair should look on their body and goes on to say, "So even if the hair was just lying on the ground and not even moving, we always want the hair to be beautiful," because the parts of the princess must be beautiful even if it is no longer a part of her (Youtube 2013). These unrealistic expectations of how princesses should look continue to perpetuate the media today making it nearly impossible to have the perfectly feminist princess.

These same unrealistic expectations of how women should behave drastically affect young people who are exposed to this media. The young females watching Disney princess movies are still very impressionable and often aspire to be like the princesses they see in the movies as is proven by multiple research projects. Children learn to behave and what to believe based on what they see on a daily basis, so parents must know the repercussions of the media that they expose their children to. Caila Leigh Cordwell conducted research done on girls ages 6-12 in her article "The shattered slipper project: The impact of the Disney princess franchise on girls ages 6-12," where she asked them a very interesting question: "Do Disney Princesses look like real women?". 62.5% of the girls believed that the princesses did not look like normal women and they expressed feelings of frustration by describing them as "perfect" and "skinny" (Cordwell 37). These feelings of frustration provide an insightful examination of the current media when it comes to body image statements, considering how young these girls were. Current advertising pressures women to maintain a certain physique while remaining extremely skinny, and the fact that these young girls were affected by these unrealistic goals reflects a fundamental problem in today's society. The detrimental impact of the princess movies on young females is also researched in the article "From the sleeping princess to the world-saving daughter of the chief: Examining young children's perceptions of 'old'versus 'new'Disney princess characters." This article analyzes the results of a study asking 8-9 year old children to compare old and new disney princesses. The study revealed that even after viewing the newer princess movies, the children continued to view princesses in the more common perfect and

feminine way as they had been portrayed in the past. The most shocking part of the study was that most of the children did not even view Moana, one of the more recent Disney princesses, as a princess at all. This is very important research to consider because it focuses on how children perceive the princesses rather than how Disney portrays the princesses. Since Moana is not quite as feminine as the other princesses, these children did not even acknowledge her as a real princess. The media greatly affects how children act and who they look up to, and if they are shown feminine princesses then they will feel the need to act this way.

Disney princess movies have reflected a common perception of how society believes women should behave, and these movies continue to do this today. Although the portrayal of women in these movies has improved drastically, the princesses are still not completely feminist which represents a flaw in how our society continues to view women. It is important to keep encouraging young females to be strong and not rely on the help from men in order to crush this cycle of gender stereotypes. Young females are greatly impacted by the media they see at a young age, so it is important to encourage them to look up to strong and independent princesses rather than the first feminine and docile princesses. The past princess movies have evolved to represent a better woman which means that we can create more feminist Disney princess movies in the future. There is room for change, and all parents should limit which princesses their daughters look up to in order to advocate for complete gender equality in our society.

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