Universitat de les
Illes Balears

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau

A Feminist Perspective on Disney's *Brave* (2012): Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

Núria García Gual

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Any acadèmic 2021-22

DNI de l'alumne: 41623025V

Treball tutelat per Guillermo Iglesias Díaz
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna i Clàssica

Paraules clau del treball:
Brave, gender performativity, gender roles, heroines, feminist values.

Abstract

This paper examines *Brave* (2012) from a feminist perspective and how Merida, the main character, breaks away from gender barriers by being portrayed as a modern princess in the Disney/Pixar production. Judith Butler's concept of performativity will help to understand the evolution of female protagonists in Disney films, from the extremely traditional feminine roles in the 1950s to the unanimously acclaimed as the first princess embodying feminist values, Merida. The power of social transformation of the Walt Disney Company since its origins will be analyzed and a deep examination of Disney's role models for young girls will be conducted by shedding light on the strict gender roles they portray. Attention will be paid to some of the most emblematic female characters in Disney's filmography (princesses), how these characters have evolved in their portrayal from passive women to heroines, and how Merida is the first example in this sense as she represents a female role model more prone to the current social context. This paper aims at providing a feminist reading of *Brave* and at demonstrating how the main character is portrayed as a female heroine that destabilizes traditional gender norms in a patriarchal society.

Key Words:

Brave, gender performativity, gender roles, heroines, feminist values.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Women have historically been portrayed as inferior or subordinated to men within the film industry. Hollywood, the leader in the film industry, is "an institution geared toward the production of patriarchal ideology and a powerful carrier of its values and ideas" (McCabe 2004, 8). Female characters are often represented from the male gaze by being subject to "voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, scopophilia, [being] the object of male pleasure" (Snow 1989, 30), and by epitomizing excessive femininity. However, femininity is purely a social construct and as Kate Millet (1970) argues, women are socialized into accepting a lower and inferior social position. In films, women tend to be expressed "in sexual relation to men—man's wife, sex object, mother, housewife—and never as persons defining themselves" (Friedan 2010, 23). For this reason, nowadays there are feminist films which "tell stories that explicitly or implicitly challenge, rather than subscribe to, dominant representations of female identity" (Hankin 2007, 60). All the persuasive and restrictive gender roles for women are implied in the term "feminine mystique" coined by Betty Friedan, it is even embodied by most Disney princesses.

The Walt Disney Company has been dominating the world of children's cinema since its creation in 1923. Throughout the years, Disney princesses have been portrayed as housewives who are weak and depend on a man to live (materializing the "feminine mystique" theory). Simone "de Beauvoir [explained] that patriarchal culture is somehow responsible for generating and circulating self-confirming parameters that institute gender hierarchies and sexual inequalities" (McCabe 2004, 4). The phenomenon of limiting gender roles for women is present in the depiction and behaviors of most female characters portrayed in Disney Princess films. With the representation of princesses as the ideal of perfection, beauty, and purity, Disney "produce[s] a false consciousness for women, offering them nothing but an escape into fantasy through identification with stereotypical images" (McCabe 2004, 8).

Notwithstanding, as will be developed in the following sections, "Disney's depiction of princesses [has] changed in response to a changing society; in [a world] that had adapted many feminist precepts, Disney needed to create more modern, more independent princess stories" (Rothschild 2013, 12). Accordingly, Disney female characters have undergone a progressive evolution towards more liberal characters without being determined by the long-established

discourses of gender, to which Merida from *Brave* (2012) is an excellent example. Therefore, it is of great importance to analyze *Brave*, a film directed by Brenda Chapman (the first woman to direct a motion film). *Brave* portrays Princess Merida's struggles with traditional gender roles in a 10th century Scottish setting and how she manages to overcome these limitations.

This paper stems from the aforementioned debates by raising several queries: How does the heroine of *Brave* embody feminist values? How does she break gender norms and stereotypes? Why can *Brave* be considered a feminist film? The paper aims at analyzing *Brave* under a feminist perspective to show how in the film Merida is portrayed as a pioneer of relatively modern feminist values. Merida's embodiment of agency, empowerment, and choice will also be considered. To discuss all these matters, this paper will take into account several feminist theorists and scholars such as Judith Butler with the theory of gender performativity together with Betty Friedan's concept of "feminine mystique" among others.

Therefore, this paper will first explore Disney's extensive influence on the audience, in what ways it contributes to the education of children, and the problems that have damaged its excellent reputation. Then, the progression of the role of the Disney Princess will be studied. Lastly, the analysis of *Brave* will be distributed by themes that can be considered feminist: defying patriarchal expectations, appropriating masculine attributes and roles, and reassessing the meaning of true love. These themes will be analyzed to further comprehend why *Brave* was such a groundbreaking film for both Disney and Pixar. Within the analysis, Merida will have a crucial role as she was the heroine that paved the way for future "feminist" Disney princesses such as the protagonists of *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), and their improved portrayal as heroines with a drive in their lives.

1. Disney's influence on children: Role Models

Disney films have constantly been studied for their considerable influence on viewers. Popular culture has been for a long time defined by Walt Disney's animated films and the values this powerful company transmits have been deeply ingrained in society. As a major cultural force and distributor of entertainment, "Disney is a teaching machine that not only exerts influence over consumers but also wages an aggressive campaign to peddle its political and cultural influence" across the world often promoting patriarchal hegemony (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 12). This process can be alarming as Disney acts as a state apparatus enforcing ideological guidance over millions of people who are unconsciously being "encouraged to internalize the

messages about social relations, love, and power that are embedded in Disney" films (Greenhill and Matrix 2010, 153).

For several generations, children have been brought up with Disney films and they "have been taught to think and act according to their favorite princesses and/or princes, ultimately learning social cues as they imitate their favorite animated movies" (Garabedian 2014, 23). As discussed by Benabdellah, Disney dictates the "appropriate and inappropriate ways of being accepted social actors. By [...] consuming the supposedly innocent [...] films, children get engaged in passive learning. That is internalizing the images drawn in the films which dictates how 'Role Model' males and females look-like, talk, feel and build relationships" (2018, 41). As expressed by Brenda Ayres, "Disney products colonize generations of children and parents to embrace this ideal [...]. The Disneyfication of [...] children, then, is empire building, complete with an imperialistic colonizing force that affects either conformity to the ideal or denigration of the Other" (2003, 16–17). Thus, Disney provides young children with values and morals by portraying idealized role models "and it is up to the Disney writers to instill positive, progressive concepts to keep children from reverting back to more traditional gender roles" (Garabedian 2014, 25).

Motion films "produced by the Walt Disney Company have been ubiquitous in children's lives for over 80 years. Due to their pervasive presence, it is important that their content, and its relationship with children's understanding of gender roles and beliefs is examined" (Hine, Ivanovic, and England 2018, 8). Walt Disney has been linked to the endurance of numerous social problems. As argued by Joel Best and Kathleen S. Lowney, "Disney [...] produces morally questionable products, [...] Disney's messages help preserve social inequities, and [...] Disney [fosters] inauthentic and alienating entertainment" (2009, 431). Respectively, the Walt Disney Company has been repeatedly criticized for being racist, sexist, homophobic, and misogynistic. One of the most controversial issues within Disney's animated films is the construction of gender identity. As Bowman (2011) explains, "the representation of 'proper' feminine and masculine behavior in these films is no trivial or childish matter. The mind recognizes key archetypes [...], and then memorizes the narrative 'lessons' presented by the tales" (81). This is not favorable for young girls, as "female characters in these films are ultimately subordinate to males and define their sense of power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives" (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 187).

It has been argued that Disney "films, though seemingly innocent, are loaded with tokens about gender portrayals, social manners and power relations among male and female

protagonists" (Benabdellah 2018, 41). Up until recently, Disney characters have been portrayed according to the stereotypical depictions of gender designated by the patriarchal society, and these gendered portrayals clearly show the inadequacies of the renowned Disney culture. Regarding gender issues, "Disney's view of women's agency and empowerment is more than simply limited: it reproduces the idea that a child born female can only realize a gendered incarnation of adulthood and is destined to fulfill her selfhood by becoming the appendage, if not the property, of a man" (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 194).

As *Brave* (2012) is the first Disney/Pixar production with a female lead character, the relationship between these two companies needs to be studied. Paradoxically, Merida (protagonist of *Brave*) is a Scottish, rebel princess fond of archery. As opposed to what Disney would have traditionally done, "Pixar [...] doubtlessly market[ed] its first female protagonist with a bow in her hand. This image cannot offset the ubiquitous marketing of Disney's traditional princesses, but it is a step towards creating more diverse female images for young female audiences" (Stover 2013, 8). Therefore, after Disney's acquisition of Pixar in 2006, a change in the dynamics of the company was noticed. As explained, Disney Princess films tend to adhere to the representation of excessive femininity. By doing this gendered portrayal, Disney makes children who do not fit into the unreal representation of characters feel excluded, while contrastingly, "Pixar films explore the relationship between the individual and his or her community, presenting characters who are somehow different from society either because of their longings or because of a physical disability" (Shepard 2012, 177).

Accordingly, "Pixar films do portray marginalized characters being accepted into the dominant culture. [...] These films extend to children the promise that they, too, will become powerful, celebrated members of society" (178) instead of promoting unattainable standards. Thus, Pixar boosts "acceptance of the Other and celebrates the potential achievements of the lowly and the different" (Booker 2009, 117), and, in contrast, Disney leans towards typecasting their main characters within extremely gendered categories. With the creation of Merida, Pixar has demonstrated that it is attainable to produce "quality narratives for children, and still produce iconic, marketable images. [Disney should] invest in female-driven narratives that have staying-power with consumers, to create female protagonists with the cultural endurance and profitability that lie in the character and personality of Pixar's" characters (Stover 2013, 8). Therefore, Merida is an example of how Disney was influenced by Pixar's values.

2. Female characters' evolution in Disney: From passivity to heroism

The representation of female characters in Disney films, in particular princesses, has received criticism for glamorizing women and girls who are substantially passive and need to be rescued by men (Orenstein 2011). Disney Princesses represent compelling and attractive characters who tend to be defined in line with gender stereotypes and are rewarded for their gendered attitude (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011). As Isabelle Gill (2016) explains, Disney has been judged "for producing stereotypical female heroines who do not embody the concept of strong feminist role models" (98). The use of princesses and their passive storylines "inculcates archaic, patriarchal ideologies in each successive wave of children and reinforces oppressive value systems in older generations" (Greenhill and Matrix 2010, 153). For this reason, there is a generalized concern around the gendered attitudes these characters portray as "Disney Princesses may be a particularly potent model for the learning of gendered behavior in children" (Coyne et al. 2016, 1911). Nevertheless, with the production of its latest princess films, Disney seems to be readdressing the representation of princesses to adapt to more contemporary times. According to Cardoso and Clérigo, "female representation has been gaining enormous prominence since it follows the changes in society, that is, it is the result of changes in the context and the public" (2020, 160).

Since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney has released a total of 12 princess films. From *Snow White*, (presenting a damsel in distress), to its newest release *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) (featuring an independent and empowered heroine), the representation of female characters has favorably progressed. As Cole Reilly points out, "there has been a noteworthy evolution among the Disney princess films in terms of offering progressively more substantive story arcs and characters with agency" (2016, 52). This advancement in princesses' representation may have been influenced by the different feminist waves, which have conditioned the direction in which princesses are characterized and their storylines. As Cassandra Stover suggests, there are "traits such as 'assertiveness,' 'independence,' and 'desire to explore' [that] delineate the progression of female characters towards embodying these previously off-limits characteristics" (2013, 3–4). These new traits can be seen in *Brave* with the introduction of these recent and progressive values within its heroine. For a better understanding of when and how Disney princesses started to have some agency, Juliana Garabedian (2014) classifies them into three main categories with regard to how films display gender roles, and links them to the different waves of feminism. These three categories are Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression.

Within the Pre-transition category, which encompasses from 1937 to 1959, there are three films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). As Garabedian mentions, "Disney developed the first three princesses—Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora—during a time when women were confined to the stereotype of homemaker" (2014, 23). These three classic films coincided with the First Wave of Feminism when women had "little room in political, diplomatic, and military history [and] were [...] outside the power structure" (Lerner 1969, 53). These restrictive gender roles are portrayed within the three Pre-transition films in a quite evident manner. Snow white, Cinderella, and Aurora's actions and behaviors comply with the male centered patriarchal society of the time. For instance, in *Snow White,* the princess is confined to the home while the seven male dwarfs work in the mines. Moreover, after being poisoned, the only thing that saves her is a kiss from a prince, reinforcing the idea that women need to be saved by men.

Moving on, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010) are the Disney Princess films comprised within the Transition period. This new categorization arises as an after effect of the Second Wave of Feminism that was "a set of political practices founded in analyses of the social/historical position of women as subordinated, oppressed or exploited either within dominant modes of production [...] and/or by the social relations of patriarchy" (Kuhn 1994, 4). All these movies "center around a female protagonist experiencing the need to be free of societal bonds. In the end, however, her happily-ever-after depends on her return to the role expected of women, be it docile princess or subservient wife" (Garabedian 2014, 23). For instance, in *Aladdin*, when men are talking about Jasmine's future she states: "How dare you. All of you. Standing around deciding my future? I am not a prize to be won" (Clements and Musker 1992, 00:53:40). With this statement, it is noticeable how princesses are more active and opinionated, and it portrays how an attempt to adapt to the claims of society at the time is made. However, the happy endings in terms of marriage demonstrate that there still was much room for improvement.

Lastly, the films *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013, 2019), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), are the ones assembling the Progression period. *Brave* was the first more revolutionary princess film released coinciding with the possible start of a new feminist wave. The fourth wave of feminism, which supposedly started around 2010, is about the use of internet tools to visibilize and achieve the empowerment of women, intersectionality, and greater gender equality. Some of these ideals are represented throughout *Brave* and the successive princess films within the Progression period. This group of princesses are more independent and their

opposition to "gender roles and patriarchal hegemony ha[s] been achieved with a notable degree of success" (Chatterjee and Bhattacharjee 2019, 127). It was in 2012 with *Brave* when "Disney decided to be braver in using unorthodox female characters" focused on self-realization and on "contriving solutions for their problems" with "aware[ness] of [their] inner potential" (128). In *Moana*, for example, the heroine sings empowering lyrics: "every turn I take, every trail I track is a choice I make, now I can't turn back" (Clements and Musker 2016, 31:11). These lines portray how women now can make their own choices. These women, as will be seen with the analysis of *Brave*, have more agency and "'empower' the woman of the twenty-first century" (Stover 2013, 7).

Provided these examples, it is safe to say that "the Disney studio is clearly trying to update its princess image for a post-feminist audience by consciously addressing gender issues" (Stover 2013, 5). This could result in "positive implications for gender role development resulting from exposure to more well-rounded characters" (Hine et al. 2018, 4). So far, the public has responded positively to this group of more androgynous princesses who "portray more stereotypically masculine characteristics" (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011, 557) and who take an active role in their respective storylines. Therefore, "by continuing to present more progressive and balanced gender role portrayals to young children, the Walt Disney Company has the opportunity to contribute to the gender empowerment of children worldwide" (Hine, Ivanovic, and England 2018, 8) instead of going back to the representation of characters that were problematic for gender construction.

3. Challenging traditional gender roles: Analysis of *Brave*

Brave was the first Disney film produced by Pixar. When released in 2012, it was quite revolutionary as two female characters were at the heart of the film while male characters were two-dimensional. *Brave* "stars the strong-willed, Scottish Princess Merida, [and] remains a groundbreaking film in the Disney canon because it rejects the idealization of patriarchal values" (Seybold 2021, 73). When the film premiered, the pattern of princess-needs-prince used by Walt Disney for decades came to an end. The main character, Merida, is a princess that "embraces the [tomboy] model of conduct, preferring archery over princess etiquette" (Dundes 2020, 2). Contrastingly, her mother (Queen Elinor) represents the traditional values of the time.

When faced with the unwanted group of suitors competing in an archery event for her hand in marriage, Merida claims that she is the first born of one of the kingdom's clans and she

has the right to fight for herself. She ends up splitting in half the winning arrow of one of the suitors, resulting in her victory. Weary of her mother's wishes to control her, Merida escapes to the forest. She encounters a witch who elaborates a cake to change her mother, and it transforms her into a bear. They try to break the spell, but the witch had left a riddle to bring Elinor back to normal: "Fate be changed, look inside, mend the bond torn by pride" (Andrews and Chapman 2012, 00:49:53). While spending mother-daughter time in the forest, "Merida comes to believe that the 'pride' mentioned in the witch's riddle refers to her 'selfish' ways; at the same time, her mother recognizes that her daughter should find love on her own schedule" (Dundes 2020, 2). The spell is reversed at the end, when both main characters admit their love for each other.

Brave (2012) was such a groundbreaking film with a rebellious, strong female protagonist that "reviewers celebrated [it] for intentionally creating a princess who breaks with Disney's tradition of celebrating patriarchal values" (Seybold 2021, 73). There are several features in the film that illustrate how Brave can be considered revolutionary and pioneering in copious aspects. There is a repertoire of themes which, when analyzed under a feminist perspective, arise as modern and controversial when compared to the classic Disney princess films. Some of the predominant feminist themes treated in Brave are: transcending patriarchal prospects, appropriating traditional masculine roles and attributes, and reassessing the meaning of love.

As outlined, one of the main themes in Brave is Merida breaking through and rebelling against patriarchal expectations. In former Disney films, "heroines had to rely on a miracle, often embodied by wishing on a star (e.g., Cinderella) or in a chance meeting with a prince (e.g., Sleeping Beauty), to actuate their dreams. Current-epoch Disney heroines do not rely on wishes upon stars but actuate their dreams through working hard" (Schiele, Louie, and Chen 2020, 665). Accordingly, in classic Disney princess films, "the stereotyped heroine retains little or no personal autonomy, becoming virtually a prisoner of societal expectations" (Greenhill and Matrix 2010, 82), however, Merida subverts these ideals by refusing these repressive boundaries.

One of the best examples to illustrate this point is the scene when Merida rebels against the Scottish traditional society by deciding to fight for herself in the archery contest for her betrothal. In the context of tenth-century Scotland, princesses were not supposed to participate in competitions or know how to manage weapons. This fact can be seen in Brave's first scene where Merida's father (King Fergus) gives Merida her first bow. Queen Elinor showing an expression of disapproval states: "A bow, Fergus? She's a lady" (Andrews and Chapman 2012,

00:02:28). This scene clearly recalls the traditional personality of the Queen and her gendered vision of how a lady should behave. For this reason, Queen Elinor is furious when Merida finds a loophole in the terms of engagement to the competition as they do not specify that the first born of each clan must be a man to perform in the archery event. This eminent moment is often quoted because it is here where Merida defies tradition by proudly stating: "I am Merida. Firstborn descendant of Clan Dun Broch. And I'll be shooting for my own hand" (2012, 00:26:03). This fragment is one of the most iconic moments in the film, as it encapsulates one of the central drives in the story, namely, challenging patriarchal hegemonic practices ingrained culturally in society that perpetuate the subordination of women to men.

Thus, Merida refuses to conform to the norms of society and changes her own destiny by establishing "herself as the next leader of her father's clan without any assistance from a husband or male suitor" (Seybold 2021, 73). Most importantly, in this scene, she is actively demanding to have the right to make her own decisions instead of having her life according to her mother's wishes, and she is also refusing the idea of spending her life under the shadow of a man. Towards the end of the film, she highlights again the idea of choosing one's destiny by sending a message to the viewers: "There are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it." (Andrews and Chapman 2012, 01:24:10). Properly, throughout *Brave* Merida is portrayed as an intelligent, "independent girl who refuses to be confined by the bonds of marriage or have her fate be determined by someone else in an athletic competition" (Garabedian 2014, 24), representing that she has chosen to be free.

Merida was such a revelation to the public eye because she was the first Disney/Pixar princess to exhibit a strong-willed, brave personality. Therefore, Merida "is just one example of how, over time, Disney movies have progressed to reflect more modern ideals" (2014, 25) and how in *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) female characters are given more power and are in control of their destiny. Thus, Merida is an excellent model for the opposition against patriarchal expectations as she "resists arranged marriage, not just changing her own future but also challenging her kingdom's traditional views, by demonstrating a strong voice, will, and body; though a girl, she is outspoken within her family and physically capable, even of surviving in the wilderness" (Wooden and Gillam 2014, 11).

Moving on, the theme of appropriating masculine roles and attributes is mainly implemented within Merida's character throughout the film. The heroine is a Scottish princess by birth. As mentioned, *Brave* is set in 10th century Scotland, and the representation of Scottish people in that period is heavily stereotyped. As Maier explains, some characters in the film such

as Merida or King Fergus have the "redhead stereotype of a hotheaded, impulsive character" (2021, 234–235). Merida's most representative trait is her curly, disheveled red hair, characteristic of Scottish people, and considered as an extension of her rebellious character. Scottish people were seen as rough individuals with barbaric customs, and described "as naturally stronger, brave [...] and [...] attractive, and [...] conspicuous for martial prowess and violent conduct" (MacGregor 2009, 19). Her Scottish background may be the reason why Merida is presented as an impulsive, wild, and brave heroine moving away from the previous characteristics of passiveness and delicacy associated with the Disney Princess character.

Instead of embodying fragility and elegance, Merida is an unconventional princess who rejects stereotypical femininity. Consequently, she has often been described as a "tomboy" (Buettner 2012; French 2012; Pols 2012) for appropriating attributes and roles which have traditionally been understood as natural traits of masculinity. As explained by Barrie Thorne, the "term 'tomboy' [...] was used to refer to a 'wild romping girl' who 'behaves like a spirited or boisterous boy'" (1993, 112). Merida is associated with tomboyism as she "chafe[s] at the restrictions of imposed femininity and 'girly-girl' ways," she is "spirited and adventuresome, [...] like[s] to move freely and to be outdoors," she detests to be clothed with "dresses and feminine adornments, and [she is] drawn to activities associated with boys" (112). As a general rule, fictional "tomboys" tend to reject people who "tie them down, keep them indoors, and put them into the confines of dresses, housework, and 'manners'" (112). This may be the reason why Merida struggles with her mother's constant supervision and regulation of her actions. Although the term "tomboy" has usually been used to express the resistance against stereotyped feminine conduct, it has dubious misogynistic connotations. As explained by Sarah Maier, "[tomboy] is a reductionist term for a girl who is not enough of a girl, or not desirous of performing femininity as understood by a given culture; it is merely another form of opposition between male and female" (2021, 234) that helps the preservation of gender stereotypes. Therefore, Merida could be described as a young girl with "tomboy" tendencies, however, always bearing in mind the sexist overtones that the label entails.

Regarding physical representation, *Brave*'s main character "defies the prim, sexualized fairy tale princess popularized by [Disney], instead having broad, muscular legs, wild hair, and a fiery attitude," (Seybold 2021, 73) characteristics that have traditionally been associated with masculinity. As Judith Butler (1998) stated, gender is "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender" (519). Drawing from Butler's

gender performativity theory and "given the importance of archery to Merida's tomboy identity," (Dundes 2020, 2) it could be said that the heroine of *Brave* performs masculinity throughout the film. Hence, Merida's representation as a boyish girl is univocal since she is characterized as a combination of Pixar's usual acclamation of hegemonic masculinity (Wooden and Gillam 2014) combined with features of the archetypical Disney Princess character. Due to the more realistic standards which the heroine of *Brave* represents, when the movie premiered, reviewers declared that "Merida could be a 'step in the right direction' for a company which has long defended and elevated heteronormativity and an androcentric notion of femininity" (Seybold 2021, 73).

Another crucial aspect treated in *Brave* that also illustrates Disney's progress towards more epoch adequate films is the theme of how love is redefined as including fondness for other people and not only expressing romantic love for a heterosexual partner. Most "Disney films conclude that each and every female protagonist, left to her own devices, will naturally discover her 'true' feminine, heterosexual self, apparently with no prompting needed from external familial and cultural forces" (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 193–194). Contrastingly, *Brave* does not explore the relationship between a princess and her love interest, and alternatively, the film scrutinizes the relationship between Merida and her mother. These two characters are presented with opposed ideals: Queen Elinor being a traditional Scottish queen and Merida being a free-spirited princess. Although their differences can be noticed since the beginning of the film, the scene when Queen Elinor tells Merida that she has to get married marks a change in their relationship:

> Elinor: The lords are presenting their sons as suitors for your betrothal.
>
> Merida: What?
>
> Elinor: The clans have accepted!
>
> Merida: Dad!
>
> Fergus: What? I…you…she…Elinor!
>
> Elinor: Honestly, Merida! I don't know why you're acting this way. This year each clan will present a suitor to compete in the games for your hand.
>
> Merida: I suppose that a princess just does what she's told!
>
> Elinor: A princess does not raise her voice. Merida, this is what you've been preparing for your whole life.
>
> Merida: No! What you've been preparing me for my whole life! I won't go through with it! You can't make me! (Andrews and Chapman 2012, 00:12:08)

In the scene above, the tension between both characters aggravates. Merida does not want to get married, and her mother wishes to follow the traditional Scottish betrothal. The heroine of *Brave* wants to be independent instead of being tied down by tradition. As Sarah

Maier discloses, in "arranged marriage, no mention is made of compatibility or love that demeans both the young men and Merida. This clarification provides an opening for her to reason that she, too, should be given the opportunity" to be independent (2021, 234). Throughout the film, Merida reiterates that she wants to be free, for example when she states: "I don't want my life to be over. I want my freedom!" (2012, 00:15:30). This statement portrays how Merida sees marriage as imprisonment and as a duty. At the time, arranged marriages provided "standardized control of men over women" (Booley 2021, 25) and it is obvious that Merida does not want to be put in that situation. With frustration, she says to her mother: "Call off the gathering. Would that kill them? You're the queen. You can just tell the lords, the princess is not ready for this. In fact, she might not ever be ready for this, so that's that" (Andrews and Chapman 2012, 00:15:05). This assertion is quite relevant as Merida is stating that she might never be inclined towards marriage, and that it should be fine for a girl to decide her own future. In a way, Merida's words imply that some women feel forced to marry and be the epitome of family because it is what society expects from them.

Not everything about *Brave* has been that advanced and modern. The film introduces Merida as a progressive character; however, the other main character is Queen Elinor, a woman blinded by antiquated practices. Due to her obsession with tradition, Merida's mother continuously tries to instill stereotypical femininity within her daughter. There are several references where Queen Elinor "nags [Merida] about her princessly duties, which include everything from being knowledgeable about her kingdom, to being quiet, patient, cautious, and clean" (Reilly 2016, 56). She constantly tries to educate her daughter into being a traditional princess: "Merida, a princess does not place her weapons on the table" or "A princess should not have weapons in my opinion" (Andrews and Chapman 2012, 00:10:08). Further, Queen Elinor repeatedly tells Merida how she should act: "a princess does not chortle. Does not stuff her gob! Rises early… is compassionate…patient, cautious, clean. And above all, a princess strives for… well, perfection" (2012, 00:06:30). Merida is expected to always be perfect, and she already expresses her distress in the opening speech: "I'm the princess. I'm the example. I've got duties, responsibilities, expectations. My whole life is planned out, for the day I become, well, my mother! She's in charge of every single day of my life" (00:05:15). Throughout *Brave*, Merida makes clear that she does not want to become her mother, instead, she even mentions that she would "rather die than be like [her]" (00:27:50).

Although both characters do not understand each other's mindset at the beginning of *Brave*, towards the end, Queen Elinor understands that Merida should be able to have her own romantic judgment. Even they end up admitting their love for each other. Thus, *Brave* is the

first Disney Princess film to explore love beyond romantic pairings by expanding on the relationship between a mother and a daughter. This is also a new topic introduced to the Walt Disney franchise because, up until that moment, women were confronted in Disney movies, as for example in *Cinderella*, where the heroine is repelled by her stepmother and stepsisters (promoting values of hatred and envy). This exemplifies how women in Disney, and in the world of cinema, tend to be presented in terms of rivalry. Therefore, *Brave* is also pioneering in exploring a relationship between two female characters, something that will encourage future films to study female relationships, as it is done in *Frozen* (2013, 2019) where the relationship between two sisters is central to the storyline.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the control that the Walt Disney enterprise has over the population and the problems that arise when it comes to educating masses. Society, in particular younger generations (Disney's target audience), is subject to the questionable values that this global company advocates for. As seen, Disney's role models are represented in terms of perfect beauty, ideal body shapes, and excellent conduct. These normative characters set excessively unrealistic standards for children, to the point where they are becoming problematic as they promote outdated morals that do not match the current ones. Nevertheless, the extremely gendered representation of characters may be changing. Merida from *Brave* (2012) is a great example of how Disney (and in this case Pixar) may be adapting the representation of their lead female characters to the present times.

This paper has also studied the change in the representation of princesses throughout history. Since 1937, when the first princess film was created, several changes have been implemented in regard to their roles within the plot. Classic princesses were mainly passive, beautiful, and weak, and their stories revolved around waiting to be saved by a prince and falling in love at first sight. Then, a group of more progressive princesses was introduced. These women were presented with more agency, and they started to question patriarchal authority. However, all of them ended up marrying a prince, showing how Disney's advancement was not that serious. The last group of princesses is characterized by exhibiting agency, empowerment, and the ability to make choices. As discussed, these princesses are more androgynous as they show characteristics that have traditionally been considered as masculine. These three groups of princesses have been studied in relation to the different claims of the various feminist waves

in history, and it can be seen how the representation of such female characters was conditioned by such social needs at the time.

To prove these points, a feminist analysis of the Disney/Pixar film *Brave* (2012) was conveyed, and it was demonstrated how *Brave* was the first princess film to introduce a rebellious girl embodying several feminist values. The inquiry on *Brave* illustrated how Disney has shown progress over time with the creation of more advanced motion films in terms of gender portrayals. The rejection of patriarchal expectations, the depiction of Merida with traditionally masculine attitudes, and the revaluation of love as not only including heteronormative relationships were some of the main topics that made *Brave* innovative. Drawing from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it can be discussed that Merida performs masculinity throughout a princess film, a thing that was revolutionary for the Disney princess genre which often represents princesses who are embodiments of what Betty Friedan describes as the "feminine mystique".

Therefore, it can be argued that *Brave* succeeds in breaking Disney's fashion of creating weak and passive female characters. Moreover, Merida can be considered as a feminist character as she rebels against societal constraints limiting women's freedom and does not conform to the traditional obligations of princesses (such as arranged marriage). She is presented as an epitome of the feminist values of agency, choice, and empowerment and therefore, *Brave* can be seen as an excellent first step towards the representation of modern beliefs. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the analysis, there are still characters (such as Queen Elinor) who rely on tradition and present old-fashioned attitudes, and characters who still are heavily stereotyped. This reinforces the idea that *Brave* could be contemplated as a starting point from which Disney has to endure its modernization and its creation of role models who promote inclusivity and diversity.

Works Cited

Andrews, Mark, and Brenda Chapman. 2012. *Brave*. Screenplay by Mark Andrews, Steve Purcell, Brenda Chapman, and Irene Mecchi. California, United States: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios.

Ayres, Brenda. 2003. "The wonderful world of Disney." In *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom*, edited by Brenda Ayres, 15–25. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Benabdellah, Fatima Zohra. 2018. "Impoliteness Strategies and Gender Differences Among Disney Modern Protagonists". *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 3, no. 4: 40–50. Doi: 10.26417/ejms.v3i4.p40-50.

Best, Joel, and Kathleen S. Lowney. 2009. "The Disadvantage of a Good Reputation: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims." *The Sociological Quarterly* 50, no. 3: 431–449.

Booker, M. Keith. 2009. *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*. Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Booley, Ashraf. 2021. "Legal and Social Complexities Relating to Practice of Arranged and Forced Marriages." *Jurnal Syariah* 29, no. 1: 21–42.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. 2012. "The Dichotomy of the Great Mother Archetype in Disney Heroines and Villainesses." In *Vader, Voldemort and Other Villains- Essays on Evil in Popular Media*, edited by Jamey Heit, 80–96. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Buettner, Justin. 2012. "Film Review: Brave." *Style Magazine*, June 23, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2022. https://www.stylemg.com/2012/06/23/37928/film-review-brave.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4: 519–31. Doi: 10.2307/3207893.

Cardoso, Luis, and Carolina Clérigo. 2020. "The Evolution of the Female Character: From Fairy Tales to the Film 'Brave' - a Study in Comparative Literature." *European Journal*

of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies 3, no. 4: 157–167. Doi: 10.46827/ejlll.v3i4.50.

Chatterjee, Ananya, and Nisarga Bhattacharjee. 2019. "Contrivances of Female Empowerment and the Millennial Wave in Disney Movies." In *Fourth Wave Feminism in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Valerie Frankel, 127–38. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company.

Clements, Ron, and John Musker. 1992. *Aladdin*. Screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker, Terry Rossio, and Ted Elliott. United States: Buena Vista Pictures.

Clements, Ron, and John Musker. 2016. *Moana*. Screenplay by Jared Bush. California, United States: Walt Disney Pictures and Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Coyne, Sarah M., Eric E. Rasmussen, Jennifer Ruh Linder, David A. Nelson, and Victoria Birkbeck. 2016. "Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children." *Child Development* 87, no. 6: 1909–1925. Doi: 10.1111/cdev.12569.

Dundes, Lauren. 2020. "The Upshot on Princess Merida in Disney/Pixar's Brave: Why the Tomboy Trajectory Is Off Target." *Humanities* 9, no. 83: 2–13. Doi: 10.3390/h9030083.

England, Dawn E., Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. 2011. "Gender role portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles*, 64: 555–567. Doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7.

French, Phillip. 2012. "Brave - Review." *The Guardian*, August 19, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/aug/19/brave-film-review-kelly-macdonald.

Friedan, Betty. 2010. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton Company.

Garabedian, Juliana. "Animating Gender Roles: How Disney is Redefining the Modern Princess." *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014): 22–25.

Gill, Isabelle. 2016. "Feminist Figures or Damsels in Distress? The Media's Gendered Misrepresentation of Disney Princesses." *Young Scholars in Writing* 13 (April): 96–111.

Giroux, Henry A., and Grace Pollock. 2010. *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield.

Greenhill, Pauline, and Sidney Eve Matrix. 2010. *Fairy tale films: Visions of ambiguity*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Hankin, Kelly. 2007. "And Introducing... the Female Director: Documentaries about Women Filmmakers as Feminist Activism." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1: 59–88.

Hine, Benjamin, Dawn England, Katie Lopreore, Elizabeth Skora Horgan, and Lisa Hartwell. 2018. "The Rise of the Androgynous Princess: Examining Representations of Gender in Prince and Princess Characters of Disney Movies Released 2009–2016." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 12: 2–23. Doi: 10.3390/socsci7120245.

Hine, Benjamin, Katarina Ivanovic, and Dawn England. 2018. "From the Sleeping Princess to the World-Saving Daughter of the Chief: Examining Young Children's Perceptions of 'Old' versus 'New' Disney Princess Characters." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 161: 1–15. Doi: 10.3390/socsci7090161.

Kuhn, Annette. 1994. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Verso.

Lerner, Gerda. 1969. "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History." *Journal of Social History* 3, No. 1: 53–62.

Macgregor, Martin. 2009. "Gaelic Barbarity and Scottish Identity in the Later Middle Ages." In *Mìorun Mòr Nan Gall, "the Great III-Will of the Lowlander?" Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern,* 7–48. Glasgow: Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies, University of Glasgow.

Maier, Sarah. 2021. "Rebellious Royals: From Disney's Ariel to Pixar's Merida." In *A Vindication of the Redhead: The Typology of Red Hair Throughout the Literary and Visual Arts*, 223–241. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

McCabe, Janet. 2004. *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press.

Millet, Kate. 1970. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago.

Orenstein, Peggy. 2011. *Cinderella ate my daughter*. New York: HarperCollins.

Pols, Mary. 2012. "Why Pixar's Brave is a Failure of Female Empowerment." *Time*. June 22, 2012. Accessed 25 April, 2022. https://ideas.time.com/2012/06/22/why-pixars-brave-isa-failure-of-female-empowerment/.

Reilly, Cole. 2016. "An Encouraging Evolution Among the Disney Princesses? A Critical Feminist Analysis." *Counterpoints* 477: 51–63.

Rothschild, Sarah. 2013. Introduction to *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*, 1-14. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Schiele, Kristen, Lauren Louie, and Steven Chen. 2020. "Marketing feminism in youth media: A study of Disney and Pixar animation." *Business Horizons* 63, no. 5: 659–669. Doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2020.05.001.

Seybold, Samantha L. 2021. "'It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart": Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (Dis) empowered Postfeminist Heroines." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34: 69–84. Doi: 10.1007/s10767-019-09347-2.

Shepard, Iris. 2012. "Representations of Children in Pixar Films: 1995–2011." In *Portrayals of Children in Popular Culture: Fleeting Images*, edited by Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic and Debbie Olson, 169–182. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.

Snow, Edward. 1989. "Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems." Representations, 25: 30–41. Doi: 10.2307/2928465.

Stover, Cassandra. 2013. "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess." *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University* 2, no. 1: 1–10. Doi: 10.5642/lux.201301.29.

Thorne, Barrie. 1993. "Crossing the Gender Divide." In *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, 111–134. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Wooden, Shannon R., and Ken Gillam. 2014. *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.