

***From Snow White to Moana: How Disney's Leading Ladies
Became More Than Just a Pretty Face***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

Caitlyn Hays

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Laurie Lindberg

**Ball State University
Muncie, IN**

April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2019

Abstract

Society has a large impact on media, whether it be fashion, activities, or even portrayal of fictional characters. In the first Walt Disney Company princess movies, the princesses were seen as servants and had very little control over their own destinies. They were damsels in distress waiting for their prince charming to save them, much as how real life was at that time. Once the second wave of feminism happened, women gained more rights and had more control over their own lives. This was reflected in the next set of Disney movies as the leading ladies started out rebellious and made their own decisions, most of the time against the will of their fathers. However, in the end, they were married and in what many thought to be their proper place, which was next to a man. The third wave of feminism led to even more freedom for women and the most gender equality in America yet. The princesses of this time were completely in charge of their own destinies. Some of these movies did not feature any romance at all and the princesses were even the ones to save the day, not the prince. As society impacted the media, the media impacted society. Young girls see these characters in their favorite Disney movies and want to be just like them. This can lead to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and the belief in how they should act, but also to the breaking of these negative gender stereotypes. Overall, images of women have become more positive as the movies begin to feature strong female leads. However, aspects of gender stereotypes still remain, and it will take more major changes in societal norms before these are gone forever.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Laurie Lindberg for advising me through this project. Without her, I would not have finished this project on time.

I would also like to thank my roommate, Chelsea, for forcing me to work on this project when I had no motivation to.

Process Analysis Statement

Writing this thesis tested my ability to stay focused on one project over the course of the entire semester. I am used to having multiple smaller projects in a class that offer a sense of variety. However, I found the writing process easier by breaking my paper up into three sections and treating each one as an individual paper. I focused on writing one section at a time instead of writing it all at once. This helped make the process seem less daunting, as three shorter papers are more manageable than one longer paper. I would not suggest having a section due right after spring break, or any long break, as it is very hard to find the motivation to write a paper on vacation.

The topic of Disney Princesses was chosen because I did not want to write a scientific paper. I am in three science classes this semester and have written many research papers throughout the past few semesters, so I wanted to write about something a little different. I am also a big fan of Disney and knew that this topic would give me the opportunity to learn more about the movies. I knew there had been progression from the first movie released to the most recent one, but I did not know about all of the differences and how the changes correlated to real life. I was very interested in how the Feminist Movement and each individual wave influenced the movies and the portrayal of women. When I had my first thesis meeting, I did not know exactly what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted it to relate to Disney. Dr. Lang came up with a list of possible topics and I combined some of them into the final idea, which is the evolution of Disney's leading ladies.

I started this process by doing some research on the movies to figure out how I could divide the movies in to several categories and see how the evolution occurred. The movies in the first section, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, were easy to

connect because they all feature the same themes and there was a large break in years between movies. For the next section, I had multiple movies to choose between and had to decide how to choose the movies. Through my preliminary research, I realized *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Mulan* would connect well together as they all featured a rebellious leading lady who defied her father or societal standards, or both. The other movies, though still relevant, did not fit into what I wanted to discuss in this paper. In order to cut off this time period, I looked into how other researchers have categorized the movies and used personal opinion to decide that *Tangled*, though it would not be discussed, would be the last movie in the time period. There was not a large gap in years as there was between the first two periods, but many researchers agreed that *Tangled* was the end of the time period and I could see a shift in themes between that and *Brave*. For the final period, I chose *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* as I have not seen any movie released after these and I knew these three movies had similar themes. *Moana* was the most challenging movie to research and write about, as it is so new. There are very few sources discussing the movie, so I had to rely on other people's interpretations as well as my own.

Once I started my actual research, I tried to find at least one article specifically discussing each movie I was talking about, if not more. I also looked for articles about what each time period was like in America and how women were treated and viewed, as I wanted to tie in the influence of real life on the movies and vice versa. I also researched each wave of feminism and the basics of what constituted them. This allowed me to see how each wave and each time period discussed correlated. I ended up with a lot of articles I did not use as many of them repeated the same ideas or only talked about movies I was not using in this paper. I also continued finding some articles as I wrote because I felt something I was saying needed support. Originally, I only tried to find scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. However, Disney movies are a part of popular

culture, so I realized I could use other people's viewpoints to further support my idea. The combination of the types of sources helped support the idea that many people believe the portrayal of women in the original movies is outdated and that the progression is real. Using the non-academic sources showed that not just critics had these ideas.

The hardest part of this paper was finishing it. In the beginning, I was excited to get started and learn more about Disney and the evolution of the leading ladies. I had no problem sitting down and writing about a princess a day in the first section. This became a little more challenging in the middle section and by the end, I had to force myself to sit down and at least write something about one of the princesses each day. I'm going to attribute this to the fact that the weather started to get warmer and the semester was almost over, so my motivation was at a low. However, I got it done. Another challenging part was deciding how to talk about the movies in the last section as there are many positive reviews but also many negative reviews about each of them. I decided to talk about both in order to show that the Walt Disney Company still stereotypes its most recent princesses and it will be a while before any movie is completely free of stereotypes. Another aspect I struggled with was writing this process analysis statement. I had already finished my actual paper, so I wanted to turn it in and be done with it. However, the process analysis is an important part of the thesis as it is an inside look of sorts as to how I completed this project.

In my title, I decided to use the term "leading ladies" instead of princesses because not all of the lead females are considered princesses in the beginning. Most of those that are not do become princesses by the end, but Mulan is the exception. I felt leading ladies was a better term as it did not exclude any of the characters I was discussing, but it still got the point across. During this process, I learned that procrastination is not my friend as it makes me very stressed

out and it is harder for me to get work done. I procrastinated on my second section as I was on vacation and did not want to do any homework. The second section of my thesis was due the week we came back from break, so I struggled to finish it. I had to put off assignments in other classes in order to get it done. I also learned that I do not know as much about each movie as I thought I did. I had to rely on plot summaries for a lot of the movies to make sure I was analyzing in chronological order. Because of this, I learned a lot about the movies I used in this paper, such as how many producers used male sidekicks, often small animals, to undermine the success of the female characters.

With the completion of this paper, I hope to accomplish the goal of beginning to educate others on how movies have evolved along with society, though there are still some aspects that lag behind. This will hopefully lead to further research and learning by the reader about Disney and gender roles, which will continue the evolution. This is important because it shows the influence of society on media, and the same can be said for how media influences society. Hopefully, people will realize that they can spark change and defy gender stereotypes, much like the later princesses. The evolution will only continue if people stand up for what they believe in and fight for what is right. One day, Disney movies will be free of all types of stereotypes, but it will be because of future leaders that fight for progress.

Introduction

In all aspects of society, gender stereotypes are present. Many forms of media, whether it be television shows, movies, or even the radio, help express and develop these stereotypes. While some producers do try to keep up with changing times in regard to gender equality and breaking stereotypes, many still fall behind. Even when movies appear to break through gender stereotypes at the beginning, it is usually not the case for the whole duration. The movie ends with a "happily ever after" and the woman choosing marriage over anything else. Real life *does* have an influence on what is portrayed in the media, but accuracy and being up to date are not always guaranteed. Also, media portrayals of gender can greatly influence the real world, especially young, impressionable children. For example, children often purchase dolls and other material goods relating to their favorite characters in princess movies by the Walt Disney Company. They act out scenes and, in turn, become the character. By doing this, they are inadvertently practicing stereotyped gender roles and seeing how they should fit into society. When girls learn from a young age that they should be like Cinderella, a damsel in distress waiting for her prince to save her, they are going to mimic that behavior. However, when girls imitate another princess, like Anna or Moana, they learn that they can be strong and save the world without a man.

Between the first Disney princess movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the most recent, *Moana*, the Walt Disney Company has made great strides in how they present their lead female characters. Snow White is portrayed as a helpless servant while Moana plays the part of heroine, following her heart and saving her people. At the same time, American society has dramatically shifted to a more gender balanced mindset, with changes coming with each wave of feminism. The Walt Disney Company has taken steps forward to keep viewers interested in their

films and to continue making a profit from the princesses. They have followed shifts in society in how women are portrayed and treated, and this is reflected in their movies. Each time period discussed shows how society has influenced the movies in order to make the princesses more relatable to everyday life. The saying about bad habits being hard to break is still true, though, as even the most recent movies still feature some form of gender stereotypes. While the Walt Disney Company has acted on societal cues and made their leading ladies much more than just a pretty face, they still have a way to go before their movies are free of gender stereotypes.

The Classical Period: 1930's-1950's

In the 1930's, many women were homemakers and that was believed to be their designated role in life. Men were the breadwinners of the family while women stayed home to tend to the children and the housekeeping duties. Stephanie Coontz, author of "Why Gender Equality Stalled," describes this period as "a time when women were confined to the stereotype of homemaker, with only 39 percent of American women working [outside of the home] by the end of this period" (23). This norm changed once World War II began and many women had to work outside of the home in the roles once filled by their husbands. These were temporary jobs and, in Joyce Bryant's article "How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States," it is explained that "when the war was over, the women were supposed to give the jobs right back" (5). Women had to fill the roles men left behind but were also expected to return to their domestic roles once that need was gone. They were seen as unable to handle a "man's job" and were once again restricted to a life of house work and child care. Aspects of real life often make their way into the media and vice versa. In a society dominated by men, women in Disney's movies were portrayed as domesticated, thus affirming the gender roles of the time.

Snow White

Many of the princess stories we know come from fairytales created by the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault. The Walt Disney Company took these stories and modified them to be more “kid friendly” and have happy endings, as the original fairytales often ended in pain or death and could be gruesome. In an article titled “Diswomen Strike Back? The Evolution of Disney's Femmes in the 1990's,” Libe García Zarranz explains some of the similarities between the original and the Disney versions. Zarranz says, “the house for Grimms and Disney was the place where good girls remained, and one shared aspect of the fairy tale and the film is about the domestication of women” (Zarranz 55). While the ending may have been changed to get that “happily ever after,” the idea that women belonged in the house remained. In the article “From Snow White to Pitch Black: Gender and Racial Stereotyping of the Disney Princess,” Lianne Blankestijn gives the basics of the plot of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, released in 1937, and how it was modified from the Grimm Brothers' original version *Sneewittchen*. The Grimm Brothers' version involves a very young girl who was supposed to be murdered but is spared and ends up seeking refuge with dwarves. In the beginning of the story, the princess is only seven. It is unknown how much time passed before marriage, but young brides were customary and the norm in the 19th century in Europe (Blankestijn 19). This same plot is followed in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* except the princess is older than seven and made to appear more American, to appeal to American audiences, as the original setting of the story was in a different country. Both the Grimm Brothers and the Walt Disney productions follow the same overall plot; however, Disney added characteristics to magnify the society of this time, especially ideas about gender roles.

When Snow White first appears in Disney's movie, she is seen scrubbing the castle steps. Although she is a princess, she is dressed in rags and relegated to servanthood by her step-mother. Snow White is seen as meek, dependent, submissive, and weak, portraying feminine traits that were considered to be characteristic of women during this time period (Blankestijn 20). Snow White also has no plans to change her situation and is simply waiting for her prince to save her and then marry her. In the Grimm Brothers' version, this image of weakness is not there. It is speculated that Walt Disney added this theme to further magnify the stereotype of women being homemakers while men are the breadwinners (Blankestijn 20-21). To continue the plot, Snow White's stepmother hires someone to kill her. However, the man cannot go through with the act and urges Snow White to run away. This is how she ends up in a cottage owned by seven male dwarfs.

As soon as Snow White gets to the cottage, she takes control of the domestic tasks and plays mother. The gender stereotypes and expectations of this time period are very obvious when Snow White says a mother is expected to clean the house and concludes that the dwarfs have no mother based on the dirtiness and state of their cottage (Blankestijn 21). Even when Snow White escapes from the clutches of her evil step mother, she cannot leave her domesticated life behind. Disney had the chance to give her a fresh start. Instead, he followed the stereotypes of that time and further domesticated her. To further add to dependency, the dwarfs offer protection to Snow White, since she has proven and will prove that she is not capable of protecting herself. Jen Bethmann, author of "The Disney Princess Sidekicks: Men Still Necessary to the Disney Princess Narrative," makes the claim that male sidekicks "diminish the power of the Disney Princess and reaffirm the stereotypical feminine and masculine identities" (Bethmann 6). The

dwarfs are small, much smaller than Snow White, yet they are supposed to protect her and be seen as strong and masculine while Snow White is weak and feminine.

In the end, Snow White achieves her happily-ever-after with her prince charming. She spends the whole movie dreaming of him and knowing he will come to whisk her off to the rest of their lives. The entire plot of Snow White can be summarized in two sentences from Gillain Youngs' "The Ghost of Snow White." She says, "Snow White is everything a good girl and homemaker should be and in the end she gets her man. The major scenes of her story are set in intimate domesticated settings" (Youngs 311). Snow White has no desire for adventure and instead spends her time safely inside the cottage playing housewife, affirming the stereotypical attitudes toward gender roles of this time. Since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first ever princess movie created by Walt Disney, it set the expectation for Disney movies to come. The other two princesses making up the classical period follow this same idea of domesticity and marriage defining a woman.

Cinderella

With *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* being such a success, Walt Disney decided to produce another princess movie. *Cinderella* was released in 1950 and although many versions have been released since then, the original production follows the same gender ideas of this time period. Linda Parsons analyzed four different versions of *Cinderella* in her article "Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories and the Construction of Gender-Appropriate Behavior" and was able to make claims about the original version. She says, "Fairy tales in the patriarchal tradition portray women as weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing while men are powerful, active, and dominant" (Parsons 137). This theme is seen in many animated tales of this time, not

just Disney's versions. However, The Walt Disney Company was, and still is, very popular so they have the enormous ability to reach audiences all over the world, influencing how people think about gender stereotypes.

Much like Snow White, Cinderella is subject to her evil step-mother's wrath. However, Cinderella also has two step-sisters to deal with and they do everything they can to make her life miserable. Throughout the film, Cinderella can be seen in rags cleaning the house and doing whatever odd jobs her step-mother demands of her. She has been made into a household servant, and, at this point, has no chance at a happily ever after. While Cinderella may occasionally despise her step-mother and the life she is forced to live, she does her work with songs on her lips. Sam Higgs, author of "Damsels in Development: Representation, Transition, and the Disney Princess," explains this. He says, "Cinderella is forced into a life of servitude by her evil step-mother, Lady Tremaine, but when we see her scrubbing the floors, she does so while singing about nightingales. In a dreamlike state, she floats around in multicolored bubbles to an orchestral score" (Higgs 62). Cinderella has accepted what her life has become and is content with her role as a domesticated servant .

When the royal ball comes around and Cinderella's step-sisters are allowed to attend, she does feel a tinge of jealousy. Since Cinderella is not able to do anything to help herself, her fairy godmother must swoop in to save the day. (In the original Grimm Brothers' version, it was Cinderella's deceased mother that saved her.) Much like the male sidekicks of Snow White, this fairy godmother makes Cinderella appear weak. However, while the male sidekicks are there for protection, the female sidekicks are mainly there for physical beauty enhancement. While the fairy godmother does help Cinderella break away from a life of servitude, this is not her only concern. It could even be said that the fairy godmother is "more concerned with maintaining or

enhancing Cinderella's feminine beauty and appeal than her safety and well-fare" (Bethmann 11).

The idea that the only value a woman can have comes from her beauty is very prevalent.

Cinderella could not possibly woo Prince Charming with her personality alone and must be made into a beauty queen. The idea of beauty being the most important trait of a woman was a societal standard at the time of this film release, and it was very prevalent in Disney princess films.

In the end of the film, every available maiden is seen trying to fit into the lost glass slipper in order to marry the prince. Much like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* is based on a Grimm Brothers' fairy tale. However, the earlier version features the step-sisters mutilating their feet in order to fit into the glass slipper. Disney omits this part in order for the movie to be family friendly, but it still conveys the message that marriage is the ultimate goal for women and they will do anything to achieve that. With the finale of Cinderella marrying her prince, she has achieved her happily ever after and what she was destined to do. It can even be said that "in many traditional tales, being rewarded with the prince and the security of marriage is the result of the heroine's submission and suffering, along with her beauty, rather than her agency" (Parsons 137). In order to win the prince, Cinderella had to be submissive to her step-mother and suffer through whatever she was ordered to do.

Cinderella is seen as one of the most iconic princesses, even having her own castle at Walt Disney World. Because of her popularity, many young girls want to be like Cinderella and are waiting for their prince charming to swoop in and save them from their circumstances. While this could be positive, if they are in a bad situation and need something to hold on to since the movies can offer hope and a better tomorrow, it can also be negative. Little girls may start to think that they need to look a certain way to win a husband and that all that matters is their beauty. Even though Walt Disney was just conforming to the cultural norms of the day, the

results of this decision are still dominant today, as the Disney influence continues to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Aurora

The next princess movie by the Walt Disney Company was released in 1959 and was titled *Sleeping Beauty*. This title alone, specifically the word “beauty,” shows that the movie will be consistent with the gender stereotypes and the ideas surrounding the previous two princess movies, as well as the time period. Half of the title is about the physical beauty of Princess Aurora, so a significant portion of the movie will also revolve around her beauty. The sleeping part of the title also indicates a characteristic of this princess, as sleeping is a passive activity and the princesses are all very passive. *Sleeping Beauty* follows much of the same plot as the previous two movies. In this movie, Aurora, which is the name given to her by Disney to further place importance on her beauty, has three fairy godmothers who attempt to protect her from the evil witch Maleficent. They remove her as a baby from her normal life and hide her in hopes of preventing the deadly curse Maleficent has laid on her. The idea of female villains follows another prominent thought from society that is carried over into this time period as well. The independent women of these Disney movies are often seen as villains. The first two princess movies depict an evil step-mother while *Sleeping Beauty* depicts an evil female witch. This is because many people had the belief that “the woman who can make her own decision without a man is reckless, uncontrollable, and evil” (Higgs 63). This furthered the stereotype that the ideal woman was weak and submissive and had to rely on a man for any decisions.

When Aurora turns 16 and returns to her family's castle, Maleficent is able to make her curse come true, at least partially. One of the fairy godmothers protected Aurora, so she just

entered a coma instead of dying. A true love's kiss must awaken her. Aurora has met her betrothed only once before and by accident, and neither knows the identity of the other, so it is really a stranger who must kiss Aurora. After being captured by Maleficent, Prince Phillip is freed and kisses Aurora to free her from the curse. Just as is true in the previous two princess movies, the prince swoops in to save the day and rescue the princess. The princess cannot save herself and is completely helpless without the prince and her fairy godmothers. Aurora, along with the other two princesses of this time, helps affirm the gendered stereotypes of this time period and the success of these films reinforces these stereotypes across the globe, even to this day.

Classical Princesses in real life

Television and other forms of media have a significant influence on how people think and act. In the article "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princess," the authors state that "gender role portrayals present in the films may influence children's beliefs and ideas about gender" adding that "television has been identified as a dominant source of social influence on children's gender concepts" (England, et.al. 556). We can easily see how the gendered stereotyping of the Disney princesses can impact young girls. They see their favorite characters portrayed as helpless, just waiting for their princes to save them, and that is how they think it should be in real life. Another analyst of Disney, Dr. Henry Giroux, says in his article "Animating Youth: the Disnification of Children's Culture" that "these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (Giroux 25). While children learn by being taught, they also learn by doing, and Disney motivates children to imitate

their favorite characters. By doing this, they are learning stereotypical gender roles and will often incorporate these ideas into their own lives.

During the years when women were considered homemakers and men the breadwinners, Disney's princess movies affirmed that this is the proper way to live. The women, especially impressionable girls, of this time period did not have the opportunity to see the princess being the heroine saving the day while the prince sat on the sidelines or even at home. Instead, they saw what was happening in their own houses, which just made the movies more powerful. In addition, the three princess movies of this classical time period still affect children in today's society. Many girls still adore Cinderella and want to be just like her, expecting life to be like the movie and waiting for their prince charming to come save them. It will also lead to thoughts about how others should act and be treated. If young girls do watch these original Walt Disney princess movies, they need to be taught that they have the same opportunities as boys and do not have to be relegated to the role of housemaker unless that is what they want.

There are many articles explaining how Walt Disney drew from his surroundings. Dr. Mahmoud Itmeizeh states in his article "The Evolution of Gender Roles and Women's Linguistic Features in the Language of Disney," that men usually created the characters in Disney's movies, as almost all of the animators and producers during this time were men. He says, "Their interpretation was based on the patriarchal society that they lived in" (Itmeizeh 31). So, since men of this time created the plots, they would not have given women much power as the expectation was for women to be weak and the men saw no problem with this. In many of the Disney princess movies, especially the first three, strong gender stereotypes are obvious with both genders. The men are usually overtly masculine and must protect the women while the ladies are meek and place more importance on their beauty than anything else. For example, in

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the huntsman is seen hunting and doing other manly activities that women would not be doing during this time. Another example is Prince Phillip in *Sleeping Beauty* when he must slay the dragon to save his princess. Just as the female follow strong gender stereotypes, the male characters do not differ from the societal norms.

The Renaissance Period: 1989-2000's

The ending of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century bring about a new wave of feminism. This second wave of feminism focused on women's sexuality and their experience in work and family life. Juliana Garabedian, author of "Animating Gender Roles: How Disney is Redefining the Modern Princess," summarizes this time period by stating, "The primary concerns of this time period were documenting sexism in private as well as public life and delivering a criticism of gendered patterns of socialization" (Garabedian 23). The idea of women having sexual freedom slowly makes its way into Disney's princess movies during this time period, though not much is shown in the movies and princesses chosen. However, the princesses in this period do have more of a say in whom they marry, showing some sexual liberation. Also, the movies do show a change in gender perception and how female characters are treated and viewed. Garabedian comments that these patterns of the second wave of feminism center on "a female protagonist experiencing the need to be free of societal bonds. In the end, however, her happily ever after depends on her return to the role expected of women, be it docile princess or subservient wife" (Garabedian 23). The princesses in this time period start off more rebellious than their ancestors but ultimately experience the same happy ending made possible by a man. This shows that the Walt Disney Company was taking steps to keep up with the changing times, though they were still falling behind.

Another important aspect of this time period is that these princess movies come after a pause when no princess movies were made. During this break, the women in the United States were able to remember what working was like and they could no longer relate to a princess movie where the main character stayed at home and cleaned all day. In her article "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," Cassandra Stover explains this phenomenon by saying how many women were leading the war effort at home while also still performing motherly duties such as taking care of the children and home. Because of their own activities, few of these women "would easily or readily identify with the passive damsel awaiting her prince" (Stover 2). Walt Disney knew something had to change if he wanted to keep his large audience, so he began changing his princesses to match the changing times. Women were no longer all housewives. Many had jobs outside of the home and had to take on the roles of both parents during the war. By the time these new movies were released, "Disney no longer portrayed the princesses doing domestic work, though domestic work was very apparent in the films" (England, et.al. 563). There would be no more Cinderella's scrubbing the castle stairs or Snow White's taking refuge with dwarfs while doing all of their housework for them. Walt Disney was not oblivious to the changing times, and he allowed the changes to be reflected in the princess movies released during this second time period. However, the princesses still had a way to go before they were completely caught up with the modern world.

Ariel

The first movie in this time period, *The Little Mermaid*, was released in 1989. Unlike the first three movies that were renditions of the Grimm Brother's fairytales, *The Little Mermaid* was loosely based on a tale by Hans Christian Andersen. This movie features a mermaid named Ariel

who has thousands of tiny trinkets and odd belongings that have come from the world above, but she longs for more. She wants to be part of the human world. This is a big change from the first set of princess movies, as those princesses are often content with their circumstances and have no wish to change. Ariel wants something more than the life she has been given. A characteristic of the princesses in this time period is that these “new heroines are more rebellious than the old passive heroines, and they also reject social roles instead of accepting them” (Itmeizeh 31). Ariel displays this rebellious streak when she visits the surface of the sea, an act forbidden by her father, King Triton. On one of these visits, Ariel ends up saving a character named Prince Eric, and she falls in love with him. In Andersen's version, the mermaid makes a deal with the sea witch in which she exchanges her voice, by allowing the witch to cut out her tongue, for a pair of human legs in order to be with Prince Eric. However, since she cannot talk, the prince mistakes a neighboring town's princess for his savior and marries her instead. In Disney's version, Ariel also makes a deal with the sea witch Ursula to have human legs for three days in order to woo Prince Eric. Part of the deal is that Ariel must receive a kiss of true love or she will transform back into a mermaid. This part of the plot is very similar to that of Cinderella, in which the princess must transform herself to win over the prince and she is given a time limit to do so before she must return to her real life. This plot point shows that Disney has not changed very much in terms of how the female characters view marriage as the ultimate goal.

Just like in Andersen's original version, Ariel has to give up her voice as payment for the legs. Unlike in Andersen's story, Ursula takes advantage of this situation, and transforms herself into a pretty young girl, goes to the surface, and convinces Prince Eric that it was she who had saved him. After the three days, the true love's kiss has not happened, and Ariel is transformed back into a mermaid while Ursula's disguise is revealed, and Ursula captures Ariel. In an attempt

to free his daughter, King Triton sacrifices himself, showing that males are still necessary, and the princesses can still be seen as damsels in distress even in this new era. Ursula is able to take King Triton's powers but just as she is about to destroy Ariel, Prince Eric drives a ship through her and kills her. This is another instance where the prince saves the day while the princess watches from the sidelines. The story ends much like any other Disney story, with Ariel becoming human with her father's blessings and marrying Eric. While Ariel initially seems to have some freedom, that all changes at the end. In the article "The Trident and the Fork: Disney's 'The Little Mermaid' as a male construction of an Electral fantasy," written by Lauren and Alan Dundes, the two explain how *The Little Mermaid* has received strong criticism from many feminists. Some have said that Ariel is "initially controlled by her father Triton, the king of the sea, who eventually hands her over to her husband Prince Eric. Never really free, Ariel is allowed only to transfer her allegiance and abode from one male to another" (Dundes, Dundes 4). Ariel does have more freedom than the classical princesses, for she chooses to bargain with the sea witch and take action to acquire what she longs for. But she is still subject to the rule of the male in her life and ultimately cannot make her own decisions.

The marriage scene between Ariel and Prince Eric reinforces what is still expected of women. An ending without a marriage would show that women can be independent and do not need to rely on a man for their happiness. However, the wedding scene shows that they can have their wild and free, rebellious years, but they are still expected to settle down and get married. No matter how the movie began, "The princess always won the love of the prince by the end of the Disney Princess films, and this portrayal of romance provides a strongly gendered message" (England, et.al. 565). When viewers are watching this movie, they see that marriage should be the main goal of women's lives as they become adults. Endings like this also provide the child

with “consistent exposure to the social script that one falls in love either very quickly, at first sight, against all odds, or both” (England, et.al. 565). The princesses once again revert to the feminine figures they were in the classical period, relegated to waiting for their happily ever after with the prince. Stover, in her article, summarizes how Disney used post-feminist ideas in the princess movies. Post-feminism is often defined as the period in between waves of feminism where critics are very critical about what the previous wave lacked. She says, “The content of the films acknowledges the gains of feminism, while marketing strategies paradoxically reverse the message to convey post-feminist ideals” (Stover 4). The change in social expectations was recognized with Ariel being more adventurous and rebellious than passive, but the story still ended in marriage, reverting back to classical period ideas.

Belle

The next movie in this time period, *Beauty and the Beast*, out in 1991. Much like *Sleeping Beauty*, the title of this movie focuses on the physical appearance of the lead female character. This title makes it seem that there has not been very much progression since the beginning of the princess movies, which is partially true. There are still patriarchal ideas about women and their role in this movie. However, Belle, which means “beauty” in French, breaks many stereotypes and is not seen as a typical princess or even woman of this time period. The story begins with a description of how the prince had turned into the beast. A beautiful enchantress had come to his door dressed as an ugly old beggar seeking shelter. She offers him a rose but he does not take it because he is disgusted by her appearance. Upon seeing his true heart, the enchantress removes her disguise and reveals her beauty, which leads the prince to try to redeem his earlier actions. The enchantress, however, places a curse on him which turns him

into a beast, with the curse breakable only by his truly loving another and being loved back. This opening scene places a lot of emphasis on the importance of beauty. It also draws attention to the fact that many men judge women by their appearances instead of getting to know what lies on the inside. The story continues by showing how miserable the Beast is during the next few years alone, locked away in his castle, which is a change from the norm: princesses are usually the miserable ones hidden from society, waiting for their release by an outsider.

When Belle is introduced, she is presented as a simple peasant girl who loves to read. Many people in the town believe she is odd and different because of this, which reflects many of the ideas about independent, intelligent women during this time period. Sam Higgs summarizes this idea by saying, "The problem is not the princess, but the society that she finds herself in. She is not the norm, and the norm finds intelligent, independent women 'strange', 'funny', and 'odd'" (Higgs 66). While Belle is not technically a princess at this point in the story, the idea remains that women who enjoy reading and learning are not the norm and they are to be mocked for their hobbies. The townspeople also look down on Belle as being strange because she is being pursued by a local hunter named Gaston, but she rejects him. All of the other women in the town swoon over Gaston and chase after him, showing that Belle rejects the norms her society expects of her. This is another example of how Belle is different from the classical princesses and even Ariel, as she does not jump with joy at the first male to show her attention. Instead, she rejects the attention Gaston gives her, showing her independence and her lack of dependency on men. Zarranz, in her article, says, "Belle is not in the least interested in the type of excessive masculinity displayed by the primitive Gaston... although he still attracts the rest of the women in the film who swoon over him and comically faint when in his presence, becoming a parody of traditional femininity" (Zarranz 57). While the Walt Disney Company has allowed their leading

ladies to evolve, the background characters still cling to the mindset that a romantic relationship is the most important aspect of their lives. Gaston, determined to win Belle over, goes so far as to publicly propose to Belle while talking about the future they would have together and imagining "my little wife massaging my feet." This quote, though short, shows how many males still had the mindset that women were there to serve them and put their needs about anything else. Belle ultimately rejects him, even in front of the crowd that had gathered, once again showing her independence and rejection of cultural norms.

Belle's father, the clichéd mad scientist, finds himself being held hostage by the Beast, and in an attempt to free her father, Belle offers to trade places with him and remain in the Beast's castle forever. This is parallel to *The Little Mermaid*, because of one person in the parent-child relationship having to rescue the other. However, this case is the opposite because King Triton had to rescue Ariel, and, in this case, Belle ultimately rescues her father. This shows that she can fight for herself and her family and does not need a man to protect her or save her. It also shows that she is a risk taker, unlike the classical princesses. During Belle's stay in the castle, she is angry and refuses to have anything to do with the Beast. As time goes on, though they become friends and earn each other's trust. Belle confides that she misses her father badly and wants to see him, so the Beast lets her go. Upon Belle and her father returning home, Gaston and the townspeople say that Belle and her father are crazy and he needs to be put in an asylum. Belle tells Gaston that he is the real beast and she sees him "as nothing more than a sexist, narcissist, rude, obnoxious, selfish jerk." In this scene, Belle once again takes a stand against the norms set forth by the classical princesses. She is rebellious and is not afraid to tell off one of the male lead characters. She has still not fully submitted to a male character. However, Belle is alone in her independence as other female characters in the movie do not share her sentiments.

Jeff Guo, author of “Researchers Have Found a Major Problem With ‘The Little Mermaid’ and Other Disney Movies”, states, “There are no women leading the townspeople... no women bonding in the tavern... no women giving each other directions, or women inventing things. Everybody who's doing anything else, other than finding a husband in the movie, pretty much, is male” (Guo 1). While Belle is trying to fight for what is right and defend the Beast against Gaston, the other women are too preoccupied with finding a husband to rally beside her and help.

Belle and her father end up locked in Gaston's house, but they are able to escape with the assistance of the Beast's servants, once again showing the necessity of helpers to the princess. Gaston, furious at Belle's escape, goes to find the Beast, and they end up battling in a show of masculinity. Gaston is vanquished, but not before he can stab the Beast in the back. While the Beast is dying, Belle admits her love for him, bringing him back to life and back to his former self as the prince. The movie ends with the happily ever after, much like the princess movies before this. However, this happily ever after is different. Belle could have had a wedding and lived her life with Gaston. Instead, she rejected him because he was totally unacceptable. Stover summarizes this situation by saying, “the ability to choose the right suitor at the end signifies post-feminist autonomy, and thus constitutes a happy ending. Post-feminism celebrates woman as the sexually autonomous individual, and thus Disney's rhetoric shifted from *any* prince to the *right* prince” (Stover 4). So, although Belle does end up marrying the prince, it is completely her choice and she does not simply accept the first man to pursue her. Belle is showing the world that women do have a choice and that waiting for the right one to come along is far better than just marrying to have that happy ending. In the end, though, we can assume that Belle spends her life taking care of her father and husband, falling back into the role of care taker. *Beauty and the*

Beast is a major turning point in Disney's portrayal of women and princesses, though there are still many areas for improvement.

Mulan

After the production of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney produced two more princess movies, titled *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*. They both fall into this category of Renaissance princesses, but I have not included or analyzed them for this paper. The next princess movie released was *Mulan* in 1998. Throughout a majority of the story, Mulan is pretending to be her father in order to fight in the Chinese army. Before this takes place, Mulan is subject to many of the same ideas about women that her ancestors faced. The story begins with Mulan going off to meet the town's matchmaker, so she can be matched with her future husband and made into a beautiful bride. During this transformation, she is told that women "should have tiny waists, be calm, and obedient... and that a man's main use for a woman is for her to have babies." This opening scene once again reinforces the antiquated idea of women being valued only for their beauty and what they can offer a man. Essentially, Mulan's transformation fails as she is very tom-boyish, and she is told she will never bring honor to her family. In order to honor her family, Mulan decides to take the place of her aging and injured father and she joins the army. She cuts her hair short and wears his clothes in order to disguise herself, as females were not permitted to join the war efforts. This is described as the feminine masquerade, which is "the acting out by the female subject of a series of male-defined roles and script" (Zarranz 61). Even though this story is set in China, this parallels the United States as women were originally forbidden to be on the front lines. They could enlist as nurses and in other positions that did not see direct combat or stay at home and take over their husband's work. While women were slowly gaining more rights

during this time period, being able to fight in combat was not one of them, and this is reflected in the movie *Mulan*.

As Mulan adjusts to her new life in training camp, she changes her name to Ping to better hide her identity. Mulan is able to surpass the men in some activities, including climbing a pole with heavy weights attached in order to reach an arrow, and slowly gains the trust of the men in her group. This would be great progress if they knew Mulan's real identity. However, they think she is Ping, an awkward boy. While she struggles to hide her identity, she questions if she made the right choice by pretending to be a boy. She questions if "she did it to save her family or if it was the only way to make something of her life... and this states the problem of any woman searching for importance in a society that pushes motherhood and housewifery" (Stover 5). Mulan knew that taking her father's place would save her family. However, she also knew it was the only way she would get to experience life living in strict, male-dominated China, because women were only meant to marry the men and reproduce. A major criticism of this plot is that it appears Mulan is rebelling against the Chinese government, which she is, but it also distances the viewer from the reality that this is happening in America, too, along with most countries in the world. The viewers see it as more of a governmental issue than a social issue and they do not believe that American women are also suppressed in many parts of their personal and professional lives (Stover 6). While *Mulan* does show some progress since the classical Disney days, the movie struggles to convey the message because of the use of disguise.

Continuing with the plot, the army goes off to battle to defeat the Huns. They come into contact with the Huns and their army, and with Mulan's quick thinking, they are able to cause an avalanche that wipes out most of the enemy forces. In the process, Mulan is wounded and needs medical attention, which means she can no longer keep her sex a secret. While the customary

punishment would be to execute Mulan, the leaders choose to leave her in the mountains alone instead. While in the mountains, she sees that some of the Huns survived the avalanche and rushes off to warn the army. However, they do not take her seriously, as she is a woman and they consider themselves far superior males. In another article, "Disney's Modern Heroine" also by Lauren Dundes, this idea is explained by saying "not only will boys be boys, but men will also be boys" (Dundes 359). The men were too stubborn to admit that Mulan might be right, and they wanted to maintain their superiority. Because of their narrow thinking, the Huns end up reaching the Emperor and kidnapping him. Unsure what to do, many of the soldiers look to Mulan for a plan. She, along with three soldiers, disguise themselves and sneak into the Huns' castle and free the emperor while killing the Huns. This is major progress from the original princess movies as the men, though doubting her moments before, look to a woman for help. In the end, Mulan becomes a hero and is recognized by many people in her town, finally bringing honor to her family.

While Mulan ended victorious by saving China, she did not get married and have that happily ever after. Disney could not let that be and thus *Mulan 2* was created where she did get married. The Walt Disney Company took a strong, successful woman and made sure she ended up in her place by a man before her story was fully over. Nandini Maity, author of "Damsels in Distress: A Textual Analysis of Gender Roles in Disney Princess Films," says Disney added this in the second movie to "make it more interesting and to forward a sexist agenda" (Maity 29). They could not simply just let Mulan be an independent woman breaking away from the stereotypes of the time. The male producers had to make sure the message of women being second to men was present in yet another princess movie. It is likely that they also wanted to capitalize on the success of the first movie and make more money. Regardless of their motivation

for producing *Mulan 2*, it still achieves the forwarding of a sexist agenda by showing a powerful woman submitting to a man. In regard to the first *Mulan* movie, progress was made in how the princess was presented. Less time was spent on her looks and making her beautiful and more time was spent on what she could do as a warrior, even if she was disguised as a man. Viewers observed that “princesses demonstrated increasingly more masculine characteristics as the movies progressed” and this is very obvious in *Mulan*, especially since she spends a majority of the movie pretending to be a man (England et.al. 561). Disney made strides by focusing less on a woman's appearance as this time period concluded but still had areas for improvement and showing women as equal to men instead of inferior.

Renaissance Princesses in real life

The exact end of this time period is debated as different researchers believe different movies end it and start the next one. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (2010) are considered to be part of the renaissance princess time period. Much like the classical princesses, these renaissance princesses had an effect on the outside world and how gender roles were viewed. Itmeizeh argues that the “Feminist movement influenced in one way or another the change that has occurred to the type of princesses portrayed in Disney movies” (Itmeizeh 33). The Walt Disney Company knew they had to keep up with the changing times in order to keep business, but their princesses evolved very slowly. Ariel found herself with a little freedom but was ultimately subject to her father's will and then Prince Eric's will. Belle was set apart from the townspeople because she was educated and enjoyed reading for pleasure. She also sacrificed herself to save her father and ended up marrying the prince, resulting in the typical happily ever after. In the original movie, Mulan saved China, but she had to pretend to be a man to do so.

Disney slowly gave each princess more freedom but also made sure to keep the stereotypes in place.

As was true in the classical princess era, many young girls look up to the princesses and want to imitate them. In the case of the renaissance princesses, the young girls can pretend to be part of the action and adventure instead of completely sitting on the sidelines. This is very important as children often learn from doing, and they are learning that they can have a role in their destiny. These movies could also provide a mixed signal to these young viewers as they originally show the princess with freedom and making her own choices but, with the exception of *Mulan*, she always ends up married in the end and seems truly happy then. Having an active life and a husband are not mutually exclusive. However, the princesses typically no longer lead an active life by making their own decisions once they are married and they simply serve their husbands. This idea can be summarized by saying "a 1990's woman may think that she wants more but a heterosexual relationship is what she needs. The Renaissance Princess, as independent as she initially appears, will always end up in her proper place: by a man" (Higgs 66). This idea once again reinforces the thought of marriage being the ultimate goal and the key purpose for a woman. The princesses start out being strong and independent, rejecting societal norms much like the women in real life during this era, but the end of the movie sees them back in the same pattern of the classical princess. The progress of gender portrayal in movies can be summarized by saying "Trends toward less gender-based stereotyping over time in the movies fluctuated greatly and the progress was not necessarily sequential" (England et.al. 564). The Walt Disney Company made great strides in some movies by representing women more equally but they also gave themselves a lot of room to progress even more.

The Revival Period: 2012-Current Day

Just as the ending of the Renaissance Period is not completely distinguishable, the beginning of the Revival Period differs between critics and researchers. For the purpose of this paper, the Revival Period begins in 2012 and still currently ongoing. The third wave of feminism relates to this period, and its influences are seen in media, as one of the bigger goals was and still is to abolish the stereotypical gender roles. This wave also focuses on individuality and diversity along with the idea that there are layers of oppression. While Disney began to break the princess pattern in some of the Renaissance movies, it is believed that they truly did not break free from the stereotypes until this period and the release of *Brave* in 2012 (Garabedian 24). This movie features a princess rejecting an arranged marriage and fighting for what she believes in, ultimately winning. While the previous time period had diversity among princesses, who were not all white or European, this time period also includes diverse princesses and characters. *Moana*, the final movie discussed in this section, is set in Polynesia and features a non-white princess. All of these changes were possible because society changed in response to the third wave of feminism. Building on the economic and professional power women were granted after the first two waves, members of the third wave of feminism “sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, and femininity among other things” (Brunell 1). The work these women did forced the Walt Disney Company to keep up with changing times or lose viewers, which would have resulted in a loss of money. These princesses show a lot of progress from the Renaissance Period, and especially from the Classical Period, but there are always areas for improvement.

Merida

Unlike the first two periods, there was not a big gap between movies. The first movie of the Revival Period, *Brave*, was released in 2012 and features a spunky, rebellious princess named Merida. Although *Brave* was produced by Pixar, it was released by the Walt Disney Company, so it is being included in this study. Merida's mother wants her to be a proper young lady and act like a princess should. However, her father has different plans and gifts her with a bow and set of arrows for her birthday. As Merida grows up, she continues to turn to her bow and arrow instead of "girl toys and activities." Eventually, the time comes when three clans send boys to fight for her hand in marriage. The boys must fight in an event of her choosing and she chooses archery. While the idea of arraigned marriage is still prevalent in this movie, Merida at least has a choice between three men and how they fight for her. None of the boys are very good at archery and Merida, defying her mother, decides to fight for her own hand, hitting the bullseye each time. Angry with her mother, Merida runs off and finds an old lady that performs spells, and Merida convinces her to make one that will change her mother's attitude. However, the spell has unwanted effects and turns Lady Elinor into a black bear. Merida must work to save her mother, and although the movie does not end with the stereotypical happily ever after, it is still a happy ending. Merida, still unmarried, has mended her bond with her mother and that relationship is the focal point of the movie.

Brave differs from prior Disney movies because familial relationships are seen as more important than romantic relationships, especially when Merida rejects the idea of marriage and does everything she can to stop an arraigned marriage. This plot has received some backlash from critics, as it breaks the norms and challenges some of the stereotypes seen in prior movies and some even still in this time period. One critic, Adam Markovits, wrote a review titled "Could the heroine of Pixar's 'Brave' be gay?" It is so hard for this man to imagine a girl, especially a

teenage girl, not liking the idea of marriage and rebelling against her parents when the time comes for her to pick a suitor, so he assumes she must be gay. In this article, Markovits says “Could Merida be gay? Absolutely. She bristles at the traditional gender roles that she’s expected to play... Her love of unprincess-like hobbies, including archery and rock-climbing, is sure to strike a chord with gay viewers who felt similarly ‘not like the other kids’ growing up” (Markovits 1). While there are no exact signs of Merida’s sexual orientations, many assume that she must be gay because she does not fit the stereotypical role of a princess.

Aside from some critiques, *Brave* has received many accolades for breaking the stereotypical princess movie plot and allowing Merida to do what she wants. Many also call this the first feminist princess movie. Johan Nyh, author of “From Snow White to Frozen,” says “*Brave* also marks the first time a Disney princess film is narrated by herself, elevating Merida from object to subject” (Nyh 29). Instead of just being there like princesses of the past, Merida plays an active role in her life and has the ability to make decisions for herself. This would not have been tolerated in the past as women were expected to be submissive and play passive roles in their lives, with every major decision being made for them. While Merida’s mother gets upset when her daughter rebels or does not act like a proper young lady, this can be attributed to the idea that her mother grew up in a different time period. She grew up knowing that submitting to the authority was the norm and is not accustomed to women having more freedom in the current time period. Nyh also says, “*Brave* is the closest resemblance to a feminist fairy tale and the only contemporary princess to be truly communicated as a post-feminist princess” (Nyh 44). In comparison with the Disney movies prior to this, *Brave* is definitely the most feminist and shows the most progression from the beginning.

It stands to reason that the Walt Disney Company took major cues from society when designing this princess and choosing how she would act. Just like the leading ladies in the Renaissance Period, these Revival Period princesses could not just be subject to the role of house wife. They had to be able to fight for themselves and have their own freedom; otherwise the movies would not be very relevant to females in this period. Caitlin Saladino, author of "Long May She Reign," explains how Merida's story is different from other princesses but very useful to the time period. They say that since Merida's story is not about self-discovery, her story is "more useful to understand as a possible way for the film's audience to understand gender expectations" (Saladino 88). The movie still shows signs of repression, like the arraigned marriage. However, the movie also calls attention to these old habits and how they really have no place in today's society. Merida fights to break free from her parents' expectations, especially her mother's, and be true to herself. She puts little importance in her appearance and knows she has more to offer than just a pretty face. This movie was a giant step in the direction of females being more accurately depicted in movies, especially ones catered toward young girls.

Anna and Elsa

Some may argue that *Brave* cannot be included because it is technically a Pixar film. That would be fair if it were the only Disney released movie that featured strong female leads that broke away from societal norms. However, it is not. The next movie, *Frozen*, released in 2013, shows two sisters orphaned at a very young age who must learn how to live for themselves. The older sister, Elsa, becomes Queen of their land and is more focused on being a good leader to her people than finding a romantic partner. The younger sister, Anna, follows the stereotypical pattern of the earlier princesses and falls in love with the first man to show her attention. They

even become engaged before his real character and motive are revealed. He was only showing her attention to get to her sister, so he could take over the country, and this relationship does not last once that information is revealed. Anna does end up falling for another man, but ultimately chooses to sacrifice a happy, selfish moment to save her sister's life. Many critics and viewers believe that *Frozen* originally starts out with the characters trapped in their stereotyped gender roles, much like the main characters in the original princess movies, but they break free from these by the end.

In the beginning, Anna and Elsa are two young girls growing up as princesses in Norway. As the story continues, it is revealed that Elsa has magical powers that allow her to shoot ice and snow out of her hands, creating a winter wonderland. Elsa accidentally strikes Anna with her powers, turning a piece of her hair white, and their parents rush them off to a family of talking boulders for medical advice. They warn the parents that if Elsa had struck Anna's hard, she would be dead and that it would be best to erase Anna's memories of Elsa's powers and keep Elsa isolated until she can control them. Cordella Chan, author of "Gender Norms Thaw in Disney's *Frozen*," believes that hiding Elsa away in the castle is "due to her hyper emotions... and a woman's tendency to overreact should be hidden" (Chan 1). While this is not the case and Elsa is isolated for everyone's protection, Anna does not remember that and thinks Elsa is just being dramatic. A little later in the story, Anna and Elsa's parents are killed in a ship wreck and the girls must now fend for themselves. The next part of the film shows them growing up, with Elsa still isolated and Anna not understanding why, until it is coronation day. Elsa will now be the queen of their village. During the coronation, Anna meets a man named Hans and immediately falls in love with him, bringing back the idea of love at first sight found in earlier

Disney movies. Even though they just met, they quickly become engaged and begin planning for their future.

When Elsa finds out about her little sister's romantic endeavor, she becomes angry and accidentally unleashes her powers, exposing herself to everyone in attendance, including those trying to take rule of the country away from her. She flees in fear, which reinforces the idea that women cannot power well. In next scene comes the first sign of breaking gender stereotypes for the two princesses. Anna, much to the dismay of her now fiancé, travels through the snowy tundra by herself to save her sister. Chan explains how this breaks the norms by saying, "In the older Disney princess films, a female character is never the one who makes the long journey to save the princess, or in this case, the queen. It is always the prince who rescues the princess" (Chan 2). Anna's strong independence is seen when she does not even think to consult Hans or listen to him when he tries to stop her. Her only worry is saving her sister, so she is acting out the typical role of the prince in earlier movies. Anna also shows her independence and lack of conformity to gender roles when she meets Kristoff, introduced earlier in the movie as a young boy, while they are in a trading post trying to buy winter gear. He attempts to get some rope and carrots for his reindeer, Sven, but is ultimately thrown out by the owner of the trading post. Anna, coming to his rescue, buys the supplies for him. In past movies, the prince probably would have bought the supplies and rescued the princess in distress.

Anna and Kristoff, now joined by the friendly snowman Olaf, arrive at Elsa's new ice castle where she has secluded herself from all civilization for fear of hurting them. Anna, leaving the two men behind, goes to face her sister by herself, something also uncharacteristic of earlier princesses. She is strong and knows she does not need a man to save her. In their conversation, Elsa ends up so frustrated that she accidentally shoots out ice and strikes Anna in the heart, a

deadly strike if they do not get help soon. Kristoff takes Anna back to the same talking boulders that had healed her earlier in the movie and they tell him that only an act of true love can thaw her heart, (which is very similar to *Sleeping Beauty* and her true love's kiss). While this is happening, Hans decides to visit Elsa's new castle in an attempt to kill her. While he and his men are unsuccessful, they are able to knock her unconscious and bring her back to the castle as a prisoner. Anna, Kristoff, and Olaf arrive back at the castle, where they are greeted by Hans. He acts concerned but ultimately reveals his true purpose to Anna, to take over the country, and leaves her to die. He tells the country what Elsa has done but that he and Anna had already said their wedding vows, so he would be next in line to take power. Elsa is able to escape the dungeon at the same time Olaf warms Anna enough up for her to get out of the room she is locked in. Elsa, not knowing the real fate of Anna, runs into Hans who tells her that she has killed her sister. She collapses in grief and pain and, in her moment of weakness, Hans goes in for the kill. However, Anna is now outside and, torn between Kristoff and Elsa, chooses to save the life of her sister, even if it means risking hers. Anna freezes just before Hans' blade touches her, which causes the blade to shatter. As Elsa realizes what has happened, she hugs Anna's frozen body as sobs escape her mouth. Anna begins to thaw out and they soon realize the act of true love was her saving her sister. Once again, this is contrary to what would happen in earlier princess movies as Anna is the one to save the queen, not a prince. Anna's transformation in this movie can be summarized by saying, "She sheds her initial feminine attitudes and realigns her priorities past romance, destroying stereotypes in one punch" (Chan 5). Anna has redefined what it means to be a princess and shows that character progression is possible.

While many can agree that Anna destroys gender stereotypes, some think that Elsa reinforces them. She is isolated because she is unable to control her powers, but those around her

think it is because she cannot control her emotions. Also, Elsa runs from power at the first sign of trouble, showing weakness. Once her powers are revealed, any hope of romance is gone as many men now fear her. This is summed up by Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes in their article "Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender Stereotyped its Most Powerful Princess." The authors say, "Elsa's power appears to both substitute for romance and deter male suitors who risk emasculation in having a love interest who is powerful" and "a princess whose power emasculates and repels men also limits women's prospects by suggesting that power and heterosexual romance are mutually exclusive" (Streiff and Dundes 1-2). A princess, or queen in this case, finally has power without the assistance of a man, but no one is romantically interested in her. This can lead to the belief that a woman cannot be both lovable and powerful because being more powerful than a man will scare any man off. While the Walt Disney Company made great strides in showing Anna's progression to independence, they also reaffirmed gender stereotypes by making Elsa, the most powerful princess yet, romantically unattached and unavailable. This is related to an idea discussed earlier in the paper that powerful women who can make decisions without men are dangerous and evil. The men in *Frozen* view Elsa as someone to fear, simply because she is more powerful than they.

Moana

One of the most recent Disney releases features another strong, independent princess. *Moana*, released in 2016, is set in Polynesia and is about a princess named Moana doing whatever it takes to save her people, including defying her father's orders. Moana goes on an adventure to save their village and does so ultimately without a man's help, much like in *Frozen*. This movie also shows progression in the form as diversity as Moana is not white and her people

are considered a tribe. Some critics still think that having a male protagonist, Maui, shows that Disney is not fully ready to let go of the idea that a man is necessary for success. Just like the two other films in this time period, *Moana* has garnered both praise and criticism when it comes to progress in gender roles and portrayal. However, since this movie is so new, there are few articles that are more than just reviews and actually discuss this topic of gender progression. So most of the interpretation will be personal opinion.

The movie begins with Moana's grandma telling young children the story of Te Fiti, the mother island, and how she can create life on the islands surrounding her. However, one day a demigod named Maui stole her heart, which was a small gemstone. The loss of Te Fiti's heart caused her to lose her ability to nurture and provide for the islands, so a terrible darkness began to spread. In the place of Te Fiti, Te Ka rose up in the form of a monster of lava and fire and fought Maui, ultimately causing him to lose Te Fiti's heart at sea. The beginning scene with Te Fiti portrays the idea of women being nurturing and life giving, which is true, but it also perpetuates a stereotype. Moana's grandma, continuing on with her story, explains that Te Ka and others still hunt for the heart and that one day, in order to save the island, someone must travel past the protective reef in order to restore the heart of Te Fiti. At this, Moana perks up, as she is amazed by the water and wants to explore the unknown, even from a very young age and much to the dismay of her father. Disney shows progress here by having a father that is trying to control his daughter, but cannot prevent her from always following her heart, no matter the cost. At one point, an older Moana sings a song with the words "I've been staring at the edge of the water, long as I can remember. Never really knowing why. I wish I could be the perfect daughter, but I come back to the water. No matter how hard I try." She knows that her place on

the island is to be the next ruler, but she cannot stay away from the water and feels a calling beyond the reef.

Moana's grandmother acts as a sort of an adversary to her son, Moana's father, and urges Moana to go beyond the reef, believing that the ocean has chosen her because the heart of Te Fiti washed up on shore while Moana was standing there. Grandma shows her where the island's hidden voyager boats are and prepares her for travel. Suddenly, Grandma falls ill and on the night of her passing, Moana and her pet companion set off beyond the reef with her grandmother's spirit, reincarnated as a sting ray, leading the way. After struggling to control the giant boat, Moana successfully crosses the reef, something no one on the island has done since the darkness set in. She finds her way to Maui, where she plans to stand up to him and force him onto her boat to restore the heart of Te Fiti, since he is the one who lost it in the first place. This action shows another characteristic not typical of earlier princesses, as Moana has a bit of spunk and is not afraid to stand up to male figures, even demigods. At her attempt, Maui laughs and calls her adorable, refusing to take her seriously as she "is just a little princess." Moana tells him she is not a princess, but he replies with "If you wear a dress and have an animal sidekick, you're a princess" (The Anti-Princess 1). This reinforces the idea seen in older movies where many of the princesses had animal sidekicks because they were unable to fend for themselves.

Eventually, Moana is able to get Maui on her boat by convincing him that returning the heart would make him a hero once again. Through many struggles, she becomes more confident in her sailing abilities and even gets Maui to believe in himself again. Their journey is almost complete but in order to get to Te Fiti, they must get past Te Ka. Maui is able to distract her while Moana gets to Te Fiti, only to realize that the mother island has turned into Te Ka without her heart. Moana calls out to Te Ka and reminds her who she really is. Once her heart has been

returned, Te Ka's hard, outer shell slowly begins to crumble, and she turns back into the beautiful and calm Te Fiti, restoring growth and life to the islands. Many believe that Moana had to be the one to return the heart because only a female could understand her pain. Also, Te Fiti no longer trusted Maui, so he would not have been able to get close enough to return the heart that he once stole.

However, this scene also faces a lot of criticism. While it was Moana that ultimately saved the island, she could not have done it without Maui, once again proving that the male sidekick is necessary to the princess's story and success. Another critical viewpoint is found in the article "From Shapeshifter to Lava Monster: Gender Stereotypes in Disney's *Moana*" by Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes. They say, "The Mother Island, also known both as Te Fiti and Te Ka, raises concerns about portrayals of females; she wreaks destruction when angry, misusing her power, until Moana convinces her to get in touch with her 'true' self (Streiff and Dundes 2). This idea suggests a parallel with *Frozen* because both Elsa and Te Fiti misused their powers and ended up being portrayed in villainous ways until someone who cared enough was able to remind them who they truly were.

Overall, the Walt Disney Company made great progress in having the princesses in this time period not be afraid to go after what they believe in. Merida, Anna, and Moana are all head-strong characters fighting to break the status quo of what it means to be a princess. They are rebellious and adventurous, following their hearts at all times. However, gender stereotypes are still obvious, but not as obvious as before, in these three movies. Merida has a mother that tries to make her into a proper princess while wanting her to choose from three designated suitors. Anna finds herself engaged to the first man to show her any attention. Elsa is seen as evil and emotionally unavailable because of her power. Finally, Moana saves her island but not without

the help of the egotistical demigod, Maui. While these movies have made great strides forward, they still leave plenty of room for forward movement to a place where women will be portrayed accurately and without societal stereotypes being placed upon them.

Revival Princesses in real life

Compared to the other two periods, the Revival Period has had a much more positive impact on society. Young girls are able to see these strong female characters taking charge of their own lives and ultimately writing their own stories. The princesses are no longer damsels in distress, just waiting for their princes to swoop in and save the day. This message can be very relatable to children of single moms with no father in the picture because they see their mother defying stereotypical roles and surviving on her own. Also, it can be relatable to any young girl because strong women are rising to power all over the world. As was mentioned earlier, the Feminist Movement had a great influence on how Disney portrayed female characters because they knew not keeping pace with society would cause them to lose a large number of viewers and money. The standards being set by women all across the world created a new standard for how Disney Princesses should be portrayed. In turn, the Revival Period had and still has a great influence on real life. Little girls still love imitating the princesses. Now, they can be the writers of their own destiny and take charge of their lives without having to answer to a prince.

The only downfall of the Revival Period movies is that some stereotypes, though not as strong as before, still exist. Romance and relationships are not inherently bad; however, Anna falling in love with the first man she meets reinforces the idea of marriage being the ultimate goal for women. Merida's mother trying to create the proper princess, who does not shoot bows and do other tom-boy activities, conveys the idea that little girls should be "sugar and spice and

everything nice.” Te Fiti transforming into Te Ka and turning back only once Moana reminds her of her true self relates to the idea that women are too emotional to have any real power and they are not good at controlling anger. While these ideas are in the movies and could negatively influence young girls, they are insignificant when analyzing the message of the movies overall. The Walt Disney Company has made progress thanks the women in real life who fight for what they believe in, equality. The door is open for the next generation of strong women to make an impact and destroy these stereotypes once and for all.

Conclusion

With the progression of how women are portrayed in Disney's princess films, the opportunity to become more diverse and inclusive exists. The Walt Disney Company can continue to learn from societal changes in order to make the movies more relevant to a wider range of people. This process is already taking place, and can even be seen in movies like *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*, and *Moana*, in which the lead character is not a white American. Movies released after *Moana*, like *Coco*, feature this same theme of diversity and inclusivity. The story lines have changed dramatically from a damsel in distress being saved by her prince charming to a princess taking control of her own destiny and being the one doing the saving. This continual progression will allow for a more accurate portrayal of women in the movies, which will in turn continue the progress happening in society. The Walt Disney Company's influence has lasted for decades and it will last for many more, but only if they continue taking societal cues to develop their characters into more than stereotypes.

Documentation of Sources

- Bethmann, Jen. 2017. "The Disney Princess Sidekicks: Men Still Necessary to the Disney Princess Narrative." *Media Report to Women*, 1(1): 1-11.
- Blankestijn, Lianne. 2015. "From Snow White to Pitch Black." *Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen*, 1(1): 1-66.
- Bryant, Joyce. 2002. "How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States." *Teachers Institute*, 1(1): 1-9.
- Burkett, Elinor, and Laura Brunell. 2005. "The Third Wave of Feminism." *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-third-wave-of-feminism>.
- Chan, Cordella. 2016. "Gender Norms Thaw in Disney's Frozen." *The Prolongation of Work*, 1(1): 1-5.
- Cook, B., T. Bancroft, P. Coats, R. Hsiao, C. Sanders, P. LaZebnik, R. Singer, and Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Firm). (1998). *Mulan*. United States: Walt Disney Home Entertainment.
- Coontz, Stephanie. 2013 Feb 16.. "Why Gender Equality Stalled." *The New York Times*, 1-8.
- "Disney's Next Heroine: The Anti Princess." *Time*. 188(10-11): 90. 2016. Print.
- Dundes, Lauren. 2001. "Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas: revealing age-old gender stereotypes and role discontinuity under a façade of liberation." *The Social Science Journal*, 38(1): 353-365.
- and Alan Dundes. 2000. "The Trident and the Fork: Disney's 'The Little Mermaid' as a construction of an Electra fantasy." *Psychoanalytical Studies*, 2(2): 117- 130.
- England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. 2011. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princess." *Sex Roles*, 64(1): 555-567.
- Garabedian, Juliana. 2014. "Animating Gender Roles: How Disney is Redefining the Modern Princess." *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(1): 22-25.
- Giroux, Henry A. 1995. "Animating Youth: the Disnification of Children's Culture." *Socialist Review*, 24(3): 23-55.
- Guo, Jeff. 2016. "Researchers have found a major problem with 'The Little Mermaid' and other Disney movies." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/25/researchers-have->

- [discovered-a-major-problem-with-the-little-mermaid-and-other-disney-movies/?utm_term=.0eb1decccdf5](http://www.0eb1decccdf5).
- Higgs, Sam. 2016. "Damsels in Development: Representation, Transition, and the Disney Princess." *Screen Education*, 85(1): 62-69.
- Itmeizeh, Dr. Mahmoud J. and Sandra Ma'ayeh. 2017. "The Evolution of Gender Roles and Women's Linguistic Features in the Language of Disney." *Journal of Literature, Languages, and Linguistics*, 36(1): 29-38.
- Maity, Nandini. 2014. "Damsels in Distress: A Textual Analysis of Gender roles in Disney Princess Films." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 19(10): 28-31.
- Markovits, Adam. 2012. "Could the heroine of Pixar's 'Brave' be gay?" *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from http://www.ew.com/article/2012/06/24/pixar-brave-gay-merida/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%253A%20ew%252Fpopwatch%20%2528Entertainment%20Weekly%252FEW.com%2527s%253A%20PopWatch%2529.
- Menken, A., H. Ashman, and Walt Disney Pictures. (1991). *Walt Disney Pictures presents Beauty and the Beast*. Milwaukee, WI: H. Leonard Pub. Corp.
- Nyh, Johan. 2015. "From Snow White to Frozen: An evaluation of popular gender representation indicators applied to Disney's princess films." *Karlstad University*, 1(1): 1-51.
- Parsons, Linda T. 2004. "Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories and the Construction of Gender-Appropriate Behavior." *Children's Literature in Education*, 35(2): 135-154.
- Saladino, Caitlin Joanne. 2014. "Long May She Reign: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender Expectations in Disney's Tangled and Disney/Pixar's Brave." *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 2137(1): 1-158.
- Streff, Madeline, and Lauren Dundes. 2017. "From Shapeshifter to Lava Monster: Gender Stereotypes in Disney's *Moana*." *Social Sciences*, 6(91): 1-12.
- . 2016. "Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender-Stereotypes Its Most Powerful Princess." *Social Sciences*, 6(38): 1-10.
- Stover, Cassandra. 2013. "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princesses." *LUX*, 2(1): 1-10.
- Youngs, Gillian. 2010. "The Ghost of Snow White." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1(2): 311-314.

Zarranz, Libe Garcia. 2007. "Diswomen Strike Back? The Evolution of Disney's Femmes in the 1990's." *Atenea*, 27(2): 55-65.