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## **Disney Princess Films: Feminist Movements and the Changing of Gender Roles**

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University of Tennessee Knoxville

Disney Princess Films:

Feminist Movements and the Changing of Gender Roles

Mckinley Frees

Chancellor's Honors Thesis

Advised by: Dr. Tanita Saenkhum

8 December 2023

*Abstract*

The goal of the project is to examine how female characters are portrayed in Disney Princess films over the last century and find thematic connections as to how they were portrayed. To achieve this, six films are chosen based on their specific eras. They are analyzed based on various categories. The categories included the plot, description of the focal character, appearance of the focal character, the relationships with the titular character, moments that focus on gender, and important quotes and lyrics. Films and their emerging themes are compared and connected to the waves of feminist theory. The study found that women's gender roles have changed over time following the waves of feminist theory as are represented through Disney Princess films. Themes that emerged across categories included marriage and love, motherhood, beauty and sexuality, goodness, patriarchy, strength, and performance. The ways in which the themes emerge and are portrayed reflect the movements of Feminism. The study concludes that Disney Princess films reflect the movements of Feminism and how gender roles in their portrayals and beliefs have changed over the last century.

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*Table of Contents*

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Table of Contents .....	3
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	7
1. Definition of a Hero .....	7
2. Selected Princess Films.....	9
3. Waves of Feminism.....	13
4. Gaps In Scholarship .....	17
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	19
1. Data Collection .....	19
2. Data Analysis .....	23
3. Summation of Methodology .....	25
Chapter 4: Results .....	27
1. Situating into the Waves .....	27
2. Categorical Results .....	30
1. Plot.....	31
2. Description of Focal Character .....	34

3. Appearance of titular character .....	35
4. Relationships to other characters .....	37
5. Gender Moments.....	38
6. Important Quotes and Lyrics.....	40
3. Discussion .....	42
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	45
Notes .....	48
Works Cited.....	49

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Walt Disney once said, “movies can and do have tremendous influence in shaping young lives in the realm of entertainment towards the ideals and objectives of normal adulthood” (Walt Disney). For the last century, the Walt Disney Studios has been creating media highly targeted towards young audiences. As such, it has had a high influence on the socialization of America’s youth. Disney’s highest influence has been on young women and girls through their Disney Princess franchise. The young women in these films since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) show what the ideal woman should be. Over the last century, the ideal woman has shifted. Disney’s films have reflected the cultural shifts regarding women, gender, and sexuality. This study aims to examine those shifts and how the films reflect them.

The focus of the study is to answer the research questions of “How have young women been portrayed in the media over the last century?” and “How does this reflect how ideals have changed over time?” I attempt to take note of especially the characters such as Eilonwy of *The Black Cauldron* who is nicknamed “the forgotten princess.” All the chosen films include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *The Black Cauldron* (1985), *Mulan* (1998), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), and *Brave* (2012). Further, I compare the historical background to what is being displayed on the screen in terms of gender studies. The study looks at how the aspects of the films reflect the ideas of the time. It also ties in research to the waves of feminist theory and its movements over the course of the last century.

This study is important because it shows how young children especially girls and women are being taught by the media on who they should be. Each of these young women has a lesson to be taught through their character. As critics continue to claim that Disney, especially their princesses, have become too independent and far from their origin stories, it is important to look

back at what has come before. Historically over the last century, the change in women's roles has transitioned drastically. Ideas on what is a woman or who should she be questions the very idea of gender as a performance and culture. These women, the princesses, are the role models young girls will look up to. Understanding how values have changed and how media has reflected that can aid in understanding why some choices were made. Snow White and Cinderella in their stories have lasted the testament of time, yet how they are viewed and the films that have followed proving changes have occurred for women. Women slowly reached equality, questioned what gender was in terms of performance, and now are questioning gender in terms of bodies and the aggressions against them. This study aims to shed some light on understanding just how these princesses have become role models over the last century and how their changing of ideals has reflected our own through comparing lasting scholarship and my own results.



## *Chapter 2: Literature Review*

In the field of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, the portrayal of women's roles has been continuously discussed regarding what their roles should be in society. Further, how do we teach lessons of gender to the younger generations? Researchers have thus turned interdisciplinary toward film studies, especially films targeted toward a younger audience. There is no children's film company so prominently researched and so reflective of the changing times as Disney and their Disney Princess line. This study analyzes aspects of the films to show the changes in beliefs. This chapter reviews relevant literature and examines previous studies on the films and gender roles following the waves of feminist theory. The waves are discussed as movements on ideals and rights of women follow the patterns of waves as women gain and current ideas are introduced to the discussion. The following paragraphs lay out prior research on the definition of a hero in connection to the princess films, each individual film and focus character that was chosen to be analyzed in the study, and the waves of Feminism and movements that have made up the last century.

### 1. Definition of a Hero

Throughout the last century, women have gained their way of being a hero represented through the females of the Walt Disney Princesses which has changed over the years. In general, changes in appearance, loss of innocence, acceptance of sexuality, and diversity have occurred through these heroines. Specifically, I choose to focus on six princesses across the last century to represent how ideas of womanhood and how they can be a hero have changed. In this section, discussion takes place on what the definition of a hero and a princess is. It goes through the standard definition of a hero and how it connects with princesses. I go through each individual

character in their characteristics in understanding a princess is a modern-day hero. Research on emerging themes is also discussed and represented as shifting for women occurs.

In the morphology of creating a hero, it has been argued that it is not the characteristics but the actions of the character that determine if they are a hero or not. Vladimir Propp, in his analysis of fairytales, writes that the:

Hero is assumed to be the protagonist, but ... he (and he is always he, frequently named Ivan) is a pattern of behavior. He is the person who disobeys or follows the interdiction, the person who is harmed by the villain, the recipient of a magical agent, the primary combatant who defeats the villain in a climactic struggle, and/or the one who undergoes a physical transformation at the end of the story. (Rahiman 118-119)

In the Disney Princess films, patterns begin to emerge in their way. Princess films have created their heroes. Their basic elements of “good prevailing over evil, expressive, catchy songs, cute animal sidekicks for comic relief, young romance, sense of humor” (Rahiman 119) create a new formula for female heroes. These heroines have come further into their strengths, as noted “most of the early princess movies the hero was the prince who came for rescue and the princess was a mere shadow. Over time Disney has made the princesses adventurous and bold” (Rahiman 119).

Still, research remains focused on key components and similarities found in the stories. Appearance is key to analyzing the characters as they shift and in some cases their films. In general, their “physical attributes were so similar with big innocent eyes, tiny chins, and short noses which make them appear meek and vulnerable” (Rahiman 118). This appearance of vulnerability plays into their stories of losing innocence.

Over time women and their roles expanded. As noted especially in the 1990s, “going also (though not completely gone) was the image of a woman whose goodness was exemplified by her being innocent and asexual, and beginning to emerge in this period was the woman who was kind, virtuous, good and aware of (as well as able to enjoy) her sexuality” (Dobson et al. 278). This loss of innocence in characters and focus on sexuality began to create a duality where women could be both good and sexy. Earlier films would demonize such sensuality, but this culture change reflected the idea that “a woman could be both good and sexy had ceased to be such an unimaginable concept in representation of femininity in much of America’s popular culture” (Dobson et al. 279). Views towards women have allowed them to be freer in their appearance and actions and this is reflected in the later films.

Not only have stories portrayed women more sexually free, but stories have also begun to open to more diverse stories. The 1990s especially brought discussions on political correctness. It is noted that between the years 1989 and 2005, “themes of multi-culturalism and tolerance of those who are different were depicted by Disney for the first time...” (Dobson et. al 278). Disney started focusing more on human stories as the characters were proving themselves through actions instead of their “goodness” (Dobson et. al 278). There has been a growth in the diversity of stories, a trend that continues today.

## 2. Selected Princess Films

This section analyzes each princess in their connection to defining what is a hero and how it has shifted. Snow White and Cinderella are “classic princesses.” The definition of how to be a princess remains narrow where they “must be beautiful, young, white women...their beauty must be so legendary...” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 28). Snow White’s destiny is laid out at her birth, and she maintains no right to change it, a feat that would be questioned by later princesses.

It is said that “the heroine's trials and triumphs alike spring from the identity she has at birth, not from her choices...” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 8). It helps if she is beautiful such as Snow White is in legend as the other characters bend to her beauty (Forman-Brunell and Hains 9). Beauty is ingrained as a central theme (Forman-Brunell and Hains 211). It is how women have “control” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 211). It is a key element of Snow White’s character. The solution to the characters' problems is in their romantic relationships. It is said that the prince’s role is “exaggerated” as “only his kiss could break the Queen’s spell” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 211).

Cinderella’s story remains a romanticized fairytale even as she struggles to work to accomplish her dreams. Critics believe that she continues the tradition of being “special.” She is born to a gentleman as well as the positive attributes she gains from her mother. She even has her fairy godmother (Forman-Brunell and Hains 14). Critics further argue that Cinderella is passively waiting “patiently for a prince to rescue them from their problems...” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 31). Overall, she fits the classic princess formula under Walt Disney’s supervision. The use of music and narration allows the viewer to understand her position (Forman-Brunell and Hains 28). Her position is that of needing to “become a servant in her own house” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 28-29).

Eilowny from *The Black Cauldron* nicknamed “The Forgotten Princess,” was one of the first princesses to start the transformation of the views of women. Her characteristics begin this transition. One researcher writes, “the transformation did not occur overnight. In the characterization of Eilowny in *The Black Cauldron*, the beginnings of this transformation may be discerned” (Dobson et. al 281). She is described as “feisty and adventurous” (Dobson et. al 281). Her age and innocence kept her like her predecessors in terms of willfulness and determination.

She is a checkpoint moving toward broader changes in the portrayal of women. The film was released in the mid-1980s, a time when the start of a transition was occurring.

Mulan, as part of the Disney Renaissance, was a part of the rebirth of classic Disney films yet the cultural changes of the time affected the aspects of her story, her character, her world, and the roles she plays. Romantic love is present but not very highly focused on. One researcher states that “romantic love is least apparent (but not wholly absent) in *Mulan* (1998) whose heroine frustrates her family by lacking the poise to make a good traditional wife” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 12-13). There are hints to romance especially at the end, but it is not the focus of the film. Mulan as a character is uninterested in marriage which sets her apart from the traditional values held. This is clear in the scene for “Honor to Us All” as she does not fit in with the other girls. It is described that the traditional narrative is then “somewhat disrupted by Mulan’s not being feminine enough and failing to meet the expectations of her family” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 55)<sup>1</sup>. She later laments in her ballad that she “will never pass for a perfect bride” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 55).

Her skills lie elsewhere and so her “girl power” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 55) stands. Her strength will continue to add to the questioning of her gender and role as she plays with it throughout the film. Mulan rejects feminine labor to become a soldier and she must learn how to fit into this role (Dobson et al. 15; Forman-Brunell and Hains 37-38). Her playing with gender follows her changing appearance. She combines the two in her appearances to shift fluidly throughout the film. In the end, she combines the “masculine traits of a soldier with the female postures, dress and accessories...” (Dobson et. al 17). It is in this instance, she pulls her hair back and declares that it was she who destroyed the Hun army. At this moment, she is both masculine and feminine (Dobson et. al 18). Mulan herself is said to be “one of three Disney

princesses along with Pocahontas and Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* who exhibit more masculine than feminine qualities, even if they are more feminine than masculine overall” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 54). She needed both identities to strive. As described, she “was not happy as ‘just’ Mulan, ...nor was she happy as Ping... As Mulan the soldier, however, the combination of both roles in which Mulan could act out both sides of herself, Mulan finally achieves true success” (Dobson et. al 16). Mulan in her discussion of gender identity proves that it is fluid. She attempts to memorize the rules by which she is expected to live for the matchmaker but is unable to do so (Dobson et. al 13-14). Those rules are “good, honest, forthright, intelligent, lively, kind heart, sense of justice” (14) but they hold little value as she cheats by writing the answers on her arm. As she fails her test with the matchmaker, she later laments about wondering who she will be. Yet, her time in the army teaches her the other side of gender in learning the male gender roles such as with the “manly walk” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 55). In the end, she learns how to combine them to show her own identity regardless of society’s rules.

The first couple years of the early 2000s brought increasingly more women in leadership and open appearances coming out of the 1990s; this is reflected in the character of Empress Kidagkedesh (Kida) from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. She is a hero able to “save her civilization from the mercenaries who have come to steal its power source but also can restore her world to prosperity and, because of her father’s death, can assume the role of queen” (Dobson et. al 280). She is noted to be the first Disney princess to succeed to the throne in a film. Further, her appearance remains more “sexual” than her predecessors. Her character shows the strength of a woman in leadership who is confident in herself. She is vastly different from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.

The mid-2000s brought the modern version of the Disney Princess including Merida from *Brave* who questions the precedent of the classic princesses and their stories. One researcher quote that she has “refreshing characteristics” (Forman-Brunell and Hains 14). A central theme in the film is Merida’s resistance to romance and marriage. She has no love interest differing from her predecessors as many of her successors would follow suit. She is “the first Disney princess in the line-up to not have a love interest in her film. Unlike the other princesses...She tries to subvert the notions of princess” (Rahiman 122). Not only does she not have a love interest, but she also outright denies the idea of marriage, especially when presented with the opportunity. It is described that “despite her mother Elinor’s desire to see Merida as a proper royal lady, Merida wants to take control of her destiny” (Rahiman 121-122). Merida’s destiny and her control of it is something unavailable to the earlier princesses. She further differs from the average princess in not having any music. Her appearance also subverts the usual “princess makeover” as she reverts it. Controversy arose in changing her design to fit in with the others yet public outcry halted this decision (Forman-Brunell and Hains 41). Merida is a prime example of how far the view of women has changed over a full century.

Women’s movements have fluctuated on waves for varied reasons including suffrage, sexuality, gender as a performance, and presently discussions on bodies. Films are contextualized based on their points in history. The waves of Feminism reflect the historical movements of their times and are a timeline in themselves. Each film is analyzed due to their historical connections to these movements and their beliefs.

### 3. Waves of Feminism

This section introduces and discusses the waves of Feminism. The waves of Feminism represent changing of ideals and rights on behalf of women. The waves include the first wave

between 1848-1928 with women's suffrage, followed by the post-WWII period into the sexual revolution second wave from 1960-1980, the third wave of gender and equality from 1990-2012, and the current fourth wave of Feminism from 2012- Present day. The ideals of the waves of Feminism are pertinent to this study as they are the timeline the films follow and the ideas they represent. Themes arising during the waves are seen throughout the transitions of the films over time.

The first wave of Feminism was about women's suffrage and the right to vote. Gender equality was being pushed to be in the public instead of solely in the private sphere. This wave was the result of earlier work from the 18th century. The mid to late 19th century held with it the growth of women's movements in the United States and worldwide. Still, anti-suffragists denied a woman's natural rights instead of pushing for a woman to be in a domestic role. Anti-suffragettes argued:

What would happen if women concerned themselves with politics rather than the home.

They further argued that women did not have the capacity to understand the complex issues of politics and economics. In addition, as men were the head of the household, they would consider women's interests with their own vote. (Raine para. 7)

The turn of the 20th century especially in the 1920s would bring with it rising rights for women in the workforce for World War I as well as the intervention of contraceptives and sexual freedoms. There would still be remarkable women such as Amelia Earhart, the first woman in flight, and Caraway the first woman elected to Senate, as well as others at the beginning of the thirties; but women would return to domesticity as the Great Depression led to unemployment. Men being the "breadwinners" would maintain many jobs, if a woman held a position, it would not be respected and paid significantly less. Working women were still pushed out of their jobs



for love and marriage even as there were influential women in government and political movements such as Eleanor Roosevelt and the women of the Harlem Renaissance.

Predating the second wave was the upward swing of women's movement from World War II. World War II put women back into the workforce. It created the image of "Rosie the Riveter," which was a symbol for aircraft and munitions. Women were a part of male-dominated industries such as the military through flying, the navy, and the army. 1945, at the end of the war, would find ¼ of women working out of the home. Women were also balancing work and home life through the creation of child-care centers.

Women's empowerment would slow a bit following the war. There was the baby boom and return to safety and normalcy that desired strict gender roles. Yet the war left a contrast in women's desires for work and home. Prominent women would continue to take part in governmental positions. There was a conflicting desire for women's empowerment in this moment and their autonomy.

The second wave of Feminism is nicknamed the "sexual revolution" focused on social rights of gender values, sexuality, and economic inequalities. The wave questions the idea of female happiness in the domestic sphere. Women desired to be more than sexual objects. The period of Feminism is marked by women who "rallied against the sexualization and objectification of women" (Raine para. 13). Discussions on patriarchy and questions about the need for it were on the rise.

The movements, especially of the 1970s and 80s, would have large impacts. The 1970s held the fight for equality. Women were not happy in the public sphere. The "image of the happy housewife was contrasted with the unhappy career woman in women's magazines. Feminists like

Friedan pushed back against these circumscribed gender roles” (Raine para. 12). There was backlash on both sides on issues such as government trust, Vietnam, and counterculture. Women finally gained the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment at the start of the decade when it was fully ratified a few years later. The 1980s would continue political movements through Reagan’s administration and popular culture would change to introduce the “outsider” character. The decade of the 1980s allowed women to have full legal barriers removed yet remained conflicting ideas on their roles. Yet, “80 years after the turn of the 20th century, ½ of married women had jobs as opposed to ⅓ at the turn of the century. Further, ½ of college students in 1980 were female” (Novack and Novack 58). Women were entering into male-dominated fields and the percentage of stay-at-home moms would decrease. Work was seen as a good thing. Strong women were seen as effective. There was a large career push but still a reminder of traditional values as men continued to be uncomfortable. It would only further as feminine and masculine traits were starting to combine.

Third wave Feminism redefined gender in its postmodernism in the disbelief of one grand gender role. Gender and sexuality continued to be large topics of discussion. It most importantly questioned gender stereotypes of women as it moves away from biology creating larger inclusion. Women saw there was “no ‘right way’ to be a woman or a man. Feminists in this period were focused on questioning and redefining ideas about gender and sexuality, particularly focusing on the role media and cultural works have played in ascribing gender norms” (Raine para. 18). The movement concludes that gender is a performance that only depends on what one decides to self-identify.

The 1990s would be an age of prosperity with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the internet. Still, there would be horrors to come with the Bosnian Genocide, Rodney King, the

Columbine Shootings, natural disasters, and the LA Riots. Further, Diana and Charles would be divorced and there would be the Gulf War, the Bosnian War, and other conflicts (“1990s: Peace, Prosperity and the Internet”). The end of the decade in 1999 was the Clinton Impeachment, Women were in key positions of power during this time including Presidents and Prime Ministers.

The 2000s would start with Y2K. America would face its largest threat with 9/11. There was a rise in body movements as well as research and discovery. Reality television would start to emerge as well as dating websites. Women were further being elected at home in the United States such as Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Sarah Palin. The war was occurring in Iraq. The beginning of the 2010s would bring a financial crisis, war in Iran, and other natural disasters as well as continued expansions of nuclear plants, democratization, and protests. Research on this final wave is still in development as it stands in the current day.

#### 4. Gaps In Scholarship

Scholarship forgets that strength for a woman is not simply physical yet extends beyond it. It is standing up for what one believes in and acting justly. All the women of the Disney Princess franchise have a form of strength although how it is portrayed has changed. There is strength in modesty and love yet there is also strength in courage, physical strength, intelligence, confidence, and in controlling one’s destiny. This study attempts to shed light on the forgotten ways of strength and to understand how women in figuring out to be their own hero can strive to be one.

This study attempts to delve deeper into characters who do not have as much research about them. In my study, the two I wanted to focus on in comparison are Eilowny from *The*

*Black Cauldron* and Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. I wanted to look at their characters and stories in comparison to the other films in the field that have been deeply studied.

This study also hopes to fill in gaps in contextualizing the films to the world at the time of their release. Through engaging with studies surrounding feminist waves and historical movements, gender roles can better be understood regarding their period. Contrasts can now be more clearly seen. This study attempts to create a larger image of how they have changed. To this end, this study aims to generate an understanding of what and how values of certain times are being taught to the future generation of girls over the last century and the present.

### *Chapter 3: Methodology*

Through contextualizing the films with their time periods, their representative princesses show the progression of beliefs of the role of women especially young women in what they should strive to become. This study aims to investigate the portrayal of women's roles over the last century in Disney Princess films. To achieve this goal, I conducted an analysis of six animated Disney Princess films.

This chapter discusses the method in which to answer the established research questions: “How have young women been portrayed in the media over the last century?” and “How does this reflect how ideals have changed over time?” It goes through the research design including the selection criteria of the films and their medium, meaning the form they take place in, in this case animated feature length films, and the processes of analyzing each film.

#### 1. Data Collection

Each of the films and the medium in which they are made represent an era of Disney and history and were chosen based on other researchers' scholarship on the character's attributes and their stories. Designed to uphold the continuity of the last century, this study focuses on animated versions of the Princess films instead of the newer live-action remakes. The staple of the Walt Disney company from their first film of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, has always been found in their animated films, most especially in their Disney Princess animated line-up. Walt Disney himself was a proprietor of the medium as well as on the usage of classic fairytales. He was quoted to describe animation as “a medium of storytelling and visual entertainment which can bring pleasure and information to people of all ages everywhere in the world” (Walt Disney). The medium itself is a way to reach a broad audience, especially young people. The story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* furthered the universal appeal to all

people. Walt Disney's own beliefs on the universality of these films and their stories is why I wanted to focus on their Disney Princess lineup.

Over the course of the Walt Disney company's film making, it has become a commonly accepted descriptor to divide into seven separate film eras (DizAvenue). Film eras are determined by the style of film and historical events that in turn are reflected in their films. Starting in 1937 from the premiere of *Snow White*, the most widely accepted eras are the Golden Age (1937-1942), Wartime (1943-1949), the Silver Age (1950-1959), the Bronze Age (1970-1988), The Disney Renaissance (1989-1999), the Post Renaissance (2000-2009), and the current Revival Era (2010-Present) according to such researchers as DizAvenue, Featured Animation, and many others.

To select a representative princess for each of the eras, I went through the list of official princesses, unofficial, and if needed honorary. From there, I narrowed down due to prior research, estimation of content and relativity, and diversity of their story. To complete preliminary research, I investigated what others had to note about the films and utilized their notes. I started out looking for broad information and then became more specific to clear up any points that were missing. Their notes helped to create an estimate as to how much I would be able to retain from each film points being added if their story differed. Desired content was on discussions and notes on gender and its portrayal. Diversity could be in the origin, the storyline, or any other point the film made on differing the character. One of the films chosen, *Mulan* for example, was decided upon due to diversity, prior research, and the film's focus on questioning gender roles.

Six films in total were chosen to be analyzed including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *The Black Cauldron* (1985), *Mulan* (1998), *Atlantis: The*

*Lost Empire* (2001), and *Brave* (2012). There is no film for the Wartime Era due to there being only minor characters and lack of feature films during WWII in the Wartime Era. This is a connection to the focus on men on the front lines, a feat Walt Disney himself served in WWI. Women were disregarded back at home except for in their war effort.

For the Golden Age, and the constant comparison, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was chosen. Being the first Disney Princess as well as the company and world's first feature length film, the film set the precedent for each princess that would follow. She would set up the usual style and storyline that is still present even in the most current film. Further, she is one of the youngest princesses, being aged fourteen, an interesting comment, especially on its period. Her driving force in the film is also to gain a prince which is something that changes as early as *Cinderella*.

Post WWII, in Disney's Silver Age, there is seen a return with the domesticity of women, yet it is the start of a pushback. Women during the war were finally able to have their own careers showing their strength of character. The prominent caricature of Rosie the Riveter is no more represented than with the titular character *Cinderella*. She is not as sweet and docile as Snow White, also being a bit older. Cinderella could be described as a woman who works hard, stays true to her beliefs, speaks her mind, and appreciates what she has. Although she still maintains the domesticity of household duties, she is the beginning of a shift of strong women to follow.

Following the Silver Age is the Bronze Age with a lack of major female characters. This era required an unofficial princess to stand in as a representative. Originally the decision was to analyze Maid Marian of *Robin Hood*, yet I decided to use Eilonwy from *The Black Cauldron*. Eilonwy being interesting as being nicknamed the "forgotten princess" and a princess herself.

Her character is seen as quite different from her predecessors one researcher calling her the “start of the change” in feminist characters (Forman-Brunell et al. 5). Her film is a bit of a time jump but represents the outcomes of the women’s movements of the time. Eilonwy herself being the equal deuteragonist of her film like the feminist movements of the 70s and 80s.

The late nineties and early 2000s became the return to the Broadway style animated films of the Golden and Silver Ages of Disney. The Disney Renaissance holding many of the official Disney Princess films made it difficult to decide on who to be a representative. Official princesses including Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Ariel. Mulan “is the man” as she crosses the gender boundary. Further she is completely on her own mission and of the films focused on up until this point is the only one who is not or does not become a princess.

The early 2000s brought the Post Renaissance Era which also found a lacking main female characters. The decision was then made to focus on another unofficial princess, Empress Kidagahkesh “Kida” from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. Kida is the deuteragonist to her love interest Milo Thatch. She is the more “masculine” of the two. Her story is another that is different from the usual journey of a Disney Princess. She further stretches the boundary of what is acceptable for women coming in a time where women were dressing more open such as in her own appearance. She, as well as Eilonwy, stand apart from their lack of musical numbers in their respective films.

The final film chosen from the Revival Period is *Brave*. Merida compared to her official era counterparts: Tiana, Rapunzel, Moana, and Raya, follows a different storyline with different goals than any of the others. To start, she has no love interest, the film focuses instead on the relationship between a mother and daughter. Further she was not made by Walt Disney Studios



but instead by Pixar. Merida and her story are interesting in how far it has come from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.

## 2. Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of two phases. For the first phase, I conducted preliminary research to retain a greater sense of the films before watching the films. As I conducted pre-viewing research, I closely looked at the following categories basic film information, summaries on the plot, important relationships such as love interests to watch for, general characteristics of the focal character, songs and dialogue, critical reception, and other general notes such as *Brave* being created by Pixar instead of Walt Disney Studios. In closely looking at these categories, I examined how the character is represented on the screen or how others act or describe them. It is how they as a character interact with their world around them as a reflection of our own. Further it gave me direction in key elements to watch out for as well as missing information that I needed to pay attention to.

The second phase consisted of analyzing the films. To analyze the selected films, I narrowed down to five categories: the plot summary for notable events, how other scholars describe the focal character, important moments (i.e., discussions on gender), their relationships to other characters, their appearance(s), and significant quotes and lyrics. These categories stemmed from my pre-viewing research. These categories are especially important and relevant because they explain how the character is viewed by others, their role, their beliefs, and how they interact within the world around them. Throughout viewing, I was attempting to find emerging patterns amongst the categories. Each film was viewed once due to time constraints. Films were viewed in chronological order to see the progression over the course of time.

To start, I had to understand the elements of the story. First, for the plot, I took notes on what was occurring before me, providing a connection to the journey of a Disney Princess like a hero's journey. Next, how the focal character is described, especially in the earlier films, is extremely telling of what the audience is supposed to believe about the character. For the character's description, I paid attention to narration and how other characters describe them. I also needed to understand how other characters in their universe, and our own, represent what are their expectations for a young woman, keeping track on discussions of gender and expectations. Expectations connect to the characters and their relationships with other characters. Understanding a character's relationships leads to understanding how well the character plays into or breaks the mold of their expected roles.

How a message comes across to the audience, especially young as targeted by Disney, means focusing also on aspects of the process. The first thing an audience member notices is their appearances, especially if they change. Appearances tell of how one is supposed to view them and their role. I kept track of what they were wearing especially if the costuming changed. Not only in how they physically appear but also in what they say show what the main character's goal as well as sometimes others in their narrative are. I also kept track of the important quotes and lyrics from the characters. Each of these categories offers a distinct perspective on the character, how they fit into our world, and how the audience is expected to think of them.

Prior research as well as viewing each of the films in their chronological order with their specific categories allows for a viewing of different perspectives. Each of them allowing for connections to be made to answer the question on how women have been portrayed in the media especially in "children's" media? What effect or role has Disney as a company had on women's views if at all or is it simply a reflection? How does this connect to the belief on what a young

woman should strive to be? Is there a trend that has occurred over the last century, will it continue? How do films and media reflect each other and how do companies capitalize on those ideas?

Through this data analysis, it demonstrates that the ideals of womanhood are changing and adapting to the world around them in response to the historical events and beliefs in our own world. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* followed the beginning of the 20th century that had the roaring twenties of a rise in women's rights followed by the Great Depression and World War I. *Cinderella* followed World War II where women were beginning their battle for equality. *Black Cauldron*, and its deuterogamist Eilonwy came following the wave of second wave Feminism where the battle for equality was at the forefront. Women were attempting to figure out their own roles. Eilonwy being twelve is at the pivotal moment of attempting to figure out her place especially as a young royal.

*Mulan* came to a time where the world was once again focusing on war but in a different light. Coming in the Disney Renaissance she represented a return to the Golden and Silver Ages of Disney, but she was a new type of woman. One that is "a man" for much of the film the situational irony placing her in a position of questioning her own gender roles. Her entire goal in the movie was attempting to find her place. *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and its deuteragonist Empress Kida represents a time of a new rise in exploration and a new question of women and their roles. The following decade would lead to questions on women on their choices on their own selves. This leads to *Brave* and its titular character Merida.

### 3. Summation of Methodology

The organization of research is laid out to be able to analyze multiple different angles of each character. It started with basis information in order to form a background and to make

selection decisions. Selections of representative characters and films are accomplished through decisions on release date, medium, and preliminary research. Preliminary research found the first phase of data analysis. The first phase sets up decisions on how to analyze the films themselves. Research is conducted on films through specific categories as well as gender movements occurring at the times of their releases. Through previous research and film analysis, this study is set up to understand the shifting of portrayals of feminist movements.

### Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 4 discusses the results of the study by situating how the films fall into the different waves of feminist theory and connects prior research to the themes present in the Disney eras through the categories.

#### 1. Situating into the Waves

To begin this chapter, I am situating the films into the feminist waves in their ideals. Films following the first wave, predating the second, reverted women's rights gained during suffragette movements. Rights decreased following the Great Depression and once again increasing with World War II, as represented by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* for the former and *Cinderella* for the latter.

*Snow White* represents the period post-Great Depression as women were once more pushed back into the domestic sphere. Themes present in her narrative are the focus on her beauty. Her fate is also decided for her before birth for marriage and motherhood as a princess much like the women of the time (Forman-Brunell et al. 8). Girls also had to uphold moral standards. They found their strength solely through their romantic relationships (Forman-Brunell et al. 211). *Snow White* upholds the themes and beliefs of her period.

Following World War II, predating the second wave, is *Cinderella*, who exemplifies the lasting impacts of the iconic "Rosie the Riveter." She represents the return to strict gender roles yet women's desires for more. She upholds classic princess qualities of being "good" and "special" and has a love interest of a prince who ultimately saves her (Forman-Brunell et al. 14). What differs in her narrative is her determination to continue to go after her dreams even as she becomes a servant in her own household.

The second wave, following the women's movements of the mid-20th century, found women fighting for equality especially in the workplace as represented by Princess Eilonwy in *The Black Cauldron*. The film portrays her attempt to become on equal footing with the men and boys around her. She is claimed to be the "start of the transformation" of women's rights especially in media (Nichola Dobson 281). She is "feisty and adventurous" (Nichola Dobson 281) in her character, yet she maintains her "goodness" and "innocence." Her story begins to show the theme of strength that is somewhat present in her predecessors yet becomes more prominently pronounced.

The third wave of Feminism would find women questioning their role as a gender in how they should act and even how they should appear. Films during this period start with *Mulan*, peaking with *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, and ending with *Brave*. *Mulan* represents when women were continuing to hold prominent positions as the world faced momentous changes as the idea of gender as a concept started to be discussed. Romantic love is present yet is not a focus of the film (Forman-Brunell et al. 12-13). She questions traditional roles and values including marriage from the start of the film. Most noteworthy, she disrupts the idea of femininity and gender (Forman-Brunell et al. 55). Strength has now moved to include physical strength as well as internal courage and determination. The concept of gender as a performance begins to arise as she is not masculine or feminine but shifts between the two (Nichola Dobson 17-18). She is the opposite of what is desired for both sides of gender identifying as something of both. She is also real in her flaws, but she remains good. Her incorporation into the Disney Princess lineup also counteracted both the company's and society's overlooking of various cultural groups when speaking on women's rights.

The late 90s and early 2000s would bring with them body movements and discussions on sexuality as well as women's roles that are exemplified through Empress Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. Kida represents a strength of women in leadership even before she is crowned. She is seen as a hero to her people. At the same time the concept of beauty has changed to bring in the idea of sexuality (Nichola Dobson 298) as well as Kida has confidence in her appearance.

Women in the early 2000s to 2010 would continue to hold discussions especially on a woman's identity and choices and what they should be as exemplified by Princess Merida of *Brave*. She outright resists previous themes of romance and marriage, expanding on the idea of love in a different form. She exemplifies a strength in controlling her own destiny, a feat unavailable to her predecessors. She also continues the discussion on gender performance as her mother continuously attempts to teach her how to be a lady and princess. Some scholars argue that she also continues the cultural expansion through being Scottish through a comparison to Native Americans (Forman-Brunell et al. 41). Her story is one of furthering discussion from a different storytelling perspective. The third wave, prominently represented in Disney Princess films, questions standards of gender, sexuality, and traditional values and roles.

The films in this study have come to represent the history, ideas, and themes of their periods following the waves of Feminism. They have come to represent the values and the form of teaching young girls who they should be. The first wave of Feminism was between the years of 1848-1928 placing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) as post-first wave Feminism following the Great Depression. *Cinderella* (1950) predates the second wave with women's movements of World War II. Found at the end of the second women's wave (1960-1990's) is *The Black Cauldron* (1985). The third wave of Feminism between 1990-2012 is represented through the films of *Mulan* (1998) at the start, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) at the wave's peak, and

*Brave* (2012) at the end of the movement. The current fourth wave of Feminism is not represented due to lack of research.

## 2. Categorical Results

This section presents the results to the distinct categories of analysis. Table 1 summarizes the themes present in each film under each category. The categories of analysis are the plot, description of the focal character, appearance of the focal character, the relationships with the titular character, moments that focus on gender, and important quotes and lyrics. Themes are shared across the various categories. The themes that appear are marriage and love, motherhood, beauty and sexuality, goodness, patriarchy, strength, and performance. Goodness is defined as morally upstanding and purity. Patriarchy is any connection to male as a higher authority and the system that has been set up to support it. Strength can be found in a multitude of ways not solely physically but also by character. Gender as a performance is represented as the characters do not strictly follow organized gender guidelines. The categories and the themes that arise throughout them are presented here.

Table 1

Films, Categories, And Themes Present

Film	Plot	Description	Appearance	Relationships	Gender Moments	Quotes/ Lyrics
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarves</i>	Marriage Motherhood	Beauty	Goodness	Goodness Motherhood Marriage	Patriarchy	Marriage Motherhood Goodness
<i>Cinderella</i>	Strength	Goodness	Strength	Goodness	Patriarchy	Strength



	Patriarchy Goodness Marriage		Goodness	Patriarchy Marriage		Goodness Patriarchy Marriage
<i>The Black Cauldron</i>	Strength Goodness	Beauty Strength Goodness	Goodness	Love Goodness Strength	Patriarchy Strength	Strength
<i>Mulan</i>	Love Goodness Strength	Strength Goodness	Performance	Strength Love Patriarchy	Patriarchy Performance Strength	Strength Performance
<i>Atlantis: The Lost Empire</i>	Motherhood Strength Goodness Love	Strength	Strength Beauty (Sexuality)	Patriarchy Love Strength	Patriarchy	Strength Performance
<i>Brave</i>	Strength Performance Love Goodness	Strength	Strength Performance	Love Strength Patriarchy	Performance Patriarchy Motherhood Strength	Strength Love Performance

## 1. Plot

The plot of the selected film reveals the story of the character and the messages that are important to be highlighted. Under the category of plot are seen the themes of marriage, motherhood, strength, goodness, love, and gender as a performance, are all present in their respective films and change over time.

Marriage and Love are prominent themes that run throughout the film's plotlines. Love has changed over time to include differing types including family such as between a daughter and her mother or father. The most prominent example being Snow White who dreams of a prince sweeping her away. In the end her dream comes true. Cinderella does not dream directly about a prince although it is implied. Her dream can assumedly be to get out of her current situation. She finds love at the ball and in the end at her wedding where her dream did come true. It is argued if love was her savior or simply the opportunity to escape her current life. Love would continue to be present in most films that would follow. Eilonwy and Taran, although young, are love interests who in the end share a sweet kiss.

Diversions about love start to divert as Mulan mostly avoids love, especially as she meets the matchmaker. Love is also not a focal point of the film. Mulan and Shang happen to like each other in the end. The roles in a relationship along gender lines also seem to blur. Mulan saves Shang instead of the other way around. This blurring of lines follows Kida and Milo as she is the stronger of the two lovers, physically. Yet the other aspect of love in *Mulan* is the idea of love of family. Her reason for fighting is for the love of her father. A similar theme to Mulan and her father follows between Merida and her mother. Merida herself does not, and is the first, to not have a love interest.

The other common theme under classic womanhood following marriage is motherhood. Snow White represents a mother-like figure to the dwarves. The scenes that most exemplify her being a mother-figure are when she cleans the dwarves' cottage and then later requires them to wash for the dinner that she made. Other films would have notions on motherhood but in a different sense. An example is Kida's mother sacrificing herself for the civilization of Atlantis. Disney's lack of mother figures has commonly been acknowledged. The loss leaves room for

other figures to step into the role that may not be so equipped such as the Evil Queen or Lady Tremaine.

All the stories of these young women include the concept of strength to never give up when things become difficult. The first example is Cinderella. She continues to wake up every day to get herself ready and then to serve breakfast and work around the house for her stepfamily. She never complains or gives up. She had been through a terrible loss of both her parents and yet she remains humble and kind even in the face of evil. In her choices to ask and then to go to the ball after how she is treated takes an expansive amount of strength. When the magic goes away after the chase, she remains grateful that she got to experience that one night. Further, in the end, she gives the duke her extra slipper even as Lady Tremaine attempts to stop her. Cinderella's feats of strength are sometimes subtle, yet they are undoubtedly there.

Later examples of strength would become less subtle through the stories of Eilonwy, Mulan, Kida, and Merida. Eilonwy has stayed determined as a prisoner of the Horned King, never giving up her spirit, especially when helping Taran to escape. Mulan's strength is most notably recognized through her continued battle with Shan Yu and the Hun Army. Her strength is especially noteworthy in the end as she chooses to warn the army of the Hun return and ends up defeating Shan Yu. Kida's strength is recognizable from her introduction as she leads the group who meets the expedition when they first arrive. Further in her physical strength as she battles the greedy explorers Rourke and Helga. Physical strength continues to emerge alongside other virtuous types continuing in the early 2010s with Merida. She is simply a girl with a bow who knows extremely well how to use it. Although a mistake in hindsight, Merida's meeting with the witch shows a strength in choosing one's own fate, a feat Snow White especially is not given.

Merida's character grows into her form of her mother as she speaks in front of the clans and then goes to save her mother.

As these young women are role models, their plots must uphold the theme of the "goodness" or moral upstanding of the characters and their stories. Cinderella is so "good" that she is granted a Fairy Godmother who makes her dream come true. The character's goodness stems from doing something selfless no matter the scale. Eilowny sews up Flam's pants. Mulan trains for war for her family and for her country. Kida is special in being the living heart of Atlantis. All the characters are good and special, a factor that does not appear to change over time.

Later films would start to discuss gender as a performance. Merida is an exemplification of this theme as her mother trains her how to be a princess and lady. There are a multitude of rules her mother insists upon for how Merida should act. A similar plot line follows in the beginning of Mulan as she attempts to follow the rules of how she should act with the Matchmaker.

The plots of these stories exemplify the messages that were wanting to come across to the audiences in their time. Some themes have remained the same while others have changed or been introduced later.

## 2. Description of Focal Character

How a character is described represents how the audience should see them and their attributes. The three main focuses of how a character is described are beauty, goodness, and strength. Beauty is central to especially the earlier films although under toned in later films. Snow White's most incredible quality is her beauty. She is described as a "Lovely little princess,"

“Fair maiden,” “So beautiful in death fashioned a coffin of glass” (*Snow White*). Snow White’s beauty is a focal point to her story. Later films would have passing comments such as “pretty lady” describing Eilowny as beauty lost its importance for other factors.

“Goodness” is of key importance to a character as they are innocent and upstanding. Cinderella, for example, is described as “gentle and kind and someday her dreams would come true” (*Cinderella*). Yet goodness can simply mean exceptional or real. Examples being that Eilowny is very well spoken yet also Mulan with her virtues must overcome her clumsiness. Exceptionalism is key to a description of a character.

They must also be understood to be exceptional in their strength. Strength can come in different forms such as strength in character. The concept of strength in a character’s description comes later. Eilowny is smart and sure of herself testing others. Mulan is also extremely strategic. Kida is knowledgeable of language and continuously curious. Merida is stubborn but she is also smart, skilled, adventurous, and yes, *Brave*.

### 3. Appearance of titular character

Appearance is important as it is how they appear to those in their world as well as to the audience, giving meaning as they change. Appearance is tied to themes of goodness, strength, beauty, and performance.

Goodness is found in the modesty especially of the earlier princesses. Snow White in either her “peasant dress” or her usual attire remains in a modest and simple dress. Cinderella’s goodness shines in her ball gown complete with glass slippers. The original design was more white than blue. Eilowny also is in a simple, modest, long-sleeve dress and her hair is simply down long. They are simple, innocent, modest young women.

Strength would shine through in varying forms. Cinderella, through her maid outfit as well as her mother's dress show how she continued to attempt to find joy even as she faced loss and was forced to work. Kida's strength appears in the end, especially in her Empress attire. Her attire requires respect in its regality. Merida finds strength in her freedom of her wily hair and basic long-sleeved and movable dress. Dress and appearance of a woman can draw respect and further show their strength in overcoming an obstacle.

Beauty must remain yet the concept has changed over time. Snow White's beauty comes from her simple purity of rosy cheeks, red lips, and "skin as white as snow." Contrasting Snow White is Kida who stands proudly throughout most of the film in a bikini and wrapped skirt with earrings and face paint. She is beautiful in her confidence and pride in her appearance. Kida's outfit represents a change in beauty to include sexuality as she no longer dresses as modestly as her predecessors.

Appearance is also imperative in understanding identity as the discussion of gender performance came to light. Mulan especially has a multitude of appearance changes. She wakes in her pajamas, changing into her normal basic outfit followed by traditional dress and then into the army uniform. Not only the outfits but her hair is significant as it changes in the film. Her hair is continuously up and down and cut to fit her current identity. She cuts her long hair off to become "Ping" yet then later wears it down in her basic dress in the final scenes. In those scenes with her short hair, she is then both masculine and feminine and her appearance throughout the film reflects her identity changes. Merida only maintains two costume changes, yet the same concepts remain. The most notable is when she is squeezed into a tight dress with her hair covered. She is then dressed as a young lady. Appearance and gender are a critical point in the discussion.

#### 4. Relationships to other characters

Relationships to other characters show how a character interacts with others in the world around them and thus adds to their characterizations. Goodness of characters shines through in their allies and enemies most especially in the common animal sidekicks of Disney Princesses. Snow White as well as Cinderella have animal allies in the woodland creatures in the former and the mice and birds in the latter. Snow White is also a contrast to the Evil Queen in every manner. Cinderella similarly foils the stepfamily in her actions. Even so, Cinderella especially, never once is cruel in return. Thus, she is gifted with the Fairy Godmother. Goodness also feeds into strength as Mulan also makes allies with Crickee, Mushu, her Horse, the men: Ling, Chien Po, and Yao, and the emperor. Her antagonists were Shan Yu and the Hun Army. She is the opposition to her antagonist in every manner. Similarly, is Kida with her allies of the Atlanteans and the Crew while facing her enemies of Helga and Rourke in their greed.

Disney has a fascination with the relationship of mothers and daughters especially when it is twisted. Snow White and Cinderella share in their evil stepmothers as opposed to Queen Elinor and Merida. This is a change in ideas over time or a maintenance of an old idea against stepmothers. Lady Tremaine is a decent mother to her own daughters, only pushing for the best for them yet stepping on Cinderella to do so. It is an interesting discussion that needs to be further conducted.

The idea of a patriarchal society is present throughout most of the films. In *Cinderella*, patriarchy is shown through role of having a King and Prince Charming who must marry an “eligible lady.” Mulan is faced with the antagonist views of a patriarchal society through the character of Chi Fu throughout the film. Kida does not fall under true patriarchy although her father is the king as she is set to take over the throne. Patriarchal views come from the explorers

when faced with her. Merida must push through the patriarchal tradition of the clans competing for her hand as well as watching her brother's autonomy to do as they wish. Patriarchy is an undertone in most films as the women attempt to fit into their roles in society.

The most prime example of relationships of the focal characters is through who they love. Love has been expanded to include not simply romantic love yet such as familial. Romantic Love interests include Snow White and Prince Florian, Cinderella, and Prince Charming, Eilonwy and Taran, Li Shang and Mulan, and Kida and Milo Thatch. Love is also present in familial relationships such as with Mulan and her father notably as well as Merida and her mother. Merida does not have a love interest the focus instead being on the other aspect.

#### 5. Gender Moments

These selected films highlight discussions and themes of gender through character's discussions on the subject. The patriarchy is an antagonist to the young women as they attempt to find their place in society. Old ideas such as with the king in Cinderella mention how a woman should "make a suitable mother...er...wife" (*Cinderella*). The women are constantly undervalued in comparison to the men around them. Someone describes Eilonwy as "silly girl even if she is a princess" (*Black Cauldron*). Patriarchy and a male-ordered society is most present in Mulan as she is told to be silent and mind her place. She is reminded to "do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence," "I know my place it is time you learn yours," and that she does not "belong here, go home" (*Mulan*). When she attempts to gain respect and be heard there are still naysayers. She complains that "No one will listen" as Mushu reminds her that: "You're a girl now, remember?" (*Mulan*). Even after saving China, Chi Fu stands that "that creature's not worth protecting" "She's a hero" "She's a woman she will never be worth anything" (*Mulan*). The explorers are surprised by Kida's actions, one even stating that



“someone needs to talk to that girl” (*Atlantis*). Merida complains about her own males in society and her roles as she says that “the princes get away with murder, I get away with nothing” and that “a princess just does what she’s told” (*Brave*).

The young women continue to reflect their strength against gender biases. Eilonwy when questioned “What does a girl know about swords” responds that “If it weren’t for this *girl*, you would still be in the dungeon” (*Black Cauldron*). Mulan further exemplifies strength in questioning when she was claimed ““King of the mountain, bravest of us all” that they “...trust Ping why is Mulan any different?” (*Mulan*). Kida stands up for her beliefs against her father in her speech that they “are not thriving, true, our people live, but our culture is dying. We are like a stone the ocean beats against. With each passing year a little more of us is worn away” (*Atlantis*). Strength is found in respect such as with Merida learning to fight which Fergus deems “essential” or her mother and later her walking through the clans. These moments of strength for the young women are important for discussions on gender.

When viewing these moments, it becomes clear that gender is a performance that has been laid out over the years. The most notable example of this is Mulan who questions traditional norms from the beginning. When she runs off her ancestors argue that “traditional values will disintegrate because your great-granddaughter had to be a cross-dresser!” (*Mulan*). Mulan uncovers what it means to be feminine through her journey through masculinity. There are many moments that “manliness” is drawn into question. Mushu complains that “Miss man decided to take her little drag show on the road” (*Mulan*). She attempts to fit in with them as she notes that “I see you have a sword they’re very manly and tough!” as Mushu instructs to “Show ‘em your manly walk” and she complains that “They’re disgusting” “No, they’re men and you’re gonna have to act just like them so pay attention” (*Mulan*). Mushu then describes her as “the

man...well sort of" (*Mulan*). Yet even as she files into masculinity, she maintains her "stupid girly habits" (*Mulan*). Mulan fluctuates between masculine and feminine, falling into both in these moments of performance.

Merida also maintains masculine traits such as strength in her moments that contrast her mother's desire for her to be a feminine lady and princess. Her mother's complaints ring out throughout the film. She complains that she was gifted a bow because "she's a lady" and "A lady shouldn't have weapons" (*Brave*). The rules and plan she must follow are suffocating as her mother deems that "You are a princess; I expect you to act like one" and lists out rules such as "A princess doesn't doddle" and "A princess doesn't chortle" (*Brave*). Merida ultimately complains that because she is the princess "Everything is planned out until I become well my mother" (*Brave*). Both instances call gender into question as a performance.

## 6. Important Quotes and Lyrics

The quotes and lyrics show the characters and those that surround them in their thoughts, commentary, and reactions to what occurs around them. The theme of marriage and love is present as the desire to be saved by a prince and married slowly fades. Snow White dreams of the prince as the narrator describes that she is "wishing for her love to find her" and she sings in her ballad that "someday my prince will come, and wedding bells will ring" (*Snow White*). The dream of marriage continues as Snow White takes place of the housekeeper of the dwarves and makes comments that "Maybe they have no mother," "I'll cook," and tells them that "You must wash," and "Time for bed" (*Snow White*). Cinderella falls into love in her song "So this is love." The duke reacts to the mission of the shoe by complaining that "this shoe could fit any number of women...that's his problem" (*Cinderella*). The conclusion being that the prince must marry no matter who they find fits the shoe. Marriage and love start to become separated then as it

becomes a duty to the King and Duke. Ideas against marriage are also found in *Brave* as Merida's mother states that "it's marriage it's not the end of the world" (*Brave*).

Goodness is found especially in the innocence of the earlier classic princesses. Snow White is pure and is upset when she makes a dent in her environment. She proclaims, "the fuss I've made" (*Snow White*) when arriving at the dwarves' cottage. Yet she is innocent and girlish as she declares it is "just like a doll's house" (*Snow White*). Her goodness only continues as she is seen praying for the dwarves in gratitude as she prays to "bless the seven little men that have taken me in and please make my dreams come true"[and] "Please make grumpy like me" (*Snow White*). In contrast to her stepsister's horrid performance, Cinderella sings "Swing Sweet Nightingale" as she cleans the floor on her hands and knees. Her goodness in this moment is overpowering.

The strength of character is represented through their lyrics and quotes. Cinderella states that "they can't order me to stop dreaming" (*Cinderella*). She keeps up her might until her stepsisters ruin her dress and she claims that "There's nothing to believe in" (*Cinderella*) before Fairy Godmother's "Bippity boppity boo." Eilonwy continues to uphold strength as she asks Taran "Lord or warrior" "pig keeper" "what a pity I wanted someone to help me escape... You can come with me if you want" (*Black Cauldron*). She is sure of herself and questions others. When she believes in someone, she uplifts them. She asks Taran "Are you alright...well come on then" and later tells him that "You must believe in yourself- I believe in you" (*Black Cauldron*). Mulan's strength is most prominent in her words in "Make a Man out of You" as she is hit with the question of "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons" and a reminder to "Be a man!" (*Mulan*). Yet throughout the montage as she starts at the bottom, she works her way up. Merida finds her strength in her determination for her own freedom. The opening soundtrack

introducing that she will “ride, I will fly taste the wind and touch the sky” (*Brave*). She fights that “I want my freedom,” that she is “shooting for me own hand,” and to ““Break tradition” (*Brave*). All these women in their words find strength reflected.

Their words reflect the performance of gender, especially Mulan, which is most reflected in the film’s soundtrack. In the song “Honor to Us All,” honor is brought by striking a match, good breeding, and having tiny waist and a girl brings honor by baring sons. She must be a “perfect porcelain doll” (*Mulan*). In the scene with the matchmaker that follows she is noted to be too skinny to be good for baring sons, she is reminded that to please future in-laws to be silent and have poise, and she is claimed to be a disgrace who “looks like a bride but will never bring her family honor” (*Mulan*). The opening has left Mulan wondering what her identity and role should be as sung in her ballad “Reflection” where she asks if she should be a perfect bride or daughter. Later the opposing perspective of the men is revealed through the song “Girl Worth Fighting For.” They want a girl who is: paler than the moon, marvel at my strength, what she cooks like, and think they have no faults. When Mulan interjects about a girl who has “a brain and always speaks her mind” they all disagree. Chi Fu is made fun of as well where Yao says the “only girl who’d love him is his mother” (*Mulan*). The words and especially lyrics of the film question what men and women want and the believed roles by a society.

### 3. Discussion

The research question being asked is: *how have gender roles changed over time as represented through their portrayal in Disney Princess films?* The results of the study prove that gender roles have followed the patterns of feminist wave theory with changes in beliefs and rights over time. Each wave comes with its own themes that are seen represented through the princess films.

Snow White proves the post-wave movement of putting women and girls back into the domestic sphere. Her beliefs centered around beliefs of love, marriage, and motherhood. Her successor, Cinderella, would come to reflect women's beliefs of post-WWII as it inched towards the second wave. As supported by the current study's results, she maintains a connection to domesticity and love, yet strength begins to make an appearance. My results, however, dispute the fact of Cinderella lacking strength. As women were doing on the domestic front, they had to save themselves. It can be argued that Cinderella does this throughout the film even as far as to say she saved herself in the end. This study's results on Eilowny expand on research on her character. Scholars had claimed that she was the start of a transformation, yet I delved deeper to look at her various aspects. She does represent a feminist fight for equality of the period.

Gender roles would continue to change as exemplified by Mulan and the aspects of her film. Unlike her predecessors she lacks a focus on love in her film. Further, this study's results matched those of prior research (Forman-Brunell et al.) as the third wave of Feminism's ideals of gender as a concept and performance began to rise. It was seen how Mulan herself is never fully masculine or feminine throughout the film. Feminism found an acceptance of women in themselves even as it did not fit in the traditional norms. I found that Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* would continue to expand on the concept of womanhood through her strength and sexuality of beauty. When reaching 2012, Merida outright disregards and questions the traditional gender norms choosing instead to be her own person. She has moved so far from the original princesses as to not even include a love interest choosing instead for herself. These three films follow the ideas and arc of the third wave of Feminism.

Gender roles are seen to be shifting to follow the pattern of feminist wave theory and the shift is portrayed through Disney Princess films. Prior research (Dobson; Forman-Brunell et al.;

Rahiman) had started to formulate discussion on the topic. The conclusion to the research question is that gender roles have followed the flow and pattern of feminist wave theory. Disney Princess films through their aspects portray the changes of these beliefs over the last century through incorporating the different themes of the periods.

### *Chapter 5: Conclusion*

This study finds that women's gender roles have changed over time following the waves of feminist theory as are represented through Disney Princess films. The goal of the project is to examine how female characters have been portrayed in Disney Princess films over the last century and find thematic connections as to how they were portrayed. Further the project contextualizes the selected films to their eras to attempt to view emerging patterns. Emerging themes are marriage and love, motherhood, beauty and sexuality, goodness, patriarchy, strength, and performance. The themes that appear and emerge follow the movements of Feminism and its waves. Further connections are found between how the characters are portrayed and the values of their time.

Films are selected starting with medium as all were animated films. Next, representation is chosen from each "Disney Era." There are seven eras in total yet only six are chosen due to a lack of any major female characters during the WWI period. Princesses are chosen by status preferences in order of official princesses, unofficial, and if needed honorary. Final decisions are made due to prior research, estimation of content and relativity, and diversity of their stories.

Research is conducted in two phases: the first being a "pre-viewing" stage gathering information followed by the second actual "viewing" stage. The first gathered basic background information on each film and character. Following this phase, categories are narrowed down to keep track of during the film's viewings. The categories are plot, description of the focal character, discussions on gender, relationships to other characters, appearance(s) of the titular character, and important quotes and lyrics. Films are watched in chronological order to see any changes occurring over time.

The project's results show that the films, in viewing the outcomes of their themes, follow the historical movements and ideals of feminist wave theory. In connecting to the categories, themes emerge representing the feminist movements of the periods. Themes that emerged included marriage and love, motherhood, beauty, goodness, patriarchy, strength, and performance. The shifting of these themes and emergence of some overtime exemplifies the changes in portrayals and roles over the last century. Those changes follow the pattern of the first, second, and third feminist waves.

Disney Princess films exemplify the feminist movements and the ideals of the time. This implies that media, even children in an animated medium, are reflections of the current context. They are products of their time. As such, especially with children's media teaches lessons and morals towards young children especially young girls. Their lessons are everlasting.

Especially in terms of women's media, it proves how they should be, act, and believe in terms of their gender. As they continue to shift, some ideas may become outdated, such as Snow White's goal of marriage and motherhood. Yet it is not forgotten as young girls still dream of their prince charming. Now they simply have the decision to find their own path and make their own decisions. As women's views change so will the lessons, they build upon to instruct their children. This study implies that changes due occur over time and are reflected in what is seen by children and young girls especially. Decisions being made could have impacts on future generations.

Future studies can be found especially in research of newer films as they emerge into this new fourth wave of Feminism with discussions on aggressions and body images and how they relate to previously revealed themes. . Films of this new period so far are: *Frozen* (2013),



*Moana* (2016), *Frozen II* (2019), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Further research would need to be done on films in the current fourth wave of Feminism including

How the new ideals are reflected would continue the discussion on the impact of these films on young girls and women. Further, the impacts of these films on young women and their choices would also shine light on the importance in looking into children's media especially for young girls. There is much room to open the discussion as women, gender, and sexuality studies continue to research the waves of Feminism. This is simply opening a new door towards children and the media in general.

*Notes*

1. The idea of female oppression, especially of matchmaking, was not historically accurate (Forman-Brunell and Hains 212). Others view it in the opposite way as the story is one where “it’s the girl who does the rescuing, saving not only the prince but the emperor himself from oblivion, and this in a culture where women were expected to obey strictly prescribed rules” (Rahiman 121).

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