THE PRINCESS EVOLUTION
FROM SNOW WHITE TO RAPUNZEL IN DISNEY ANIMATION

by

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Thesis directed by Professor Margaret L. Woodhull

**ABSTRACT**

The major objective of this study is to critically engage with the representation of princesses in Walt Disney Studio animated films. Although popular feminist criticism of the last four decades claims that the Disney Studio creates negative portrayals of women in their fairy tales films, a deeper understanding of women’s roles can be found through the use of critical analysis and close reading of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast,* and *Tangled.* The work of the Disney Studio animation will be closely examined and discussed while exploring the domestic and feminist issues present within these four specific films. Through analyzing these films, I will demonstrate that these characters have a depth and complexity to them that showcase an evolution that mirrors the changes within American society.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Margaret L. Woodhull
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Michael Eason, who constantly encouraged and supported me through this long and exciting process. His belief in my determination and drive constantly inspires me to be better than I am.
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I would like to thank Margaret Woodhull for all of her time, dedication, and support. Without her this project would not exist. I would also like to thank Gillian Silverman, who told this first generation college student that he could always come to her for help. I would like to thank Howard Movshovitz, who always inspires me to dive deeper into film analysis. Lastly, I would like to thank all the friends and family who came to multiple screenings of Disney animated films in an attempt to help me better understand these riveting films.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Literature Review ................................................................. 1
- Research Methodology .......................................................... 3
- Conclusion ................................................................................. 6

### II. DOMESTICITY AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

- Introduction .............................................................................. 10
- Things Walt Disney Never Told Us ........................................ 13
- The Domestic Goddess .......................................................... 14
- Snow White’s Sentimental Agency ......................................... 22
- A Pious Princess ................................................................. 24
- Conclusion ................................................................................. 28

### III. CINDERELLA’S DOMESTIC PRISON

- Introduction .............................................................................. 31
- Fairy Tales and Seventies Feminism ....................................... 33
- Cinderella’s Rising Agency ..................................................... 39
- A Domestic Prison .................................................................... 46
- Happily Ever After and Societal Norms ................................. 49
- Conclusion ................................................................................. 52

### IV. THE ENLIGHTENED BEAUTY AND THE DOMESTIC BEAST

- Introduction .............................................................................. 55
- She’s Nothing Like the Rest of Us .......................................... 58
- Beauty in Knowledge ............................................................. 63
- Who’s A Man Among Men ..................................................... 68
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On May 11, 2013 the Walt Disney Company announced that the fiercely independent heroine, Merida, from Disney/Pixar’s Brave, would officially be crowned Disney’s 11th princess. This group already included Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora from Sleeping Beauty (1959), Ariel from The Little Mermaid (1989), Belle from Beauty and the Beast (1991), Jasmine from Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana from The Princess and the Frog (2009), and Rapunzel from Tangled (2010). To match the Disney Princess marketing campaign, the Walt Disney Company decided to transform Merida from her 3D animated look to the traditional 2D animation appearance of the rest of their animated princesses. However, this change in animation style has caused an uproar amongst fans of Princess Merida and Disney critics alike. Through this transformation, Merida has taken on a more mature and sexualized look than that of her film representation. For many Disney critiques who have long been frustrated with the companies representation of the princess and females in general, Merida, in the movie, was a step in the right direction. Merida does not pine for a prince, spends her time being active and adventurous, while solving her problems without the aid of a suitor. Her new look has, in many eyes, changed the perception of the character from her film’s quirky and realistic looking female to something closer to a magazine cover model. Over 100,000 fans spoke out against the redesign when they signed a petition started by A Mighty Girl, after the announcement of the changes went viral (Brenda Chapman, 'Brave' Creator, Calls Merida's Makeover 'Atrocious', 5/16/23). Even the co-director of Brave, Brenda Chapman, has spoken out against the changes made to Merida in the Walt Disney
Company’s attempt to make her more stereotypically beautiful. Brenda Chapman was quoted as saying, “Merida was created ... to give young girls a better, stronger role model, a more attainable role model, something of substance, not just a pretty face that waits around for romance” (Brenda Chapman…, 5/16/23). Chapman continued by saying that she had given Disney's CEO, Bob Iger, "a piece of [her] mind.” This recent controversy underlies the major problem at the heart of this study.

Since 1937, the Walt Disney Studios has produced over 50 feature length animated films that have been released in countries around the world, grossed billions of dollars, and amassed legions of fans and critics in the process. Many of these films have taken classic fairy tales as its inspiration, propelling many princess characters into the public’s consciousness. With Disney princesses populating the cultural landscape it is only valid that they exert an influence across the minds and expectations of young women the world over. While critics have long believed that the princess figures have had a negative impact on women, there is a flaw in the way these characters have been perceived.

Feminist fairy tales scholars of the 1970’s have been some of the most vocal critics of classic folklore, and by extension, Disney animated films. These feminist voices argued that the princesses of Disney fairy tales were passive characters who encouraged young girls to accept traditional gender roles. Because of this, the Disney company has come to be seen as anti-feminist for over the last four decades. Disney animated films continue to dominate the box office, and generations of children are introduced to the many characters that populate the entire history of the Disney animation oeuvre. In an attempt to subvert this labeling and to respond positively, Disney has in fact produced
films such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) with more contemporary female heroines. This study will speak to the feminist fairy tale scholarship of the early 1970s, and reveal that the Walt Disney Studios have listened to feminist criticism by filling their post-1970s animated fairy tale films with positive female role models.

Before the ability to watch and study films very closely through VHS, DVD, and Bluray, scholarly work in the realm of film was incredibly difficult. This difficulty means that much of the criticism laid against Walt Disney Animation relies on a superficial understanding of their fairy tale films. Even worse, much of the problematic issues with the Disney princesses stems from the presentation of the characters once they have left the hands of the animators and become the responsibility of The Walt Disney Company’s marketing department. Through my critical analysis I will argue that the creators of these classic animated fairy tales were responding to the changing roles of women of the last century and crafted engaging female characters who are surprisingly active considering the eras in which they were created.

**Literature Review**

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, when fairy tales became a popular form of literature, thanks to authors like the Grimm Brothers, the role of women within fairy tales were rarely questioned or approached in a scholarly manner. In December of 1970, American author Alison Lurie changed all of that when she published “Fairy Tale Liberation” in the *New York Review of Books*. This article ignited an intense discussion within feminist scholarship that has lasted the past forty years. In this article, and her 1971 sequel, “Witches and Fairies,” Lurie explained that the presentation of strong
female characters within fairy tales and folktales should act as a guide to making progress for women’s liberation. Lurie even concluded “Fairy Tale Liberation” by stating that fairy tales were, “one of the few sorts of classic children’s literature of which a radical feminist would approve” (Lurie, 44).

Alison Lurie’s view on fairy tales would spark years of disagreement that started when Marcia R. Lieberman published her refutation entitled, “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale.” Lieberman contested Lurie’s position and argued that fairy tales do not portray strong female characters. She associated the Walt Disney Studios as culpable of these same portrayals by using the song “Some Day My Prince Will Come” from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the title of her argument. It was Lieberman’s defense that the most popular fairy tales, and those popularized by Disney, are the stories most known by children and adults, and these same tales serve to acculturate women into traditional roles of patriarchy (Lieberman, 383).

Lieberman wrote that films, television, and books have a conditioning factor on children, whose influence cannot be measured. Picking up where she left off, the research in Kay Stone’s 1975 article “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” hoped to uncover the effects fairy tales, especially those of Disney animation, have on women. Stone’s follow up to Lieberman’s work highlighted how popular the fairy tale heroines became in the last century because of the very intentional efforts of Walt Disney and his company (Stone, 42). Although Lieberman was one of the first to bring attention to the passive heroine and wicked villainess in fairy tales, it was Stone who would really connect those concepts to the princesses of Disney animation. In regards to the Disney versions of
Snow White, Cinderella, and Princess Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty,* Stone wrote, “If the Grimm heroines are, for the most part uninspiring, those of Walt Disney seem barely alive [...] All three had passive, pretty heroines, and all three had female villains, thus strongly reinforcing the already popular stereotype of the innocent beauty victimized by the wicked villainess” (Stone, 44). Stone goes on to argue that Disney amplified the already negative stereotypes contained within the most popular of fairy tales. She concludes the article by interviewing 40 females of different ages and backgrounds and uncovers that many of these women formed their world view from the fairy tales of Disney and the Grimm Brothers (Stone, 48). Through this revelation, Stone did discover that many of the women could not recall specifics about the films and that they only remembered certain impressions that they had formed from a combination of the classic stories and Disney films.

It was through the opposing articles of Alison Lurie, Marcia Lieberman, and Kay Stone that early feminist fairy tale scholarship began and helped to develop a negative criticism against Walt Disney animated films. Donald Haase writes in his article “Feminist Fairy Tale Scholarship” that, “Throughout the 1970s, these ideas were repeated in writings by American feminists, which did not always analyze fairy tales in depth, but more frequently utilized them simply as evidence to demonstrate the sociocultural myths and mechanisms that oppress women” (Haase, 17). By the end of the 1970s, the scholarship surrounding the problematic nature of gender and social values within fairy tales begun to be viewed as oversimplified and too polemical. As the scholarship on this subject progressed over the next thirty years, it began to take a less controversial and more complex approach, but the damage was already done. Although the discourse on the
subjects of fairy tale and Disney animation has moved on from the original criticism of Lieberman and Stone, it is their voices that continue to influence and shape this popular debate.

**Research Methodology**

While the scholarship on fairy tales has remained active over the last 40 years, this scholarship has not reached a broader audience: the early criticism laid against Walt Disney feature animation has mostly retained its anti-feminist slant. This project will focus on the Disney animated fairy tales *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* (1950), *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Tangled*. Although Disney has many other animated films besides those based on fairy tales, the loudest criticisms laid against the studio tend to focus on its fairy tales and princesses. I am specifically choosing these four fairy tale films because of the eras of their release, and to showcase an evolution based over time. These specific films also contain many issues involving domesticity and anti-feminist values that this study intends to unpack through a nuanced critical reading of the films as text.

Produced and released during the Great Depression, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* contains many aspects and characters that reflect this era in American history. *Cinderella* was the second fairy tale that the Walt Disney Studios reinterpreted. It was released in 1950, after a string of box office flops for the company. The release of *Cinderella* provided the studio with their first financial success in a decade. More importantly, *Cinderella* came on the heels of World War II, after the role of women in society evolved because of the war and subsequently regressed after the war ended. The roles of the early princes, villains, and villainess will be discussed to provide context for
how gender is being represented within the stories. The inclusion of these other characters will help in displaying the attributes of the princesses found within the text of the stories.

*Beauty and the Beast* in 1991, and the main character, Belle, are a return to the company’s fairy tale origins, and it, as well as *The Little Mermaid*, would help to pull Disney animation out of another decade of slipping box office attendance on their animated films. I have selected *Beauty and the Beast* for my research not only because it is the first Disney animated fairy tale to be written by a women, but also because it showcases what many argue is the first feminist Disney princess, Belle. The powerful position of female employees at Disney, and within its films, would become standard at the company while the rest of Hollywood continued to be a male dominated industry.

With the success of the princesses Ariel and Belle, Disney would return to many more fairy tale films that emphasized stronger females. These females would see their most recent step in their evolution in the last films I will focus on, *Tangled* from 2010 and the film’s heroine Rapunzel, as well as Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*. These films are important because they are the company’s most modern princesses and provide my project with best counterpoints to Disney’s original heroine, Snow White.

While the gendered issues of Disney extend to their marketing, television, theme parks, movie sequels, and more, I will be focusing my research strictly on the animated feature film fairy tales, and precisely on the *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast*, and *Tangled*. Selecting these specific films will uncover how Disney has enacted change in a response to the negative criticism, and how the princesses within these films have evolved to reflect more contemporary women.
By performing a close reading, my project will analyze, in depth, the stories, dialogue, actions, and visual representations in an attempt to resolve the constructed female identity issues within Disney films. Direction, lighting, color, editing, cultural context, juxtaposition, and many other facets of animation all help to create or to weaken the meaning of any given scene within a film. These varying techniques along with the combinations of shots and images create additional meanings and only through a close reading of the films text can a complex, but deeper understanding of the female characters be found within the films.

Animated films provide an interesting subject because of their ability to exist as a unique art form, combining the classical art aesthetic of painting with literature’s power to convey a narrative. An animated film is thus able to create a new world that traditional live action films do not have the power to realize. Since Disney was the first to undertake animation in feature length form with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it is the Disney Animation Studio that has set the standard for the past 75 years. The company plans to release two to three animated films a year for the foreseeable future, many of which will be based upon fairy tales. As The Walt Disney Company continues to produce culturally significant and financially successful films, their products require continued scholarship.

**Conclusion**

The writings of Lieberman and Stone helped to produce an extremely negative criticism of Disney animation that have created a lasting impression over the past forty years claiming that Disney animated fairy tales reinforce patriarchal stereotypes. This polemical, feminist view gives a skewed reading of Disney films which has left the company’s newer productions mostly untouched and open to examination. My research
will speak with these original critics—and those who continue to support that ideology—and demonstrate that the Disney princess is an evolving character, who, with each subsequent film release showcases a more modern view of women. The repressed princesses of European fairy tales are barely recognizable in modern Disney animated films, as the company has worked to produce heroines that reflect more current cultural norms. The past criticisms of fairy tales have negatively influenced Disney animation, and the time has come to reevaluate Disney’s place in that judgement. I will strive to provide my reader with a nuanced reading of these classic films and to reveal an evolution within the Disney princess that showcases a positive change.
CHAPTER II
DOMESTICITY AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

Introduction

During the very first screening of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in late 1937, the audience wept openly as they watched the dwarves mourn the death of Snow White. The seven dwarves circle Snow White’s bed while the room is filled with heavenly candle light, injecting a heavy dose of pathos to this heartbreaking scene. The melodramatic climax of this moment takes place when Grumpy, who has been an unabashed misogynist up to this point, turns and hides his tear-filled face from the audience as he finally embraces his true feelings for the princess, Snow White.

For Walt Disney, this was the moment that confirmed that he had truly created something unique within Hollywood and the film industry as a whole. Only nine short years before the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (henceforth *Snow White*) Walt Disney had astounded the world with *Steamboat Mickey*, the first cartoon made with synchronized sound. In the time between this groundbreaking Mickey Mouse short length cartoon and the release of *Snow White*, Walt Disney’s company, Disney Animation Studios, had become world famous. However, with changes in the way theaters showed their films Walt Disney realized that short length cartoons would soon become unsuccessful, and the only way to save his growing company was to risk everything on creating the first feature-length, animated film. Walt Disney mortgaged his business and home to financially back the production of *Snow White*, while the rest of Hollywood
snickered at what they believed to be a huge mistake. The press at the time even took to calling *Snow White*, “Walt’s Folly,” as all of Hollywood expected the film to be a giant flop. No one believed that an audience would ever want to sit through an animated feature film. On the back of “Walt’s Folly,” however, an empire was created.

*Snow White* was an incredible financial success and received critical acclaim when it was first released, but Walt Disney could never have predicted the film’s long-lasting popularity and appeal. Feature-length animation was a completely new concept and when *Snow White* was created, no one could have foreseen that the movie, which was made with the sensibilities and ideals of the 1930s, would still be watched and consumed over seventy-five years later. Although a classic, everything about the film, from the story, to the characters, feels anachronistic and outdated. Yet something about the film continues to speak to modern audiences, and therein lies the paradox of the princess Snow White. What makes this film so dated and yet so timeless? *Snow White* is appealing to a modern viewer while at the same time finding her character’s representation both challenging — riddled with domesticity issues and anti-feminist values — and celebratory. This chapter will argue that, despite the era in which she was created and her representation as an icon of feminine domesticity and anti-feminist values, Snow White is an active female character who contemporary audiences must see as progressive in historical context, and thus, at the vanguard of feminism.

The film opens in traditional fairy tale style with “Once upon a time…” and quickly sets up the narrative of the evil Queen, who is jealous of the young Snow White’s growing beauty and charm. The Queen forces her step-daughter, Snow White, to work as
a scullery maid in an attempt to hide the young princess’s beauty. But, the Queen’s magic mirror reveals that Snow White is indeed “the fairest in the land.” When the Queen finds out that a handsome, young Prince has been flirting with Snow White, the Queen orders her huntsman to take her into the woods and kill her. However, the princess expresses so many sweet and charming attributes, that the Huntsman is unable to complete his murderous task, and instead, tells Snow White to run away. After a terrifying journey through the woods, Snow White comes across a little cottage inhabited by seven dwarves. She befriends them and they agree that she can stay in their home away from the wrathful Queen. However, the evil Queen realizes that Snow White continues to live and uses her magic to transform herself into an old hag. In new disguise, the evil Queen convinces Snow White to take a bite of a “magic, wishing apple” which is really an enchanted, poisoned apple. Snow White falls into a deep sleep that mimics death and the dwarves chase the evil Queen up a mountaintop, where she is struck with lightning and falls to her death. So beautiful, even in death, the dwarves cannot find it in their heart to bury the princess. Instead, they build her a glass coffin to mourn her. The young Prince, who audiences meet earlier in the film, searches the countryside to find his lost Snow White. When he finds her in deathlike sleep he kisses her, breaking the enchantment and awakening the princess. As the dwarves celebrate that Snow White is still alive, the Prince places her upon his horse and carriers her off to his literal castle in the sky, where they live happily ever after.
Things Walt Disney Never Told Us

In the early seventies, Alison Lurie and Marcia Lieberman began a feminist critique of fairy tales in their articles, “Fairy Tale Liberation” (Lurie, 1970) and the rebuttal to that article, “Some Day My Prince Will Come” (Lieberman, 1972). Peer, Kay Stone, entered the dialogue with a special focus on Walt Disney’s influence on the traditional tales in 1975. Stone writes in her article, “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” that the popularity of fairy-tale heroines in North America had become “household words as well as ‘household tales,’” and she attributes this “to the unintentional efforts of the Grimms and the very intentional efforts of Walt Disney” (42). Writing in the height of the feminist movement, Lieberman would be one of the first to paint Walt Disney as culpable of anti-feminist representations, arguing that his images of women reinforced negative stereotypes of passive and submissive women. Indeed, it was Stone’s work that would make the Disney Animation Studio synonymous with anti-feminism. Stone argued that “if the Grimm heroines are, for the most part, uninspiring, those of Walt Disney seem barely alive” (44). Of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty (1959) she noted, “In fact, two of [the passive heroines] hardly manage to stay awake” (44). Overall, Stone believed that the popular heroines of Grimm and Disney are always beautiful, passive, obedient, industrious and quiet (Stone, 44) to the point where they become largely negative in their representation of women. More importantly, Stone contends that these representations lead young women to learn unhealthy expectations for how they should behave in real life. Stone writes:
I interviewed forty women of varying ages and backgrounds. All had read fairy tales, almost all could name several favorite heroines but rarely any heroes, and most of these tales were from Disney or Grimms. Many admitted that they were certainly influenced by their reading of fairy tales. Some had openly admired the lovely princesses and hoped to imitate them—especially their ability to obtain a man and a suburban castle without much effort (Stone 48).

While Stone’s article and research are certainly valid it fails to recognize progressive values in Disney’s heroines considering its 1937 release date. Stone’s critique stems from an anachronistic view, framed by her 1970s feminist values. David Haase, author of “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Critical Survey and Bibliography,” notes that by the end of the seventies the feminist fairy tale bashing had become so popular that it could sell books meant for mass-market distribution, but this in turn lead to an “oversimplification of the fairy tale’s problematic relationship to social values and the construction of gender identity” (17). The work of the Grimm Brothers and Walt Disney will not go out of style anytime soon. Both continue to be incredibly successful in many different iterations, pointing to the fact their mythic qualities speak to something in our general consciousness that we cannot help but find meaningful. While much of Stone’s criticism reveals patriarchal structures that work to limit the role of women, I propose an exploration that exposes the empowering values found within Snow White.

**The Domestic Goddess**

If we explore the construction of Snow White’s character, it becomes apparent that Disney frames her as an idealized domesticated, woman whose only desire is to clean, cook, and love. Patriarchy traditionally imagines the “good woman” with specific qualities to which women were to adhere. These included submissiveness, purity, piety,
and domesticity. An ideal woman was to be meek and subservient to the men in her life, never questioning of her father or husband, and always doing as they were told. It was important that this woman was also to be a virgin until her wedding night. She was to keep the role of religion alive within the home and her family, as religious pursuit was one of the only interests that was suitable for women. Lastly, the ideal woman must be a domestic goddess. She was to wash, mend, cook, and garden so to provide a haven for her husband and children.

Within the first few moments of the film, Snow White wastes no time revealing to the audience these now problematic ideals. The narrator reveals to the viewer that Snow White’s evil step-mother, jealous of the young princess’s beauty, dressed her in rags instead of fine clothes and forced her to become a scullery maid. This position was generally associated with the most drab and dirty work of the kitchen, which means Snow White was forced to wash the floors and scrub all the kitchenware clean. Moreover, the scullery maid was left to a wretched and miserable existence because of her menial position (Nicolaisen, 67). In the step mother’s attempts to hide Snow White and her natural loveliness from the world, the Queen placed her in the one place within the castle that a woman could learn, the kitchen. In the kitchen, Snow White learns to cook and clean, essentially studying all she needs to know about being an ideal woman in the time period the film is set, as well as the time period in which the film was produced and released. In fact, the very first time Snow White is shown to the audience they see her scrubbing the castle steps, which immediately ties her character to subservient domesticity within the eyes of the viewer.
After the Huntsman informs Snow White that the Queen intends to kill her, the princess flees into the woods, where every tree, sound, or creature becomes a threat to Snow White’s safety. No longer able to return to her home, Snow White becomes a homeless woman with nowhere to turn. In “‘Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them’: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934,” scholar Elaine Abelson writes:

Women constituted more than 25 percent of the total labor force in the United States in the 1930s—over ten million women were working out of the home at the beginning of the decade, and over three million of them were married. They lost jobs at a higher rate than did men in the early years of the collapse, were often unable to find other sources of income, and were routinely discriminated against in public employment (106).

While homeless and transient men have traditionally been focused on in regards to the Great Depression, the women who lost their jobs and did not have a man to take care of them were in an even worse position, as the societal and charitable needs for homelessness were only aimed at men. This left women with very few options once they were unemployed (Abelson 106-107). Although she is only skilled with domestic abilities, Snow White was still a working women with a roof over her head. Suddenly without a job, without a home, and without a man to watch over her, she finds herself in a situation that would have resonated with the women of the film’s release. The young princess’s flight through the dark and terrified forest symbolized the fear of unemployment and homelessness associated with the Great Depression.

Snow White finally collapses on the forest floor when she can finally take no more of the terror that surrounds her. It is during this moment that a group of helpful
woodland creatures lead her to a cottage in the forest where they believe she will be safe. Upon entering the cottage, Snow White notices that the home is filled with a host of small items and leaps to the conclusion that small and very untidy children must live there (Image 2.1). Snow White reacts to the room by saying:

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A pickax. A stocking too. And just look at that fireplace. It's covered with dust. And look, cobwebs everywhere. My, my, my! What a pile of dirty dishes. And just look at that broom. Tsk, tsk, tsk! Tsk, tsk, tsk! Why, they've never swept this room. You'd think their mother would—Maybe they have no mother. Then, they’re orphans. That’s too bad. I know. We’ll clean the house and surprise them. Then, maybe they’ll let me stay (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs).
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Within this short moment the audience finds that Snow White quickly returns to her domestic abilities, as they are the only skill that may provide her with employment and protect her from homelessness.

Snow White, a princess, upon first entering the dwarves cottage only notices the problems that she believes a lack of a woman’s presence has created in the home. She immediately connects the idea of a disorderly home with that of a home lacking a woman’s touch. To Snow White, the cleanliness of the home is the responsibility of the mother. If the house is dirty then the mother must be out of the picture, for what kind of woman would let her children live in such filth and squalor. Since she has nowhere else to go, Snow White must rely on the only skills she knows in order to prove herself a worthy addition to the dwarves’ home. Her solution—fill the role of a mother and begin to clean the house for the untidy dwarves. Stone writes, “The only tests most heroines require, [is] nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament. At least that is what we learn from the translations of the Grimm tales, and especially from Walt Disney” (45). For Stone and other radical feminists of her era, no true feminist plot can take place within the home. Read another way, the change that Disney made from the original tale reveals how Snow White is empowered. Rather than falling prey to starvation or homelessness, Snow White is resourceful by relying on her “skills” to provide her with a solution to her problems. While it would have been nice if Snow White had skills other than those of the domestic to fall back on, any other skill would be out of place for a woman in this time period.
It is at this point in the film that Snow White sings “Whistle While You Work,” one of two songs in this film based on the concept of working (Image 2.2). She performs this song while teaching the woodland creatures how to help her tidy up the dwarves messy cottage. This musical number provides humor for the audience as they watch the animals attempt to clean as well as try to avoid doing too much work. But, Snow White is present, and, like a domestic mother, teaches the animals how to do the chores correctly. As a domestic goddess, a woman must correctly impart the skills of domesticity and keeping a good home. Snow White is not only teaching the animals in the film, she is also teaching the audience the proper way to keep a home. She explains to the animals that the dishes belong in the washing tub and chastises the squirrels for trying to sweep the dirt under the floor, because there is a proper way to keep a dignified home.

With lyrics like, “Just whistle while you work and cheerfully together we can tidy up the place. So hum a merry tune. It won’t take long when there’s a song to help you set the pace” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), “Whistle While You Work” was not only a song about domestic responsibility, it also provided an uplifting idea that work could be pleasant to a nation finding its way through the painful period of the Great Depression. However, the role that men and women played during the Great Depression was quite different. For men, used to the idea of being the breadwinner, losing a job or losing income made them feel like failures. The role of the housewife became even more vital and enhanced (Ware). While the husbands were bringing home lower incomes, it became the wives’ jobs to keep their families feed, sheltered, and healthy on such smaller budgets. Though still housewives, the greater importance placed on their responsibilities
created an incredibly strong position of power within the walls of their home. The strong working woman was not only relegated to the domestic sphere, but also began to an increase her presence outside of the home over the course of the Depression. Susan Ware writes, “According to census figures, the percentage of employed women fourteen and older actually rose during the Depression from 24.3 percent in 1930 to 25.4 percent in 1940, a gain of two million jobs. Even more dramatically, the number of married women working doubled during the decade.” Many women were either stuck in the home, continuing their anti-feminist role of housewife, or “risked public scorn for supposedly
taking jobs and money away from more deserving men” (Ware) during the Great Depression. “Whistle While You Work” became an anthem to anyone stuck within the terrible situations caused by the Depression. If a woman, or man, could find pleasure within the menial tasks they were forced to perform, then things may not seem so bleak. This becomes an incredibly influential message about hard work and finding happiness provided through an animated princess, cleaning a home.

When the dwarves return home from their day working at the mines, they at first assume someone has broken into their cottage but are shocked and surprised by the clean house and dinner cooking over the fire. The dwarves eventually find their way upstairs where they first lay eyes on the sleeping Snow White. While most of the dwarves are instantly smitten with the beautiful, young girl sleeping in their beds, Grumpy wastes no time complaining about her presence. “She’s a female!” Grumpy argues, “And all females is poison! They’re full of wicked wiles” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Even though Grumpy cannot explain what “wicked wiles” are, he knows for sure that he is “against them.” Grumpy does not know women, but his distaste for anything to do with women clearly label him as a misogynist. Upon Snow White waking up, she quickly informs them that the Queen wants her dead and she has nowhere else to go. While the rest of the dwarves listen to her concern, Grumpy of course, is ready to kick her out of the cottage. When Snow White realizes that she is about to lose the only place to shelter herself, she is forced to return to her one skill—domesticity. Snow White explains, “And if you let me stay, I’ll keep house for you. I’ll wash, I’ll cook…” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). This comment prompts the dwarves to ask if she can bake their favorite
desserts, and when she confirms that indeed she can, they quickly shout, “Hurray! She Stays!” even with Grumpy’s dissenting opinion.

With her new role as mother and domestic goddess in place, Snow White suddenly remembers that dinner is ready and hurries downstairs to check on supper. The dwarves attack the dinner table and ravenously dig into the bread and other side items that are already sitting on the table. However, Snow White, in her new role as domestic goddess, sternly reprimands the dwarves for not washing up before dinner. She chides the dwarves on their rude behavior at the table, shuns them when they lie to her about having washed up “recently,” and demands that they wash or else there will be no dinner. Although the dwarves have only known her a short time, her position within the house gives her the ultimate, unquestioned power. Grumpy, of course, is the only one who refuses to do as the princess asks. As he walks away from Snow White, in an act of high-minded defiance, Grumpy collides into the door, knocking himself flat. Snow White quickly asks if he is hurt, and Grumpy acts like he does not care for her concern. I suggest that we understand that this moment in the story acts as a warning to those who do not listen to or respect women’s roles in the household—disobey the domestic goddess and you are the one who will end up looking like a fool.

**Snow White’s Sentimental Agency**

Despite his forward thinking when it came to technology and the future, Walt Disney continued to be inspired by Victorian era sensibilities. Steven Watts, author of “Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century,” writes:
Disney, an enormously gifted entertainer in search of laughs, innovation, and sales, had stumbled into the arena of modernist art and became an experimenter with its forms and techniques. His true aesthetic heart, however, continued to beat to an internal rhythm of nineteenth-century sentimental realism. His Victorian sensibility grappled with the attraction to an audacious modernism, but neither impulse completely triumphed. This internal conflict produced a hybrid ‘sentimental modernist’ who helped mediate a key cultural transition in twentieth-century America. (Watts, 87)

This odd conglomeration of sensibilities is easily seen within one of Walt Disney’s most important legacies, Disneyland. The different areas within the park form a unique pastiche of the ideas Walt Disney found important and grappled with throughout all of his creations; from Main Street, U.S.A., a tribute to an idealized America at the turn of the century; Adventureland and Frontierland, honoring the ideas of expansion and colonialism; and Tomorrowland, which brought to life a future in which technology and new ideas could build a utopia of equality. Disney displayed this dichotomy of ideas within his films as well. *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), and *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), were all set in the Victorian period while simultaneously breaking ground with their technology and their modern style. It is no surprise than that Disney’s earliest female protagonists took their values and ideals from the bygone Victorian period. In her article, “Cracking the Mirror: Three Re-Visions of ‘Snow White,’” author Cristina Bacchilega comments that *Snow White* “is grounded in the nineteenth-century European dominant discourse about women and the bourgeois cult of domesticity, the ideological effects of which are still with us as the Disney version of ‘Snow White’ and its popularity only confirm” (3). While Walt Disney was breaking ground adding synchronized sound to animated shorts, producing the first feature length animated film, or inventing the
multi-plane camera, this sentimentalism for Victorian sensibilities would not allow him to change much of *Snow White*’s heroine.

While the film’s story relegates Snow White’s power and strength to the household, her influence within the home is absolute. While this representation of female empowerment is not the idea of a strong woman we would imagine today, she is still the total authority within the home. Within the walls of the home Snow White is allowed complete agency, and the dwarves act in accordance with her demands. This position would have been seen as a positive one amongst the audience when the film was released. Snow White may have been powerless outside the house with all the forces working to destroy her, but within the home her demands are unquestioned and she becomes the center point around which everyone else revolves. This is why Snow White’s role is so problematic by today’s standards. For the time in which the film was created, the princess might be seen as a very positive role model for women, with her strong and commanding presence within the home. However, it was impossible for Walt Disney to predict that the character he was creating for his film would still be watched and idolized by millions, decades into the future. A future that consisted of extremely different ideas, morals, and concerns than the Victorian era sensibilities in which Walt Disney took so much inspiration.

**A Pious Princess**

Before Snow White can truly claim her role as a domestic goddess, she must take on the responsibility of religious nurturing within the home. “Religion and piety was the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength,” (152) wrote Barbara Welter in “The
Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.” Young men were taught to look for a pious woman, because of the belief that if she was first and foremost a religious woman, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity were sure to follow (Welter, 152). Welter continues:

One reason religion was valued was that it did not take a woman away from her “proper sphere,” her home. Unlike participating in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive, less a True Woman. (153)

Snow White, already showcasing so many of the traits that Welter would associate with the True Woman, now must showcase her devotion to the Christian faith if she is to become a fully actualized domestic woman.

After dinner, the dwarves entertain Snow White with a silly song and some fun dancing. When the music comes to an end, the dwarves ask Snow White to tell them a story—a love story. It is at this point that Snow White sings her famous anti-feminist ballad, “Some Day My Prince Will Come.” Despite the issues brought up by the idea of a woman waiting around for her prince, this scene plays out more as a mother informing her young children about the roles of men and women within the context of religion. She sings, “Someday when spring is here, we’ll find our love anew. And the birds will sing, and wedding bells will ring” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs). Her mentioning of springtime and birds symbolizes sexuality, while the line she sings about wedding bells performs as a reminder that the church and religion must play a part in the love between two people.

As soon as the song is over, Snow White realizes how late it has become and that the dwarves, as well as herself, should be in bed. The film then provides a scene of Snow
White’s piety as she prays before she goes to bed. The Walt Disney Company, who for almost all of its history, has avoided any blatantly religious moments, starts this scene by showing a heavenly blue light pouring through the bedroom window. The audience hears Snow White softly praying, as the camera pulls back to show that the heavenly spotlight is surrounding the princess (Image 2.3). Although this seems like a private moment for Snow White alone, her prayer is spoken loud enough that the dwarves downstairs can hear her. Unlike Snow White, who has taken the time to pray before bedtime, the dwarves, who have not had a woman in their lives to teach them religious rituals, are going to bed without praying. As they begin to fall asleep, they hear Snow White say,
“Bless the seven little men who have been so kind to me. And may my dreams come true. Amen. Oh, yes. And please make Grumpy like me” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Grumpy of course responds with a sarcastic, “Hah! Women!” but Snow White’s introduction of religious piety has officially taken root within the household.

After the dwarves defeat the evil queen for poisoning Snow White, they return home to find the princess dead, or at least spellbound by a curse that mimics the effects of death. They surround the princess in her bed, fill the room the candles, and weep the loss of the domestic goddess who had changed their lives for the better. The solemn music and the ephemeral lighting all work to make this moment feel similar to a religious ceremony, mourning the departed. The dwarves believe Snow White to be so beautiful, even in death, that they cannot find it in their hearts to bury the princess, instead opting to build a glass coffin above ground. This option allows for her shining radiance and the lessons she imparted to still be present even after her death.

At the end of the film, the dwarves and the animals come to place bundles of flowers around Snow White’s glass coffin (*Image 2.4*). The characters move away from the sleeping princess as sunshine bathes her in otherworldly light. The dwarves and the animals all kneel and pray as they continue to mourn her death. Snow White’s presence in the lives of the dwarves and has taught them all to be better Christians. Through her lessons of piety and prayer, she has brought Christian faith into the dwarves lives. It is only now, after displaying all of the traits of a True Woman that Snow White has proven herself an ideal woman, ready to be married and given a home of her own. Fulfilling all of the qualities of a domestic goddess, Snow White can finally be rewarded for her good
deeds. The handsome prince of her dreams breaks the wicked Queen’s enchantment with true love’s kiss, and carries the princess away to a castle where Snow White will live happily ever after.

**Conclusion**

*Snow White*, like all other films, becomes a representation of what was important during the time that it was created. Bacchilega notes, “For centuries storytellers have retold tales in their own ways, embellishing the storyline with details peculiarly representative of both the individual teller and his time” (1). For this animated film, the
important messages to take away are that hard work, as well as an optimistic personality, can help anyone who is downtrodden find happiness. Watts writes:

In 1937, *Snow White* made national celebrities of the seven dwarves, miners who bent to their tasking singing “Heigh Ho, It’s Off to Work We Go.” It subtly celebrated the virtue, independence, and dignity of (literally) “the little guy” who, despite character flaws and a rough-and-tumble life, works hard, maintains an upright character, and pulls through the worst of travails offered by nature or social order. Aristocracy takes a beating throughout. The Wicked Queen destroys herself, and the protagonist, a princess, gains viewer sympathy by her position as a servant girl and her no-nonsense habits of hard work. (Watts, 99)

Walt Disney did not create *Snow White* as a means to sell a patriarchal view on the role of women. His intention was to showcase a character who deserved more than she possessed, and her downtrodden status as well as her work ethic made her deserving of the happiness that came her way.

Through the character of Grumpy we realize Walt Disney’s intentions toward women. During the film, Grumpy becomes the voice of anyone in the audience who may be overwhelmed with the over-the-top cuteness and earnest sincerity that takes place in the film. Throughout the movie, the audience continually sees Grumpy’s blind misogyny causing him no end of trouble. Every time he acts smarter or better than Snow White, he ends up smacking his head or falling into a creek. No matter how hard he tries, Grumpy eventually caves in to the cheerful, good nature of Snow White. When the animals warn the dwarves that Snow White is in danger from the Queen, it is Grumpy who leads the charge to save the princess. And when the dwarves surround the sleeping Snow White, who they believe is dead, it is Grumpy who turns his face, sobbing alone in the corner, and creates a grief in the audience that brings them to tears. Grumpy show tremendous
growth of character within the narrative of this film that has little to no character
development with the rest of its cast. By the end of the film the unabashed woman-hater, Grumpy, grows to care and love for Snow White regardless of the domestic role she plays in his life and the film. Her loving nature win him over and the audience as well. While this positive growth does not make up for the fact that Snow White is still trapped in a world that only appreciates her for her domestic abilities, it is obvious that for this period she was a strong character who used the only skills available to her in an attempt to make her life better. The problematic representations of a female heroine would continue to be an issue in the next Walt Disney animated fairy tale, Cinderella, but as the twentieth-century continued to challenge traditional women’s roles, so to would Disney animation.
CHAPTER III
CINDERELLA'S DOMESTIC PRISON

Introduction

In the previous chapter we examined Snow White’s domestic agency as it was historically situated in the era that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was created. Here, I will turn our attention towards Walt Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950) and the domestic prison in which the main character, as well as post-World War II women, found themselves trapped. The world had changed since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The role of women expanded dramatically in the 1940s as a result of the war. Unlike the domestic goddess, Snow White, these women took the power they held in the home out into the workforce, and kept society running while the majority of men were away. But, as the war ended and men returned home women were forced back into the domestic roles and stripped of their power outside the home. Disney’s *Cinderella* reflected the angst that many women felt upon being asked to resume their domesticated lives. When it comes to domesticity, Cinderella and Snow White are drastically different characters.

After the incredible success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Walt Disney Animation Studios saw a steady decline in financial blockbusters at the cinema. While movies like *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), and *Bambi* (1942) were moderately well received here in the states, the onset of World War Two in Europe meant that Disney, and the rest of Hollywood, could not export their films to the rest of the world, and therefore watched box office revenues fall. To make matters worse, when America
entered the war, the United States military took over the Walt Disney Animation Studios lot in Burbank and used the animators to produce training and instructional films, which, of course, could not be used for profit. Knowing that they needed a hit, Roy Disney (Walt’s older brother and business partner) realized that they already had a successful film in the form of Snow White. This re-release of Snow White in 1944 introduced the film to a new generation of moviegoers and again was a huge financial smash. The success of Snow White’s re-release would introduce the company to the benefits of re-releases for new movie patrons, but more importantly it caused Walt Disney to realize the popularity of traditional fairy tales in animated form. Whereas Bambi and Dumbo were largely unknown stories to American and European audiences of the time, the classic fairy tales were known the world over, and the stories possessed preexisting fan bases. With this knowledge in mind, Walt Disney realized he could return to the story telling well of fairy tales to create a financially successful film, while also putting his own American ideological spin on them. Thus, he began work on his second animated fairy tale, Cinderella.

With the release of Cinderella in 1950, the Disney Animation Studios had another incredibly successful animated fairy tale on their hands. Unlike the films since Snow White, Cinderella was both critically praised, adored by the film going public, and a financial blockbuster. On a technical level, the animation had much improved, and although it still spent a majority of the time focused on easy to animate mice and birds, the human characters received more screen time and development. Disney’s animators spent their time studying dancer’s bodies in attempts to recreate the fluid and focused
movements of highly trained ballet performers as they attempted to animate more natural human movement. The narrative of the film began to take more liberties with the classic Charles Perrault version of the fairy tale, which is where Disney found the inspiration for his vision of Cinderella. Disney’s script focused on giving more of the characters a fully developed arc and avoided much of the one-note characterization of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

**Fairy Tales and Seventies Feminism**

Cinderella opens with the classic “Once upon a time...” and a female narrator provides the story of young Cinderella. After Cinderella’s mother passes away, her father marries again as he believes his young daughter needs a female presence in the home. Shortly after his remarriage her father also dies, leaving the young Cinderella with a jealous step-mother, Lady Tremaine. The new lady of the house uses her dead husband’s fortune to spoil her own daughters while forcing Cinderella into a life of domestic servitude within her own home. From this point on, the plot follows the major story beats of this classic fairy tale; the beautiful Cinderella is covered in dirt and exhausted from work; a ball held by the King to find his son a bride; a fairy godmother who provides Cinderella with a beautiful gown and glass slippers; and a happily ever after for Cinderella and the Prince.

As Walt Disney always did with his animated films, he could not rely simply on the plot of the original story, and of course this animated version adds new characters and subplots to keep the audience engaged while simultaneously aligning the narrative with American sensibilities. The cute animals and the comedic dwarves from Snow White and
*the Seven Dwarfs* combine within *Cinderella* as the comedically adorable birds and mice that the heroine befriends and nurtures. As Cinderella deals with the antagonism of Lady Tremaine and her step-sisters, so must the mice contend with the step-mother’s malicious cat, Lucifer. While the King and the Grand Duke are added to the cast of characters for more comedic moments, like *Snow White* before it, the Prince continues to remain a figure relegated to the background; a hollow ideal with no real personality or distinctive qualities. The addition of representational animal characters pushes the traditional story of *Cinderella* into new territory, allowing not only to meet the requirements of time in a feature length film, but also to open up new ideas for the fairy tale to explore.

As the film begins, Cinderella awakes before dawn and sings to her mice and bird friends, that “a dream is a wish your heart makes” (*Cinderella*). Cinderella enjoys a few brief moments to herself before the castle clock begins to toll, representing that it is time for her to stop focusing on herself, wake up from her daydreamy haze, and get to work taking care of the home. Cinderella grabs her pillow in a threatening manner and shouts, “Oh that clock! Old killjoy! I hear you! ‘Come on. Get up, you say! Time to start another day.’ Even he orders me around” (*Cinderella*). The dream that Cinderella’s heart makes symbolizes the fleeting years that women were finally allowed a presence outside of the home, and the clock, throughout the film, continually reminds Cinderella, and the women of 1950’s American, that the freedom they once had outside the home is over. (Friedan, 43) When speaking about women’s lives away from domesticity, Betty Friedan writes, “It is like remembering a long-forgotten dream, to recapture the memory of what a career meant to women before ‘career woman’ became a dirty word in America” (40). Even
when Cinderella is finally able to escape her life of never-ending housekeeping to enjoy one night of freedom at the ball, the clock, and by extension, reality, remind her that her brief liberation is limited. Friedan writes:

Fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949 — the housewife-mother. As swiftly as in a dream, the image of the American woman as a changing, growing individual in a changing world was shattered. Her solo flight to find her own identity was forgotten in the rush for the security of togetherness. Her limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home (44).

As the war came to a close, and the threat of the Cold War lingered over the heads of all Americans, women needed to take back their traditional domestic roles in the home to support the “togetherness” that American society demanded. As the twelfth charm strikes, Cinderella’s once beautiful dress is turned back into the homemaking rags, and her fleeting moment of freedom is over. For Cinderella and American women after World War II, it is time to get back to their lives of domesticity if they want to support the nation. The offending clock is located on the castle, the very seat of this fairy tale’s patriarchy, and Cinderella even refers to the clock using a male pronoun, imbuing the timepiece with a masculine personality of dominance and control. For Cinderella, it is time to wake up and stop dreaming of a life away from domesticity.

In 1970, critic Alison Lurie claimed that traditional fairy and folk tales are “one of the few sorts of classic children’s literature of which a radical feminist would approve” (42). In response to Lurie’s position, noted feminist author, Marcia Lieberman, argued within “‘Someday My Prince Will Come:’ Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale” that, “It is hard to see how children can be ‘prepared’ for women’s liberation by reading fairy tales; an analysis of those fairy tales that children actually read indicates
instead that they serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles” (383). This article, by Lieberman, is held by many to be the founding statement of the feminist critique of fairy tales. Although Lieberman’s main argument focuses on the traditional fairy tales written at the end of the late nineteenth century, Snow White’s famous song “Some Day My Prince Will Come” from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, locates the Walt Disney Company within this critique. As Lieberman points out, the most famous fairy tales are those that focus on passive female characters. She states:

Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture. Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White are mythic figures who have replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses, and heroes for most children. (383-384)

One of the many critiques Marcia Lieberman argues for when discussing the classic fairy tale princesses regards the heroine’s agency within their own story, stating, “Since the heroines are chosen for their beauty (*en soi*), not for anything they do (*pour soi*), they seem to exist passively until they are seen by the hero, or described to him. They wait, are chosen, and are rewarded” (386). Lieberman believes that the most popular princess stories tell the tale of women who cannot function on their own and cease to be anything remotely human without the presence of a man to validate her existence. This man will in turn save the beautiful girl from any type of dangerous situation (388). As far as the original written folklore goes, Lieberman is completely correct in her readings of the text. Although it is important to note that fairy tales represented both genders as fairly hallow and lacking in substance. The submissive and inactive nature of female characters upholds the ideals of female domesticity and passivity. In regards to women, the original
lessons to take away from these stories were meant to instruct females on how to be
obedient and fulfill the needs and desires of men. Marcia Lieberman writes:

After leaving [Cinderella’s] slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay
home and wait. The prince has commanded that the slipper be carried to every
house in the kingdom, and that it be tried on the foot of every woman. Cinderella
can remain quietly at home; the prince’s servant will come to her house and will
discover her identity ... otherwise enslaved, and waiting for a passing prince ... the
helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale. (389)

While this passive and docile version of Cinderella rings true to the original fairy tale, I
suggest an alternative reading with regards to Disney’s animated version of this story.

Disney’s Cinderella does presents Leiberman’s woman trapped in a world of domesticity,
but actively dreaming of a way to escape, and thus they are able to come closer to the
ideal that Lurie believed feminists would approve.

In watching Cinderella, we must again deal with the anachronistic issues that the
critiques of the film posit as problematic, especially in regards to Cinderella’s supposed
lack of agency. Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen write in their article titled, “Who’s
Afraid of Female Agency,” that, “agency [is] an analytical term that refers to the
purposeful actions of individuals, leaving aside the question whether these actions are
autonomously arrived at, or are results of structural forces” (165). Taken from the ideas
of Anthony Gidden’s, Duit and van Zoonen contend that human behavior is based on a
circular formation of both structure and agency (165). We must then take into
consideration that all of Cinderella’s actions are based on both the structured reality in
which she exists and the individual choices she makes that constitute her agency. When
approaching the role of women within fairy tales, I believe one must situate the heroines
agency within a historical context. If agency is the ability to speak or act for herself or himself, it is crucial not only to take into account the time period and societal structures in which the original story was written, but also to know the era in which these films were produced. It is problematic to assume that these characters, who are situated within a defined time period, act against the societal norms of that period even if those actions support patriarchal structures. Lieberman views these stories and critiques them through the lens of 1970s feminist scholarship, which will always find a less than healthy representation of gender equality. By contrast, my reading of *Cinderella* takes into account the historical period leading up to the film’s release, and showcases that the Disney interpretations have included positive changes made in regards to the fairy tale female heroines. It is easy for Lieberman to argue the negative impact of fairy tales while looking back at these stories from her place of feminist enlightenment in 1972. It is more beneficial to view these works of art and literature through a historically situated lens because it provides an opportunity to show growth and hopefully a positive trajectory of change.

For a story written in the late nineteenth-century and placed in a time further in the past, what does Lieberman think Cinderella should be doing? Let us consider Cinderella’s situation within a historical context. With her father gone and her step-mother in charge, she has no control over her home or inheritance. If the story took place within Lieberman’s 1970s America, Cinderella would have the opportunity to leave the home, and although she would have many hurdles to overcome, she could eventually build a happy and successful life for herself. Within the time period of the fairy tale and
the film, there is nowhere for Cinderella to go that would allow her to build a better life. To leave the only place and people she has ever known would leave Cinderella nowhere. Unlike Snow White, who was forced to leave her home, if Cinderella were to leave her home, it is easy to imagine, that, although she would escape the oppressive control of her step-family, she would only enter into a world of controlling patriarchy that would probably leave her in a worse situation than the position in which she currently finds herself. This situation would also ring true for any real woman within this time period as well. Cinderella’s so-called passivity can then be read as an active choice that the character is making about her life. Cinderella is acutely aware of the situation in which she finds herself trapped, and begrudgingly decides that this is the best option. Her decision not to risk loosing her home is thus her own. Lieberman’s argument that Cinderella is passive is harder to believe once the viewer considers that Cinderella actively makes an unfortunate, but incredibly realistic decision about her life. Pragmatic agency then, is a progressive virtue Cinderella embodies.

Cinderella’s Rising Agency

Early in the film, Cinderella finds her dog Bruno, a gift from her deceased father, dreaming loudly on the kitchen floor (Image 3.1). Cinderella knows that she is not allowed to let Bruno sleep within the home, but she allows it to happen anyway. I believe this is a form of silent protest for Cinderella. Fed up with the unjust way the rules of her step-mother affect her life, Cinderella willingly lets Bruno sleep within the house as she exerts her own power in whatever little ways she can find. When she wakes Bruno, she asks if he was having the dream where he is chasing Lucifer, the cat, again. As only
animated animals do, the dog nods his head in understanding, but Cinderella is quick to inform him that his desire to harm Lucifer is bad. Cinderella tells Bruno:

Suppose they heard you upstairs. You know the orders. So if you don’t want to lose a nice warm bed, you better get rid of those dreams. You know how? Just learn to like cats. No, I mean it. Lucifer has his good points too. For one thing he... Sometimes he... Hmm, there must be something good about him” (Cinderella).

From this simple exchange, it is clear that Cinderella knows she and Bruno are in the same precarious situation within Lady Tremaine’s home. Throughout the film, Lady Tremaine and Lucifer are continually represented as the spiteful and spoiled counterparts to Cinderella and Bruno. In one of the very first scenes, the audience sees a young
Cinderella with her father, horse, and dog outside on a bright and sunny day. (Image 3.2)
The film immediately juxtaposes this idyllic scene of joy with a shot of Lady Tremaine, hidden in the shadows of a window, stroking her kitten, Lucifer and starring at Cinderella with disgust and contempt. (Image 3.3) Both Cinderella and Bruno must forever stay within the good graces of those who control their fate. If Cinderella does not want to lose her nice warm bed and instead be homeless on the street, she must try her best to be civil with her terrible step-family, even if she cannot find a single redeeming quality about them.

Although Cinderella and Bruno continue to be gentle and refuse to be pushed to a point of aggression, Lucifer, learns his behavior from his master. He will always use his relative status within the house as a way to cause problems for the dog. Lucifer violently scratches Bruno, causing him to growl and Lucifer throws himself on the ground pretending to be injured. Cinderella, concerned that Bruno has attacked Lady Tremaine’s precious feline, must escort Bruno out of the home so as to protect her dog and herself from the wrath of her step-mother. Lucifer, symbolizes Lady Tremaine, and continually acts out scenes of aggression towards Bruno and the mice who all serve as analogs to Cinderella. Just as Lady Tremaine continues to toy with Cinderella and remind her of her lowly place within the home, so too the cat shows the other animals their lower status. When Cinderella argues for her right to go to the ball, Lady Tremaine shockingly seems amenable to the idea. After Cinderella leaves the room, her two step-sisters fly into a rage due to the fact that their mother would even consider letting Cinderella attend the party. However, Lady Tremaine reminds them that she said “If Cinderella could get all her work
Image 3.2 and 3.3: Gentle and kind Cinderella juxtaposed with the dark and ominous Lady Tremaine.

done and find a suitable dress to wear,” (Cinderella) knowing full well that she will keep Cinderella so busy with domestic work that she will never be able to attend. Scenes like these remind the viewer of how little power Cinderella has within her own home. Back in the kitchen, Bruno sulks past Cinderella, knowing he has just lost his warm bed. She reminds him, “I know it isn’t easy, but at least we should try to get along together” (Cinderella). Always on the receiving end of her step-family’s tormenting and accustomed to taking the blame for anything that goes wrong within the house, Cinderella knows that the cat was to blame for the incident with Bruno. Cinderella cannot vent her anger towards those who deserve it, so she quickly turns on Lucifer and shouts, “and that includes you, your majesty!”

As the film progresses we continue to see Cinderella experience moments that push her to assert her own agency within the household. After Cinderella is forced to scrub the floors for something she did not do, she quietly sings to herself to keep her mind off the menial task she has been given. She suddenly awakes from her daydream to see that Lucifer has purposefully made a mess of the floor she has just scrubbed. Instantly, the dreamlike quality of the musical sequence is shattered and Cinderella, for the first time, shows intense anger and frustration. She begins to chase after Lucifer, grabbing her broom in a violent fashion as if she intends to harm the malicious cat (Image 3.4). Before she is able to harm Lucifer, she is distracted when the doorbell rings. It is easy to assume that if the doorbell had not rung in time to distract Cinderella, that this could have been the moment where she finally lost her cool and punished Lucifer in a way that would have gotten herself removed from the house. Constantly forced to assume
a submissive role within the home, this moment within the film displays a hidden, active side of Cinderella that is tired of the abuse and passive position that is forced upon her.

The scene that follows has Cinderella interrupting Lady Tremaine’s music lesson with her two daughters. While Lady Tremaine is outraged by Cinderella’s intrusion, all is quickly forgotten when Cinderella informs the ladies that they have just received a message from the King. Lady Tremaine reveals from the letter that a royal ball is to be held in honor of the Prince and that all eligible maidens are to attend. Cinderella, still riled up from her aggression towards Lucifer, speaks up and says, “Why that means I can go too!” Her step-sisters are quick to make a joke about the dirty maid Cinderella asking
the Prince to hold her broom while she dances, but Cinderella is just as quick to remind them, “Well, why not? After all I’m still a member of the family. And it says: ‘By Royal Command, every eligible maiden is to attend’” (Cinderella). At this moment it is apparent that Disney’s Cinderella is not the completely meek and inactive princess that Lieberman believes populates all fairy tales. It is difficult to imagine Disney’s Snow White being this forthright with her own step-mother who forces domesticity upon her. However, this Disney version of Cinderella is assertive, takes a stand for something she wants, is not waiting for someone to take action for her, and demands what she knows is rightfully fair. Lieberman argues that “Some heroines show a kind of strength in their ability to endure, but they do not actively seek to change their lot” (392-93) and while it is true that Cinderella does show grace through her ability to deal with her domestic prison, she is also an active agent who demands the same rights as everyone else.

It is important to note that Cinderella is not arguing to go to the royal ball because she hopes to meet the prince and fall in love, but because the invitation from the King, and therefore the law, states that she is just as welcome at the celebration as everyone else in the kingdom, no matter what their social standing. Her step-mother’s rules may be unjust but those of the kingdom command equality for its citizens. This intelligent version of Cinderella uses the King’s laws as a force to provide her with necessary support to stand up against Lady Tremaine’s dictatorial rulership within the home. The invitation may be to a royal ball but for Cinderella, the royal ball is an invitation for a night away from the house, away from chores, and away from domesticity.
A Domestic Prison

From the opening scene, it is apparent that Cinderella hates the life she is forced to live because of Lady Tremaine. Domesticity was not an issue for Snow White—in fact she seemed to thrive because of it. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* never explores Snow White’s character deeply enough to show the audience whether she was truly unhappy with the life of domestic duties that her step-mother imposed upon her. Snow White’s happiness in her domestic role is an issue when Lieberman states, “fairy tales that children actually read indicates instead that they serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles” (383). However, in the case of Disney’s *Cinderella*, it is clear to see that she is not happy or content within a traditional social role that would trap her in a life of domesticity.

Perhaps no sequence showcases Cinderella’s misery more than the scene in which the audience is introduced to Lady Tremaine. After one of her step-sisters thinks that Cinderella has played a prank against her, she rushes into her mother’s room to blame Cinderella. For the first time the audience hears Lady Tremaine’s booming voice demanding Cinderella’s presence in her bedroom. As Cinderella walks in Lady Tremaine demands that Cinderella close the door behind her. Frightened by the punishment she knows is about to befall her, Cinderella stands frozen against the bedroom door as the morning light pours through her step-mother’s windows, providing the only source of illumination in Lady Tremaine’s terrifying chambers. The light through the windowpanes creates a shadow of bars across Cinderella, similar to the bars of a prison cell (Image 3.5). The scene is incredibly tense, as Lady Tremaine remains hidden in the shadows until
a slow camera glide across the room reveals the commanding and beautiful face of the step-mother. Just like a prisoner waiting for a punishment to be handed down from a warden, Cinderella remains frozen, knowing she has absolutely no power within this dynamic. Like Bruno before her, Cinderella knows she is about to take the blame for something she did not do. Even when Cinderella performs the domestic duties she despises to the best of her ability, they are used as a reminder of her fragile standing within the home. Household chores become the cage that Cinderella cannot escape from. As Cinderella tries to explain the misunderstanding, Lady Tremaine barks at her to “hold her tongue.” The tone in the step-mother’s voice makes it clear that this situation has taken place before. Lady Tremaine begins to list chores for Cinderella to do around the house, but her tone and facial expressions make these domestic duties seem more like
punishments laid against a criminal in a court of law. Even when Cinderella tries to inform her step-mother that she has already completed some of these chores, Lady Tremaine shrilly exclaims, “Do them again!” For Cinderella there is no winning. Domesticity is not the shield that protected Snow White from harm and enabled happiness. In *Cinderella* it is a prison, an inescapable routine filled with mundane tasks that deprive one of their dreams and steal any ideas of a happy future.

For women of 1950’s America, this domestic prison would feel like a very real place in their lives, because of the expectations of society during this time period. Betty Friedan begins her seminal work by stating:

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night — she was afraid to ask even herself the silent question— “Is this all?” (15)

The question “Is this all?” asked by so many women symbolizes the imprisoned feelings that Cinderella, and women of the 1950s themselves, were dealing with. Throughout history, women had been undervalued, but the ideals of post-World War II America informed women that they were not inferior to men. In fact, they were equal to man, as long as women understood that said equality meant embracing their femininity and domestic natures. Any unhappiness that women might encounter in their lives was due to the denial of woman’s true nature and by envying the role’s of men (Friedan, 43). Being a domestic housewife thus became the pinnacle of what it meant to be a woman. Women were placed upon a pedestal, finally giving them the credit they deserved for their true
feminine natures and excellence in the domestic role within the home. Society was finally praising women for their roles, but said roles were restrictive and denied the individual needs of women—needs that could only be met from a position outside of the domestic realm. A woman in correspondence with Friedan wrote, “It has been the feeling of being almost alone with my problem that has made it so hard … It is an awakening to know that I’m not an oddity and can stop being ashamed of wanting something more” (33). Cinderella’s step-family constantly reminds her that Cinderella’s role is not to want more, and to accept the position that life has given her. However, that same role becomes a punishment that she cannot escape. Why should she expect more? To women of the post-World War II America, Cinderella’s silent domestic suffering would have been incredibly relatable.

**Happily Ever After and Societal Norms**

Since *Cinderella* is a fairy tale, the audience is well aware that a happy ending is sure to come, but how can Walt Disney provide a happy ending that is true to the original fairy tale, while at the same time speak to the issues of agency and domesticity that have arisen over the course of the film? Like any good businessman, Walt Disney must create a product that appeals to a broad audience. Being a commercial business, the Walt Disney Studios will never lead the change, but they will respond to a changing world. With the financial problems his company had sustained over the previous decade, Walt Disney knew that to save his company he could not afford to make another experimental animated film like *Fantasia* (1940), or a film that bucks the expected societal norms of post World War II America. *Cinderella* thus creates a conflicted ending in which the
heroine is lucky enough to escape her domestic prison, but not so fortunate as to completely escape the traditional role of a American woman in 1950.

Because of this conflict, we must explore the relationship between the only real male characters in the film: the King and the Grand Duke. Although both characters are used in the film as comic relief, their scenes and dialogue always focus on the traditional idea of marriage. We are first introduced to the King as he hurls his crown through a window while ranting that his son, the Prince, is shirking his responsibilities by not settling down and starting a family. The King, by his position, and his role as the main male figure in the film, represents the will of patriarchy. This particular patriarch is obsessed with marriage, and is violently adamant that his son settle down and start a family.

As American soldiers began to return after the war, there was an immediate need for things to return to normal as quickly as possible. The trauma of The Great Depression, followed by the events of the World War II, created a longing for the return of a simpler time. This simpler time manifested itself by returning to “normal”—men as providers, women in the home. The King in Cinderella demands that his son, who has also just returned from war, begin to mend a fractured society by settling down and starting a family as a reward for his service. The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist David Halberstam writes in his book The Fifties, “After World War II most Americans had a vision of a better life just ahead ... As promised by endless Hollywood films, it represented fulfillment, contentment: confident dads, perky moms, and glowing children” (131-132). Halberstam speaks to the need that Americans had to turn their country back
into the land where dreams could come true, especially after two decades of hardships. Therefore, the King becomes the driving force within *Cinderella* who pushes the narrative back into the realm of traditional gender norms and roles.

It is the King’s decision to throw a royal ball in honor of his son’s return, but he is actually plotting that one of the eligible maidens in his kingdom might attract the eye of the Prince. The King’s intentions are not to provide his son with happiness and love, but to put into motion a relationship that will create a traditional family. The King does not believe in such things as love or romance. He informs the Grand Duke that his son only needs to find the right girl under the right conditions. The King laments to the Grand Duke, “I’m lonely in this desolate old palace. I want to hear the pitter patter of little feet again” (*Cinderella*). At one point in the narrative, the King has a dream sequence in which he has a young grandson and granddaughter riding on his back as he plays pony with the children (*Image 3.6*).

For a film that spends so much time focusing on the power of dreams, this is the only moment in which we are actually allowed to witness one of the characters true dreams. Dream sequences are rare within Disney animated films so it is critical to note that the story goes out of its way to include one that focuses on the importance of traditional gender relations producing offspring. The King could care less about the actual woman that the Prince chooses as his bride. Her only importance stems from her ability to give birth to children and future heirs to the kingdom. For Cinderella, the importance of creating a family means that her marriage to the Prince would free her from the
domestic prison in her step-mother’s home, but it would place her squarely in a position to fulfill her “wifely duties” of providing a family.

**Conclusion**

As the film comes to its inevitable happy ending, the issues brought up throughout the film do not have a clear way of concluding themselves. When Cinderella learns that the man she spent her evening dancing with at the ball was the Prince and that he has fallen in love with her, she is instantly overcome with happiness. Her step-sisters fly around the room, dumping laundry and more chores on Cinderella, but she does not pay any attention to them as she dumps their clothes on the floor and walks out of the room. Disney has found a conflicting solution to Cinderella’s domestic prison—marriage. As Lieberman writes, “Marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it
is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment” (386). For Cinderella it might just be both, and it is most certainly her best option. With so few options available to Cinderella, the film relies on the hope that perhaps her decision to marry the Prince will lead to a better life than the one within her step-mother’s home. Lieberman continues, “While it would be futile and anachronistic to suppose that these tales could or should have depicted alternate options or rewards for heroines or heroes, we must still observe that marriage dominates them” (386). From the moment Cinderella finds out that the Prince wants her to be his bride, she seems more excited about escaping her step-mother’s house than she is about marrying the Prince. By marrying the Prince, Cinderella will begin a life where she no longer must be a domestic slave.

Within the narrative of the film, marriage becomes a contradiction for American women in the 1950’s, who, by getting married, are practically guaranteed all of the domestic duties in their new role as wives. Though for the majority of the film, Disney Animation Studios has built their Cinderella character as one who objects to the domestic role of women. She finds it deeming, strangling her of her independence. Disney’s Cinderella acts with a subversive and growing agency that is not present in the classic Perrault version of the fairy tale. However, in the end, most of the positive feminist thinking is undone by the patriarchal demand that women must marry and stay within their traditional gender roles. Cinderella is granted freedom from one form of imprisonment but is immediately locked into a new role under the control of men. As one of the last Disney animated fairy tales before the onset of second wave Feminism in the 1970’s, Cinderella’s attempts to showcase a strong female character are eventually left
unresolved, and will continue to stay that way until the release of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, some forty years later.
CHAPTER IV
THE ENLIGHTENED BEAUTY AND THE DOMESTIC BEAST

Introduction

After yet another decade of slumping box office success, Walt Disney Animation once again returned to the genre that had already saved the company twice before—fairy tales. With the enormously successful *The Little Mermaid* (1989) behind them, Disney set its sights on an even more well known story with *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Combined, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* would usher in a modern renaissance for Disney animation that would alter not only the world of animation, but film history as well. At the 64th Academy Awards, broadcast on March 20, 1992, *Beauty and the Beast* was nominated for six awards, including Best Picture. This nomination was a major milestone as it marked the first time in the 54 years since Walt Disney created the first feature length animated film with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* that an animated movie was nominated for Best Picture. *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) ended up taking home the award that evening, but in the end, the nomination for *Beauty and the Beast* was enough to prove that things were changing. While other Hollywood animation studios were also creating feature length films during this period, it was the Disney Animation Studios that continued to strive for groundbreaking films that would break the stereotype that animation was only meant for children. Animation was finally being recognized as a legitimate form of filmmaking by the Academy, Hollywood, and America as a whole.
With this reshaping of the way people viewed animation, came a transformation of the classic Disney princess as well. Gone was the idea of a passive princess waiting for her prince charming — in her place was a woman who wanted more out of life than what was expected of her. A woman who was active, passionate, longed for adventure, and above all, had an undying thirst for knowledge. Belle was the Disney princess that Marcia Lieberman and Kay Stone had argued did not exist within fairy tales when they changed the way feminism looked at women in these stories during the early 1970s. Donald Haase writes in “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship:”

Throughout the 1970s, these ideas were repeated in writings by American feminists, which did not always analyze fairy tales in depth, but more frequently utilized them simply as evidence to demonstrate the sociocultural myths and mechanisms that oppress women. In 1974, for example, Andrea Dworkin’s *Woman Hating* echoed Lieberman’s thesis by asserting that fairy tales shape our cultural values and understanding of gender roles by invariably depicting women as wicked, beautiful, and passive, while portraying men, in absolute contrast, as good, active, and heroic. (17)

After years of scholarly criticism finding Disney animation anti-feminist, the Disney princess had truly started to evolve in a way that understood the way women were being viewed in the wake of second-wave feminism.

The change in gender representation is at least partially due to Linda Woolverton, who was the script-writer of *Beauty and the Beast* and the first woman to ever write a Disney animated film. After the release of the film, Woolverton said, “I wasn't on a soapbox … But Belle is a feminist. I'm not critical of Snow White, Cinderella . . . they reflected the values of their time. But it just wasn't in me to write a throwback. I wanted a woman of the ‘90s, someone who wanted to do something other than wait for her prince
to come” (Dutka, N.p.). Woolverton’s views are a direct reaction to the anti-feminist criticism against the Walt Disney Animation Studio. Her presence in the making of the film can be seen as a direct influence on how the character of Belle was created. Woolverton had originally planned a sequence in which Belle, longing to travel the world, was pushing pins into a map of the world as a way of marking all the places the character had a desire to visit. When Woolverton looked over the storyboards, the animator instead drew Belle baking a cake — a clear throwback to the classic domestic princesses of earlier Disney films. In the end, Woolverton was able to convince the animators to show Belle engaging in her favorite hobby — reading a book (Dutka, N.p.). The changes made to the classic Disney princess in *Beauty and the Beast* contributed to the positive critical response as well as the overwhelming box-office success. The film proved that the transformation Disney had created within its princess protagonist was a popular alteration, and one for which the movie-going public was ready.

Like all their previous fairy tales, Disney once again took liberties when it came to its version of the story. The film begins in a small French village and introduces the audience to Belle; a smart, adventurous, young woman who does not fit in with the people who live in her town. However, the most handsome and popular man in town, Gaston, is desperate to marry Belle. Gaston feels that Belle is the only woman in town as beautiful as he is, and therefore the only person worthy of his advances. Belle’s father, Maurice, while traveling across the French countryside, is imprisoned within the Beast’s castle. When Belle arrives to rescue Maurice, she willing takes her father’s place as the Beast’s prisoner. Through a series of misadventures, Belle and the hideous but gentle
Beast grow closer and becomes friends. When Belle finds out that her father is in danger, the Beast lets her leave, but no sooner has Belle rescued her father than the manipulative Gaston tries to blackmail Belle into marrying him. When Gaston finds out Belle has feelings for the Beast, he leads an army of townsmen to the castle in an attempt to kill the Beast. As Gaston and the Beast fight on the rooftop of the castle, Belle arrives just in time to save the Beast from falling to his death. Belle openly admits that she does in fact love the Beast, which breaks the curse and provides a happily ever after for the protagonists of the film.

It is my argument that Beauty and the Beast displays the first major steps taken by Disney to create a feminist princess within one of their animated fairy tale films. Besides making Belle an intelligent and active character, the film also explores a depth within the male characters previously unseen. Instead of starring a female character threatened by other females, Belle becomes a figure of strength, willing to stand up to any man or beast. Through a critical analysis of the film as a text, this chapter will reveal layers within Beauty and the Beast which validate Belle as the first feminist Disney princess.

She’s Nothing Like the Rest of Us

Although the main narrative structures of the classical fairy tale are present within the Disney version, it is the characters of the animated film that transform the original story into something fresh and modern. My analysis on the film’s opening number “Belle,” reveals that the small French town into which Belle and her father Maurice have recently moved represents the ideals of traditional fairy tales. This musical number symbolizes a conscious moment in which the creators present something new to the
audience. Through song, this scene provides a near perfect introduction to the film’s heroine, Belle, and informs the viewers that they are in for a new kind of Disney fairy tale.

As the song opens, Belle sings, “Little town, it’s a quiet village. Everyday, like the one before” and she continues by singing, “Every morning just the same, since the morning that we came, to this poor provincial town” (*Beauty and the Beast*). Throughout the song Belle continually refers to the town as provincial and therefore unsophisticated and narrow-minded. Susan Jeffords writes in her article “The Curse of Masculinity: Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*:"

[Belle] is, as the audience’s introduction to her reveals, an exception in her town. In fact, in one of the longest production numbers of the film – requiring a cast of voices, elaborate animation and complex movement – the townspeople call her ‘strange’ and not ‘normal,’ principally because she spends all of her time reading. While the earlier [versions of Beauty] were avid readers, the Disney film marks Belle’s interest as more of a social than character feature, using it to distinguish Belle from the rest of the townspeople, marking her as better and less provincial than they (170).

Throughout this opening musical number, all the women in the town are focused on domestic issues or keeping themselves busy with traditionally feminine hobbies. Belle walks through the town noticing women who are getting their hair done, shopping in the market, or struggling with an armful of unruly children. One woman is even frustrated by her husband’s wandering eyes. None of these women have a life that Belle wants, and throughout it all, Belle continues to remind the audience that “There must be more than this provincial life!”
During the musical number, Belle stops at a water fountain to sing about her enjoyment from a book. An older woman washing laundry at the same fountain hears Belle’s voice, and becomes incredibly aggravated by Belle’s presence (Image 4.1). The older woman frowns as she scrubs the clothing—she is comfortable with her role—but upon hearing Belle, she becomes disturbed. As viewers we understand that she feels criticized by Belle, who wants more from her life than to be in a domestic role. This brief moment within the film represents the juxtaposition between Belle’s desires and the expectations of her town. While the rest of the women in Belle’s provincial town are tied to their household duties, Belle is shown as a free agent, able to do with her life as she pleases. Since Belle spends her time consumed with books, this older woman, and the town by extension, view her as an outcast. As long as Belle continues to be an individual within their town, she will remain an outsider.

When discussing Belle’s role as an outcast, it is also important to notice that Belle stands out visually from the rest of the town. Her exceptional beauty and the fact that she does not adhere to the traditional gender roles of this small French village, are only a couple of the reason she is unique. The creators of the film choose to animate Belle in a different color palette than the rest of the town. The musical number “Belle” shows the entire town awash in muted earth tones such as ocher, brown, and yellow, while Belle is shown in a very bright, sky-blue dress. Through the choice of colors, the town represents grounded people who go out of their way to be like everyone else in their village. Their choice of colors makes them bland and unoriginal. Belle in bright blue and cloud white aligns her with the sky, and by extension, freedom. This choice of color makes Belle a
character who dreams beyond that of the people around her, which makes her a character to be questioned and ridiculed because she does not follow the rules of the crowd.

The townsfolk continue to gossip about Belle by repeating the lyrics, “But behind that fair facade, I’m afraid she’s rather odd, very different from the rest of us, she’s nothing like the rest of us, yes different from the rest of us is Belle,” (Beauty and the Beast). Each line of music adds more people to the chorus of voices who question Belle’s behavior in the town. This belief in Belle’s peculiar presence within the town only heightens the subtextual comment that Belle is unlike any Disney princess that has come before.

Belle’s differences are showcased even more during “Belle Reprise,” otherwise known as the “I Want” song. In every Disney fairy tale there is always a moment when the heroine sings a song about the things she desires and longs to obtain. In Snow White
and the Seven Dwarfs it is when Snow White sings “I’m wishing for the one I love” and in Cinderella it occurs when she sings “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.” While Snow White is clearly asking for a man in her “I Want,” song and Cinderella is dreaming of an escape, Belle’s “I Want” song explicitly rejects the idea of marriage and domesticity. After Gaston’s surprise proposal, Belle sings, “Can you imagine? He asked me to marry him! Me, the wife of that boorish, brainless...” and then goes on to sing, “Madame Gaston, can’t you just see it? Madame Gaston, his little wife. No sir, not me, I guarantee it. I want much more than this provincial life” (Beauty and the Beast). Through her “I Want” song, Belle mocks Gaston as well as the provincial ideals that would see her settled in a traditional gender role. Jeffords writes, “Belle is, for all intents and purposes, a Disney Feminist. And Gaston is a Male Chauvinist Pig, the kind that would turn the women of any primetime talk show audience into beasts themselves” (170).

Belle has a desire to escape her surroundings that expect her to settle down. The provincial town that she lives within would see her stripped of her progressive personality—another woman shopping in the market and taking care of her family. Belle continues her song by singing, “I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. I want it more than I can tell. And for once it might be grand to have someone understand, I want so much more than they’ve got planned” (Beauty and the Beast). Belle, the constant reader who longs for adventure, sees her town as a place that denies deviation from the norm, and because of this, she has no one to share her true ambitions—ambitions that reach far beyond the life of a domesticated woman.
Both “Belle” and the “Belle Reprise” take place within the first fifteen minutes of the film. By this point Belle has provided the audience with multiple reasons to understand that she is changing the expectations of a fairy tale heroine. While the small, provincial town that Belle lives in clings to the gender roles espoused in classical fairy tales, Belle is a Disney princess who rejects traditional labels and expectations. Her intelligence and strength of character make her an outcast in the world she lives in, and so, Belle must find a place that nurtures her true self.

**Beauty in Knowledge**

Disney crafts change within the princess by making Belle a promoter of education, a bringer of knowledge, and by rejecting the ignorance that has come before her. Unlike the princesses of the past, she is not interested in finding a man or cleaning a home. Instead, Belle is imbued with intellectual pursuits, with her main joy deriving from reading. Learning and books provide a window to another world, allowing Belle to escape from her world that does not appreciate women like herself. Her knowledge becomes a tool allowing Belle to better those around her who are willing to learn.

Belle’s growing relationship with the Beast provides the best example of her power to use education to change people for the better. In the film’s early scenes that include the Beast, he lurks in shadows so that the audience sees very little detail. Since the moment the Beast was cursed, he has hidden himself in darkness as a way to escape the eyes of the world. The darkness of the Beast’s world becomes symbolic of his selfish and conceited behavior—the very reason he is cursed in the first place. The scene in which Belle trades places with her father as the Beast’s prisoner takes place in a dark and
dimly lit dungeon. The Beast demands that Belle stay in his castle forever, but before she
gives her answer, she realizes that the person holding her father captive has kept himself
concealed within the shadows. Before she can commit to the Beast’s demands she asks
him to “Come into the light” (Beauty and the Beast). The Beast complies with Belle’s
request and although she is shocked at the towering monster in front of her, Belle’s
simple request represents a much larger ideal. By spending his life hiding in the shadows,
the Beast has refused to acknowledge his behavior and actions. The shadows symbolize
the ignorance of the Beast’s past. By asking the Beast to step out of the shadows, Belle is
essentially coaxing him to step out from his own dark past and accept her gift of
enlightenment. (Image 4.2). This seemingly insignificant action is arguably a significant
first step on the Beast’s journey of transformation. Unlike Gaston, who is determined to
stick to his outdated patriarchal behavior, the Beast is open to the idea of change.

By being active and determined, Belle becomes a character who enacts change
and positive development within the Beast. She is defiant without being obstinate, and
strong in her convictions without appearing faulty. It is hard to image earlier Disney
princesses like Snow White or Cinderella standing toe to toe with a monstrous beast yet
alone coming out on top—even though that is exactly what Belle does. Where Cinderella
failed to hold her own against Lady Tremaine, hidden in the shadows, Belle is triumphant
in her arguments with the Beast. After the Beast angrily demands that Belle join him for
dinner, she simply does not comply with his wish. Her lack of action sets off the Beast’s
violent and hot-tempered nature. The Beast pounds upon Belle’s bedroom door and
shouts “I thought I told you to come down to dinner!” Although he has the power to rip
the door down and drag her from her room, Belle, every so coolly responds, “I’m not hungry” (*Beauty and the Beast*). The two characters continue their discussion from either side of the door, and even though the Beast’s anger continues to rise, Belle remains calm and steadfast. The film never shows the audience Belle, however, she continues to maintain absolute control over her violent captor. While the Beast tries to use all his fearsome strength and power to command the scene, Belle remains calm and unflinching against his furious nature. By denying the Beast his every demand and whim, Belle becomes the first person in his life whom he cannot control with fear and intimidation. Belle stubbornly denies the Beast, no matter how hard he tries to bully her. Belle’s denial of the Beast’s desires forces him to adapt and learn other ways in which to deal with people. This scene exhibits Belle’s ability to be active through passivity. It also displays
her as a character much stronger in the face of a threatening situation than many of the Disney princesses that had come before her.

Belle displays yet another transgression against the wishes of the Beast that once again sheds her knowledge and light into a darkened area of the Beast’s life. During a late night excursion throughout her new home, Belle sneaks into the west wing of the castle—an area that the Beast has strictly forbidden. Belle’s curiosity compels her to be an active character that illuminates the parts of her world she does not understand. When Belle first enters the west wing, she finds a space much darker than the rest of the castle. This area is filled with shadows, destroyed furniture, claw marks, and a suspicious looking ripped painting. Unbeknownst to Belle, the west wing houses the private quarters of the Beast. As Belle walks through the forbidden area of the castle, she opens doors that expose light in areas that otherwise would have remained dark. This physical space becomes symbolic of the Beast’s broken psyche and uneducated mind, and Belle’s presence within the space is just another example of her ability to pierce the darkness. (Image 4.3). When the Beast discovers Belle in his private chambers, he flies into a rage much more violent than Belle or the audience has seen up to this point. The Beast begins to smash and throw furniture around the room. The frightened Belle flees the west wing, leaving the Beast alone with his fury. However, the moment Belle is gone from his sight the Beast is suddenly struck with overwhelming guilt and shame. The Beast knows he must impress Belle if he is to hope that she can help break the curse. Now that she has seen into the way he lives through exploring his private quarters, he knows those chances are slim. For the first time in the film, the Beast regrets his own actions. This is a pivotal moment in the film,
because it represents that Belle is beginning to have a positive influence on a character who previously showed no signs of redemption. It is her intellectual and active presence in the story that forces other characters to demand better of themselves.

After the Beast almost dies saving Belle from a pack of attacking wolves, the two begin to strengthen their friendship. Belle begins to realize that the Beast can care for others besides himself. It was never his outer appearance that caused her to dislike him, but his rotten core that caused her disgust. In an effort to show his warming affections for Belle, the Beast surprises her by giving her the enormous castle library. Gaston, the villain of the film, finds Belle’s enjoyment of reading a disgusting pastime and is constantly throwing her books in the mud or otherwise showing total disregard for knowledge. However, the Beast not only provides the tools for Belle to grow her education, he encourages it.

growing affection for one another, the audience sees moments of Belle reading to the Beast and sharing moments of learning together. Something that Gaston—the hunting, masculine, man’s man—would never imagine doing.

**Who’s A Man Among Men?**

During the course of the opening musical number the audience is introduced to the extremely vain and self-centered Gaston. If Belle’s small patriarchal village manifested itself into one singular character, that person would be Gaston. He is physically imposing—muscular, strong-jawed—and shown as a hunter as well as a leader of “real” men. His trusty sidekick Lefou states “that no beast [or woman] alive stands a chance” against Gaston’s strength and charm. Even though Belle cannot stand him, the vain and superficial Gaston is determined to marry Belle because she is the most beautiful girl in town. Although Lefou is a dopey character and a groveling sycophant, he is still aware that Belle would not be interested in Gaston simply because she is so different from everyone else in town. Gaston cannot grasp the validity of Lefou’s concerns, and he sings, “Right from the moment that I met her, saw her, I said she’s gorgeous and I fell. Here in town there’s only she, who is beautiful as me, so I’m making plans to woo and marry Belle” (*Beauty and the Beast*). It is clear from this lyric alone that Gaston, and by extension the men of his village, have no interest in women beyond their physical appearance. Even though there are other beautiful women in town who throw themselves at Gaston, his narcissistic personality will only allow him to focus on the one woman he feels compares to him in exterior beauty, even if she is completely wrong for him on every other level.
Since Gaston, as a character, is a creation of Disney’s interpretation of “Beauty and the Beast,” it is important to note that the film not only rejects the normal expectations of the charming man being the hero but twists expectations by casting Gaston as the villain of the film. Belle’s rejection of Gaston becomes just as important as the twist in his portrayal. In a traditional fairy tale, Gaston would be the handsome hero of the town and Belle, or any other princess, would have jumped at the chance to be his wife in order to obtain her happily ever after. Since Belle represents the light of knowledge, Gaston clearly represents the ignorance and darkness of the patriarchal town in which he lives. During their first encounter Gaston snatches Belle’s book out of her hand and questions how she is able to read the book without any pictures in it. He than tosses the book into a puddle of mud and tells Belle, “It’s time you got your head out those books and paid attention to more important things...like me! The whole town’s talking about it. It’s not right for a woman to read—soon she starts getting ideas—and thinking” (Beauty and the Beast). Belle responds by calling Gaston “positively primeval,” which the ignorant brute takes as a compliment. While the Beast is able to slowly open himself up to change and embrace new ideas, Gaston cannot let go of the outdated ideals his character represents. This juxtaposition of the protagonist “beast” and the villainous “prince charming” displays a definite challenge to traditional fairy tale expectations.

Growing up in this particular village where a rugged and brash man like Gaston is the perfect specimen of manliness, he is completely oblivious to the fact that Belle wants nothing to do with him. Gaston is so sure of himself that he decides to surprise Belle with
an entire wedding, even though she has given no indication that she is interested in being his wife. As Belle sits at home, reading a book, Gaston arrives to propose to her. Before she answers the door, Belle uses her father’s peephole-like invention to peer outside. This invention provides Belle with a view of Gaston, but the faulty peephole distorts how Gaston appears (Image 4.4). Instead of the ruggedly handsome man that everyone else in the town admires, the distortion causes Gaston to appear warped and monstrous. Belle is the only person in town who recognizes Gaston for what he really is. The view of Gaston through the peephole, and Belle’s point of view, foreshadows his truly twisted inner character and provides the audience with a way to see how Belle looks at her unwanted suitor. After Belle knows that it is Gaston at her door, she breathes a disgruntled sigh and reluctantly opens the door. Gaston, with his normal, pretentious behavior, struts into her home like it belongs to him. As he begins his proposal to Belle, he stops in the middle of his speech to admire his reflection in the mirror. The film uses Gaston’s appreciation of his own reflection as a moment of comparison to Belle’s view of Gaston through the peephole. While he only notices the stunning specimen that the entire town builds him up to be, he is truly an incredibly flawed and warped character.

Gaston is a character straight out of classic fairy tales that can only provide a domestic role for any woman in his life. However, for the forward thinking and modern Belle, that domestic life equals a domestic prison similar to that of Cinderella. Gaston does not know how to deal with a powerful and independent woman so he does the only thing he knows how from his expertise as a hunter—he traps his prey. He is determined to make her fit into his patriarchal world, which of course he tries to impose using his
masculine and violent nature. His attempts to win her hand continue to escalate, as Gaston first tries to have Belle’s father imprisoned in a mental institution, and when that does not work, Gaston storms the Beast’s castle in an attempt to murder him.

When Gaston finally stops admiring himself, he begins to paint a picture of what Belle’s domestic life would be like married to him. He tells her, “Here, picture this. A rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire, and my little wife, massaging my feet, while the little ones play with the dogs. We’ll have six or seven” (Beauty and the Beast). Throughout Gaston’s speech Belle’s face registers absolute horror at the future he would provide to her. When Gaston plops down on a chair he puts his mud covered boots all over Belle’s book. This complete disregard for her hobbies and intellectual pursuits only help to strengthen Belle’s distaste for Gaston. When he tells her that they will have six or seven “strapping boys” like Gaston, Belle can no longer hide her total disgust with
the idea of his proposal. As Gaston tells Belle of his plans, which sound like a prison to Belle, he physically corners her in the room. His predatory blocking of her escape creates a claustrophobic and threatening environment for Belle. This temporary entrapment by Gaston becomes a brief taste of Belle’s future if she were to say yes to his proposal. Belle, trying desperately to get away from Gaston gets trapped against the front door. When he commands, “Say you’ll marry me,” she responds by stating, “I’m very sorry, Gaston, but I just don’t deserve you” (*Beauty and the Beast*). In one swift movement, Belle flings the front door open causing Gaston to fall out of her home. Belle’s rejection of Gaston only strengthens his resolve that she will be his wife. By denying him, Belle pushes away the domestic lifestyle of women and the patriarchal control that Gaston represents. The harder she pushes against the norm the more Gaston is forced to exert his power over her.

The more that Disney’s new kind of princess, Belle, pushes back against the traditional gender roles, the more the enforcers of those gender roles try to control her. Gaston violently grabs both Belle and her father and locks them in the cellar of their own home for daring to threaten his expectations and way of life and threatening to bring enlightenment and equality into a world that Gaston has long controlled. He then uses fear, the weapon of ignorance, to rally the men of the village who will always blindly follow their patriarchal leader.

It is in the end, as Gaston and Beast fight on the roof of the castle, that Gaston completes his transformation into a full egomaniacal villain, bent on continuing the gender roles that would trap Belle within his outdated domestic prison. As Gaston
provokes the Beast to fight with him, Gaston shouts “Did you honestly think she’d want you when she had someone like me?” and then, as it seems that he has the Beast trapped, Gaston, in a truly psychotic moment, bellows, “It’s over, Beast! Belle is mine!” (Beauty and the Beast). Belle has at no point in the film given Gaston any reason to believe that she is in anyway interested in him and yet he still believes that she belongs to him, and worse, that she is a possession he can take for himself. Gaston does not only want Belle for his domestic prison, he wants to possess her as he does the mounted trophies on his lodge wall. In Gaston’s warped and outdated way of thinking, Belle is the ultimate prize to add to his collection of trophies. With Gaston’s antiquated views of women as a possession completely exposed within a film that continually rewards those who treasure individuality, change, and knowledge, the narrative of the film can no longer abide with Gaston’s presence. After Belle rescues the Beast, Gaston very quickly falls to his death at the bottom of a dark crevice.

Conclusion

Some may argue that Disney’s version of Beauty and the Beast remains problematic because of the happy ending of the film. Even though the film upholds the idea of a woman moving towards marriage, Woolverton argued that Belle deserved to have a partner to share her life. Woolverton stated, “At heart, the story is a romance and I didn't want to disappoint. Belle wanted excitement and adventure in her life—but, like most of us, she also wanted someone to share it with. The Beast is someone who shares her love of books, her values. As a fellow outsider, he's also misunderstood” (Dutka, N.p.). Longing to share her life with another person does not make Belle weak or anti-
feminist. In fact, this trait teaches a valuable lesson—that Belle waited to fall in love with someone who she had a deeper connection, not a person who she fell in love with at first sight.

As the film reaches its finale, it becomes apparent that Belle does not need rescuing, like many of the Disney fairy tale princesses before her. Right before Gaston falls to his death, he stabs the Beast with a knife. The wounded Beast stumbles and Belle is there to catch him off the roof. As he lies in her arms about to die, Belle whispers in his ear that she does not want him to die because she loves him. With that the curse is broken and the Beast is magically transformed back into a human. More important than her ability to physically rescue the Beast is the metaphysical rescue that Belle provides for him. The curse specifically stated that, “If he could learn to love another, and earn her love in return,” then the spell would be broken (Beauty and the Beast). While love is a crucial part of breaking the curse, I would argue that the most important part was the Beast’s need not only to learn—yes, learn to love—but also to learn how to let go of his vanity, selfishness, and past filled with patriarchal ignorance. Above all else, the Beast needed to learn how to find his humanity. As Jeffords writes:

There is another important change in the curse itself. While the older tales condemn the prince to live as a Beast until someone can see past his exterior ugliness to his interior beauty, the Disney curse is that the prince must also learn to love someone else. He must, in other words, learn to change if he wishes to live in human society again ... audiences are now anxiously awaiting his changes as well as [Belle’s] insights (168).

The Beast’s lack of humanity before the curse demands that this change take place. It is Belle’s positive influence and initial spark that drive the Beast to become a better person.
Belle could have had the same influence on Gaston, but he refused to learn or modify his outdated ways of thinking. The Beast needed Belle to rescue him, both physically and psychologically.

*Beauty and the Beast* changed the equation when it came to Disney animation and the way it represented gender in fairy tales. Within this duality is an underlying subtext referring to the Walt Disney Animation Studio as well—learn to change or become obsolete and die. As previously mentioned, Andrea Dworkin claimed in 1974 that women in fairy tales “never think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care, or question” (42) and that the men are “powerful, noble, and good … He has a mission, a purpose. Inevitably he fulfills it. He is a person of worth and a worthwhile person. He is strong and true” (43). Disney no longer followed the problematic issues of shaping women as passive and men as heroic as Andrea Dworkin claimed in the 1970s. They were playing with the fairy tale mold and transforming the stories to work towards addressing feminist critiques.

In the years following the release of this film, Disney continued to produce more and more films with strong female protagonists like *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*. These films continued to see both financial and critical success. However, with the rise of computer-animated films, the classic two-dimensional animation that started the Walt Disney Company had been built on began to see smaller and smaller box office returns and by late 2004 the traditional animation part of the studio had completely been shut down. As always, Disney would soon return to the well of fairy tales that had started the company
and saved it so many times before when they released their first computer-animated fairy tale, *Tangled*. 
CHAPTER V
TANGLED UP IN GIRL POWER

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s Disney films began to showcase more and more multidimensional female characters. The women in these films are characters like Pocahontas in 1994, who was willing to stand up to her father to prevent a war from breaking out. Mulan (1997) features a young woman who pretends to be a male soldier in the Chinese army to protect her father, and eventual saves the country from invaders.

However, as film companies, such as Pixar and Dreamworks, began to release computer animated box office mega-hits at the end of twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first, the Walt Disney Company’s cornerstone, traditional two dimensional animation began to lose its appeal. By 2004, Disney decided to stop production on any future animation that was not computer animated, thus ending the very thing the company had started with. This was a stunning event to take place, because the first decade of the twentieth century was transforming into a time when animated features were getting serious art credibility. Disney eventually purchased Pixar, and in 2008 the Disney/Pixar film Up (2009) became the second animated film to ever receive a Best Picture nomination at the Academy Awards, with Disney’s Beauty and the Beast (1991) being the first. With a change in the air, the Disney Company decided to reopen their traditional animation doors and created The Princess and the Frog (2009), staring their first African-American princess. Although this film was mildly successful, it was the release of the
companies 50th animated feature, *Tangled* (2010), that really saw Disney reenter the Hollywood animation stage that they themselves had created seventy-three years earlier.

In the film, Rapunzel is a princess who is kidnapped by a witch, Mother Gothel, because the infant princess’s hair has the ability to heal and keep the witch young. When a roguish young thief by the name Flynn Rider tries to use Rapunzel’s tower as a hideout, the trapped princess coerces Flynn to take her into the kingdom to see the mysterious floating lights that appear in the sky every year on her birthday. Thus the film becomes a travel adventure as Rapunzel begins to learn about the world she has been denied access from experiencing. All of the new details that the Disney Animation Studio added to *Tangled* proves important because it reveals an inner strength that Rapunzel never knew she had.

From the very first moments of the film, the audience realizes that Rapunzel is unhappy with her existence; feeling alone and isolated, she suffers within her lonely and uninspired existence. Rapunzel, when looking at her own life, is forced to ask herself “Is this all?” This kind of self awareness within the princess protagonist was only building upon the trends within the Disney animated film and American society as a whole. Although Disney’s *Tangled* takes inspiration from a classic fairy tale, “Rapunzel,” starring a passive female, the team behind *Tangled* created a feature film that combined the growing assertiveness of recent Disney female characters and the popularity of three-dimensional computer animation. *Tangled* is centered around the idea of breaking with the norm, inverting expected roles, and finding depth within characters who were once one dimensional.
When Will My Life Begin?

The film opens with Mother Gothel raising Rapunzel from infancy to young womanhood as if Rapunzel were her own child. Audiences learn that Mother Gothel has convinced Rapunzel that the world outsider her tower is a dangerous place. Mother Gothel reminds Rapunzel that she is keeping her in the tower to protect her from those that would want to use her hair’s magical properties for their own nefarious reasons. On the eve of her eighteenth birthday, Rapunzel is a prisoner in her own home—a young women dying to escape her limited world and experience the life that she has been denied. In regards to the changing portrayal of young women in cinema Mary Celeste Kearney writes in “Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinema” that “such films incorporate contemporary feminist themes, especially the need for girls to develop confidence, assertiveness, and self-respect apart from boys” (125). The need to experience life and become her own person away from a parental figure become a major drive for Rapunzel throughout Tangled.

We are introduced to the daily life of Rapunzel through a musical segment in which she sings a song titled “When Will My Life Begin?” Unlike Snow White before her, Rapunzel shows little joy or enthusiasm over the chores and domestic lifestyle that keep her trapped. Instead, she shows exhaustion and boredom. During the musical sequence, the audience hears Rapunzel list the activities she does everyday, trapped within her tower. She is so tired of her domestic life and desperately craving adventure and a life away from the home, that she must keep herself as busy as possible. (Image 5.1) Unlike her earlier predecessor Snow White, Rapunzel does not want to “whistle
while she works” around the house. Instead she sings, in a frustrated and bored manner, “7 AM, the usual morning lineup: Start on the chores and sweep ’til the floor’s all clean. Polish and wax, do laundry, and mop, and shine up. Sweep again, and by then it’s like 7:15” (Tangled). Through the course of the song Rapunzel does eventually sing of

Image 5.1: Unlike Snow White before her, Rapunzel shows little joy or enthusiasm over the chores and domestic lifestyle she is trapped within, instead showing exhaustion and boredom. 
hobbies that allow her to express herself, such as reading, dancing, and painting, however, she is still stuck doing the traditional female chores, of cleaning, cooking, baking, and sewing, all in an attempt to keep her mind occupied. The lyrics to “When Will My Life Begin?” sound similar to Betty Friedan’s observations about women: “[The women] were so busy—busy shopping, chauffeuring, using their dishwashers and dryers and electric mixers, busy gardening, waxing, polishing, helping with the children’s homework, collecting for mental health, and doing thousands of other chores” (237). At this point in the film, Rapunzel is more similar to the trapped housewives of Betty Friedan’s era than the young feminists full of “girl power” after the start of the new millennium.

As the song continues Rapunzel laments the fact that she is likely to continue to live this life forever, “Stuck in the same place I’ve always been. And I’ll keep wonderin’ and wonderin’, and wonderin’ and wonderin’, when will my life begin?” (Tangled). Rapunzel does not enjoy her domestic life, and only continues her gender specific role out of sheer boredom. This unhappiness with domestic responsibilities and roles has become the trend within Disney animated fairy tales. There is an evolution from the first Disney princess, Snow White. This evolution displays a more nuanced understanding of the needs of women, reflected not through the time period in which the story was originally created, but in which the film itself was made. In the seven decades since that original animated feature film, the Disney princess has undergone a transformation that would reject the domestic lifestyle of Snow White, embrace Cinderella’s hatred for a domesticated prison, and, like Belle, desire adventure away from her expected role in life.
When Rapunzel asks her mother to take her to see the floating lights for her eighteenth birthday, Mother Gothel sings a song titled “Mother Knows Best” whose lyrics describe a scary and uninviting world. The song is intended to frighten Rapunzel of the world outside of the home. It is Mother Gothel’s intention to deny Rapunzel the ability to find her own confidence or display any assertiveness for herself. Mother Gothel keeps Rapunzel stunted and does not allow her to mature as all young people must. With the changes brought about through liberal feminist ideas that women are equal with men, Kearney writes, “girls are encouraged to develop into assertive and independent individuals capable of taking care of themselves” (129). Due to these new ideas about the role of women, Mother Gothel comes to symbolize an outdated and patriarchal parent who denies Rapunzel her role within a changing world.

In the song, Mother Gothel sings, “Look at you, as fragile as a flower. Still a little sapling, just a sprout. You know why we stay up in this tower. That’s right, to keep you safe and sound dear” (*Tangled*). Gothel reminds Rapunzel of her inexperience outside of the tower as a way to undermine Rapunzel’s confidence. But worse than that abuse, she spends a verse pointing out made up problems that Rapunzel has, such as being immature, clumsy, and ditzy. In perhaps the most offensive moment, Gothel sings, “Plus, I believe, gettin’ kind of chubby. I’m just saying ’cause I love you” (*Tangled*). Gothel spends time pointing out trumped up flaws and problems as a way to break Rapunzel down and rob her of any confidence she may have in herself.

Mother Gothel provides all of the information about the outside world to Rapunzel, and as such, Mother Gothel becomes her only connection to life beyond the
tower. The film visually represents Rapunzel’s thirst for knowledge and outside-of-the-home experiences by having her search out light. Rapunzel begins her song “When Will My Life Begin?” by using her hair to open a window on the roof of her tower to let light into the dark home that Mother Gothel has created. Rapunzel’s driving desire throughout the film is to experience the “floating lights” for herself, and to understand what they represent. As Belle’s presence in Beauty and the Beast comes to symbolize knowledge and light, so too does light work within Tangled. Light is a way to pierce through the dark ignorance in which Mother Gothel works to keep Rapunzel hidden. Mother Gothel spends her performance of “Mother Knows Best” taking away all of the light from the tower and leaving Rapunzel fearful and in unenlightened darkness. Gothel spends the opening of her musical number, closing all of the windows that Rapunzel had opened in her previous musical sequence about wanting more out of life. As Gothel sings her song, Rapunzel tries desperately to bring light back into the tower, only to have Gothel snuff it out (Image 5.2).

After spending the entirety of her song scaring Rapunzel through lyrics and through her actions, Gothel ends the number in a moody pool of the light. The space in which Mother Gothel inhabits becomes the only source of illumination within the tower—and the only place Rapunzel can turn to as an escape from the darkness. Rapunzel runs into Mother Gothel’s arms, where Gothel informs her never to ask to leave the tower again. The small bit of assertiveness that Rapunzel had shown earlier by asking her mother to leave the tower is stripped away. Sufficiently terrified, lacking all confidence,
and frightened of upsetting the only person who has ever been there for her, Rapunzel promises to stay within the tower that is her home.

Image 5.2: As Rapunzel strives to find light and knowledge, Mother Gothel continues to leave her in darkness and ignorance. 

Rapunzel grapples unsuccessfully with the role that her mother has created for her. Mother Gothel’s song and knowledge remind Rapunzel that she should be happy with the life that Rapunzel leads. When Rapunzel pushes against Mother Gothel’s expectations, Mother Gothel proceeds to make Rapunzel feel like less of a whole person. Rapunzel cannot be assertive or display her confidence as Mother Gothel continual tricks her daughter and undermines Rapunzel’s growing strength as a female. The fear of the outside world and Mother Gothel’s guilt create a world that leaves Rapunzel timid, depressed, and doubtful, all while reminding her that “mother knows best.”

**I’ve Got a Dream**

Throughout the course of the film, when the audience assumes that they know a character because of the expectations of previous animated fairy tale films, *Tangled* changes the equation. The film begins with all of its main character strictly within their expected gender roles—Rapunzel the lovely, domestic princess, and Flynn Rider, the take-charge leading man. However, as the film progresses, gender roles begin to take new forms, and the expectations placed upon the characters begin to shift. These original representations of the film’s characters, expand far beyond the main protagonists. Many introductions of the the film’s characters present them with a traditional context, but reveal these figures to be vastly different by the end of the story. While the characters do not switch gender roles completely, *Tangled* portrays its main characters in a more realistic middle-ground of gender role expectations, with neither lead being hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine. As the film progresses, Rapunzel begins to take on some of the more masculine traits of Flynn Rider, and loses more of her extremely feminine
characteristics. Flynn in return loses his masculine shell and slides more towards feminine attributes.

Although Flynn portrays himself as a dashing leading man, he is usually in the position of following Rapunzel’s lead. Rapunzel is unafraid to stand up to a gang of ruffians who have captured Flynn. In another scene, when Rapunzel and Flynn find themselves cornered, Rapunzel uses her hair to escape while Flynn is still trying to think of a plan. During the climax of the film, Rapunzel must become the hero by sacrificing her own future in order to save Flynn Rider’s life—a position traditionally reserved for a fairy tale prince charming.

The main male protagonist is not a prince like most leading Disney males. Instead, he is a thief with a habit of getting himself into trouble. Unlike the princes of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs or Cinderella, who are dashing, handsome, but utterly one-dimensional, Flynn is a deeply complex character with a rich personality and issues from his past. During Flynn Rider’s introduction, he is portrayed as roguish, conniving, self-centered, and a bit full of himself. However, the story reveals that Flynn has been basing his personality off of a swashbuckling character within a book. As an orphan, Flynn Rider used to read adventures of a highly-masculine, fictional character. Unhappy with his own life, he figured he could find happiness by mimicking the personality from the story. Even his name, Flynn Rider, is a moniker given to himself to sound more rugged and manly. In a moment of deep revelation, Flynn confides in Rapunzel and tells her his backstory, along with his real name, Eugene Fitzpatrick. Flynn Rider basis his masculine personality on a dashing leading man character, who would be much more at
home in a traditional fairy tale. In reality, Flynn is a sensitive, and thoughtful human, who is just as lost and confused about who he is supposed to be as Rapunzel.

In the most extreme example of playing with gender expectations that this film exhibits, Rapunzel and Flynn arrive at a pub called The Snuggly Duckling to find it inhabited by vicious, and terrifying looking rogues and criminals. The men inside the pub are the exact description that Mother Gothel has been using to frighten Rapunzel from avoiding the world all of her life. When Flynn finds out that Rapunzel is extremely nervous about running into any such a character, he thinks that by taking her to The Snuggly Duckling, the men will terrify her. Once she is sufficiently frightened by the outside world Rapunzel will ask Flynn to take her home, and thus get him out of his deal to take her to the floating lights. Although temporarily scared of the crowd within the bar, Rapunzel relies on an inner strength to rescue Flynn when the criminals inside begin to threaten him. Rapunzel loudly refuses to let the criminals hurt Flynn, and begs them to “Find your humanity!” and ask the criminals, “Haven’t you ever had a dream?” (Tangled). Suddenly the entire mood of the scene changes. What was once a scary and threatening situation becomes a big musical number with every one of the large, and imposing criminals bursting into dance and singing a song titled “I’ve Got a Dream.” The song references a look versus an expectation, when it begins, “I’m malicious, mean, and scary. My sneer could curdle dairy. And violence-wise, my hands are not the cleanest, but despite my evil look, and my temper, and my hook, I’ve always yearned to be a concert pianist” (Tangled). As the song progresses, the masculine expectations of the characters are continually challenged, as the characters reveal that
they would rather quit their current expectations to be florists, interior designers, or just
knit and sew (Image 5.3).

While this example might be extreme, it perfectly showcases the subtext within
the film that people are not always satisfied with the roles they are expected to play.
Though these men look like vicious thugs, they are actually sweet, and enjoy spending
their time partaking in traditionally feminine activities. Even though the film creates
characters like Mother Gothel who enforce traditional roles, the movie only celebrates
and rewards characters who challenges gender norms and expectations.

These expectations even get altered when it comes to inanimate objects within the
film. The black, cast-iron skillet that Rapunzel has used all her life for cooking within her
prison, transforms into a weapon that allows her access to the outside world. Instead of
being a tool representing her domesticity, the frying pan becomes a key to her freedom.
As Rapunzel becomes a strong figure outside of the home, her frying pan becomes a symbol of that strength and the male characters of the film also begin to use the frying pan as a weapon, as it has transformed itself into an object with no specific gender associations.

By the end of the film, thanks to Rapunzel’s influence, all the characters are embracing the person they really want to be. All of the vicious men from The Snuggly Duckling have arrived in the kingdom to celebrate the return of the princess, and all of these characters have given up their criminal pasts to embrace the feminine hobbies they had always enjoyed in private. Even the soldiers decide to ditch their swords in place of frying pans, as Flynn narrates “that crime in the kingdom had never been lower.” Rapunzel has taken her place as the ruler of her parents kingdom, and as Flynn narrates the ending, he says, “Beloved by all, she led her kingdom with all the grace and wisdom that her parents did before her” (Tangled). Flynn Rider gives up his thieving ways and goes back to his real name, Eugene. Instead of the traditional moment where the prince kisses the princess, Rapunzel takes the masculine position and dips Eugene, before she swoops in for a kiss (Image 5.4).

**Conclusion**

Though some critics might argue that Tangled falls back on the problematic issue of having a princess find her prince and living happily ever after, Friedan provides her own reading of marriage that would argue with this analysis. Friedan writes that when women went back out into the world, that they felt a “sense of being complete and fully a part of the world — ‘no longer an island, part of the mainland’ —had come back. They
knew that it did not come from the work alone, but from the whole — their marriage, homes, children, work, their changing, growing links with the community” (356). This same sense of feeling complete with work, marriage, and family is as true for the women that Friedan was writing about, as it is for the women of today, and Rapunzel. Unlike the princesses before her, Rapunzel is able to get away from the gender roles specific to women, and create a role for herself that includes a blending of genders. She is able to led her kingdom with “grace and wisdom” while also able to find happiness in a successful and happy marriage. She is not forced to pick work or a man to find contentment. If the criticisms of Disney animated princesses has been that they are passive characters only in search of a husband, the same argument can no longer hold true. *Tangled* takes inspiration from a classic story, but so transforms it, that it becomes something greater than the original. No longer a shallow story about a woman needing rescue, the film subverts
expectations by its very nature, and tells a Disney fairy tale that holds no gender to any specific notions.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

In November 2013, the Walt Disney Animation Studios released their 53rd theatrical animated feature, *Frozen*. Loosely based on the Hans Christian Anderson story, “The Snow Queen,” *Frozen* tells the story of two sisters who are the princesses of the mythical kingdom, Arendelle. The older sister, Elsa, who is destined to become Queen, holds a terrible secret—she can create ice and snow telepathically. On the day of her coronation, the kingdom discovers Elsa’s power and the new Queen flees into the mountains, and accidentally traps the entire kingdom in an eternal winter. Elsa’s younger sister, Anna, must travel into the wilderness to bring back the Queen and fix the curse Elsa has unknowingly set against her people.

After the Disney Animation Studio saw financial flops through the first decade of the twenty-first century, their films began to see success at the end of the decade and the start of the second decade—with none more popular than *Frozen*. A critical and box office smash, *Frozen* has crossed the $1 billion-mark at the worldwide box office, making it the seventh release for the Disney studios to reach that level. *Frozen* has become the most profitable animated film of all time. The film has gone on to win two Academy Awards, one for Best Animated Feature—the first time the Walt Disney Animation Studio has ever won this award. Even more astounding, *Frozen* marks the first time a film directed by a woman has grossed over $1 billion dollars at the box office (Barasch).
Perhaps it is the guiding hand of Jennifer Lee, co-director of *Frozen* with Chris Buck, that has been instrumental in the success of the film. It is also possible that her point of view is what has helped *Frozen* to become yet another Disney animated film to showcase an evolutionary step in regard to the Disney princess. Gone are the damsels in distress normally associated with fairy tales, replaced instead with active princesses who take charge in their own lives while at the same time being deeply layered and engaging characters. As feminist film blogger, Amanda Rodriguez writes:

In *Frozen*, female agency and power are paramount. Elsa has cosmically awesome winter powers … Anna, our heroine, is normal, which is a refreshing change of pace from most fantasy stories where the lead is imbued with a striking talent or birthright. Though Anna has no unique skills or magical powers, it is her compassion that makes her extraordinary. Anna’s personality makes her special because she never gives up, never questions her own capability, and never thinks she can’t do something. With her courage and conviction, Anna is the driving force behind all the film’s action. The male characters are mostly along for the ride, lending support or acting as obstacles to the true goal of the film: the reconnection of two estranged sisters (N.p.)

*Frozen* takes the fairy tale and princess niche genre that Disney is so well known for and outwardly embraces the strength of its female characters. Neither of the two main female characters are shown cleaning or spending their time focused on issues of domesticity. Even when Anna, the younger sister, falls in love at first sight, her older sister —and everyone else in the film— quickly reminds her that you can not marry someone you have just met. When at the end it is revealed that Anna’s fiancé is actually using her to gain control of her family’s kingdom and that he does not love her at all, the love at first sight idea proves false. This twist ending goes against almost all romantic comedies or fairy tales that Hollywood produces, but most importantly this change in the narrative
works to dispel the unrealistic notion of “love at first sight” and women finding happiness from a man.

Even though Frozen engages with the idea of romance, the true heart of the film revolves around the concept of sisters and family love. When Elsa’s ice powers injure Anna, the friendly kingdom trolls inform Anna that her only chance of survival is an act of true love. The characters in the film, and the audience as well, assume that this means the stereotypical “true loves kiss.” However, when Elsa’s becomes threatened during the climax of the film, it is Anna stepping in to protect her sister that breaks the curse. Anna’s love for her sister causes Elsa to realize that love is the solution that will stop the curse that has kept Arendelle trapped in ice. Instead of the traditional fairy tale ending that would see the princess rescued by a handsome prince, Frozen allows the female characters to solve their own problems, and by doing so, become wise and caring leaders of their kingdom. Elsa embraces the unique powers that once made her an outcast and uses them, not to land a man, but to take her place as respected Queen of her kingdom.

Audiences around the world have embraced this distinct and refreshing take on the traditional fairy tale, as the success of the film clearly attests. Frozen proves that the Walt Disney Animation Studio has learned from their past mistakes and are trying to showcase an evolved take on women within film. While accepting her award for Best Actress in Blue Jasmine (2013) actress Cate Blanchett spoke against Hollywood traditions by saying, “To those of us in the industry still foolishly clinging to the idea that films with women at the center are 'niche' experiences. They are not … Audiences want to see them, and in fact they earn money. The world is round people!” (Plank, N.p.)
success of *Frozen* is a lesson that all of Hollywood, not just animated films, needs to pay attention too.

Far too many Hollywood films continue to be released that play to the stereotypical romance of early fairy tales, even those created by Walt Disney. However, while the rest of Hollywood continues to showcase vapid actresses fighting over men and searching for true love, the Walt Disney Company, which continual receives negative criticism about their presentation of women, is one of the few companies that has actively been trying to change the way women are presented in film. Women have progressively seen higher positions of power both in the studio's animated films and within the company itself.

While critics like Lieberman and Stone were right to question the structure of fairy tales and early Disney animation, the Walt Disney company is clearly attempting to change with the times—as they have continued to showcase growth in regards to the representation of women. By implying that the Walt Disney Company is as guilty as the authors of the original fairy tales is equally unfair, as the animated versions have all become incredibly loose interpretations. The creators of the Disney princesses never intended their female characters to be bland and one-dimensional. Instead, they infused these women with a subtle awareness of the world and eras in which they were created.

The Walt Disney Company, and Hollywood in general, still have a lot of work to do in regards to the way they present females—always skinny and traditionally beautiful. The manner in which the Walt Disney Company markets their princesses towards young and impressionable youth continues to be problematic as well. However, as much as
current discussion likes to paint The Walt Disney Company as anti-feminist, a deep understanding of the work produced by Disney Animation Studios reveals that the films themselves tell a different story. A story that focuses on the strength, intelligence, and determination of female characters.

Disney animated fairy tales will continue to be popular and the company will continue to produce these films as long as they remain profitable. While feminist scholars of the early 1970s were right to question the earlier fairy tales of Walt Disney, the times have changed since their original negative criticisms. It is only by holding media corporations like the Walt Disney Company accountable for their representations of women that they will strive to create characters worthy of their long-lasting place within American society. Through these films, the audiences of highly-lucrative animated movies have been shown a window into the world of women for the last century. By holding a company as powerful as Disney accountable for their creations, they will continue to showcase an evolution within their animated films and throughout the wide range of media they create. Disney animation will maintain its evolution as the rest of American society continues to progress as well.
CITED WORKS


Barrash, Emily. “This Movie Just Became the First Film Directed by a Woman to Make $1 Billion.” PolicyMic. N.p. Web. 03 March 2014.


