

EXPLORING CHILDREN'S GENDER IDENTITIES AND THE DISNEY COMPANY

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Abstract: Cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in mass media impact the formation of gendered identities from an extremely young age. Representations of masculinity and femininity are explicitly and implicitly embodied in children's toys, books, movies, and various other products aimed at corralling young children into specific gender roles. One of the most influential producers and distributors of these gendered products is the Disney Company, whose efforts aimed at a vast economic, social and cultural monopoly have impacted children and their formations of identity since its creation in 1923.

Cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in mass media impact the formation of gendered identities from an extremely young age. Representations of masculinity and femininity are explicitly and implicitly embodied in children's toys, books, movies, and various other products aimed at corralling young children into specific gender roles. One of the most influential producers and distributors of these gendered products is the Disney Company, whose efforts aimed at a vast economic, social and cultural monopoly have impacted children and their formations of identity since its creation in 1923. How has the extensive reign of the Disney Company contributed to the formation of gendered identities in young children? Through progression of gendered representations that spans generations – moving from strict reproductions of Western patriarchal binary gender norms to seemingly more progressive understandings and representations of gender – the Disney Company has continuously normalized a misogynist and patriarchal social organization. Since 1923, representations of masculinity in Disney productions have ostensibly attempted to reflect larger social movements toward a more enlightened and

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liberal understanding of masculinity; however, these productions have consistently been accentuated by patriarchal representations of hegemonic masculinity. In early films such as *Snow White* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and *Cinderella* (1950), “the various versions of Prince Charming[,] being often two-dimensional[,] more than inadvertently shape the definition of the protagonist’s femininity” (Kimmel & Messner, 1992, p. 520). This two-dimensional representation, found in various Disney films, also functions as an ideological tool to both romanticize and normalize the idea of the alpha male.

Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (1992) analyze the ways in which cultural representations of alpha males function in a larger sociological context. They suggest that “a working definition of *alpha male* ... familiarly evokes ideas of dominance, leadership and power in human social organizations” (Kimmel & Messner, 1992, p. 521). Both comments highlight the problematic nature of stereotyped representations of hegemonic masculinity in Disney’s early film productions. These productions often completely deny the existence of alternate forms of masculinity by idealizing the *alpha male* hero – who dominates all other masculinities and femininities, constructed as subordinate in each work. Accurately reflective of strict patriarchal gender norms of their time period, early Disney films hinder the development of a comprehensive understanding of masculinities in young viewers. A more enlightened, contemporary construct reflecting a spectrum of gender identity might allow young viewers to grow into better-adjusted adults, as society recognizes more and more that gender does not fit into tidy, binary categories.

As the Disney Company grows and evolves, so too do representations of masculinity and femininity in its productions; however, as Western society moves toward a more gender-enlightened social organization, the Disney Company continues to underwrite even its “progressive” narratives with reactionary patriarchal ideological reinforcements. During the 1990s and 2000s, Disney released a number of films focussing on a male protagonist, in contrast to their many earlier Princess-centred productions. While these male protagonists may

move beyond the static alpha male figure, the narrative trajectory of these male characters is still placed in necessary opposition to their female counterparts (or sometimes in opposition to equally subordinated and feminized male characters). Kimmell and Messner (1992) comment on this trend in films such as *Cars* (2006), *The Incredibles* (2004) and *Toy Story* (1995). They write: “each of these films is about being a man, and they begin with an outdated, two-dimensional [hegemonic] prototype to expose its failing and to ridicule its logical extensions” (Kimmel & Messner, 1992, p. 523). Kimmel and Messner continue:

... ‘emasculated’ is not too strong a term for what happens to these male protagonists ... [as each one is] literally put in the service of a nominally feminized figure valued for the more ‘feminine’ orientation of service to the community. (Kimmel & Messner, 1992, p. 523)

Here, these authors highlight how going beyond this two-dimensional representation does not necessarily move these productions toward potential gender equality. This demonstrates how Disney’s recent attempts at providing more progressive and liberal representations of masculinity within their films are regrettably self-contradictory: amidst these apparent progressions is a reinforcement of feminine subordination.

Some of the films go as far as to deprive their heroes of virility by placing them in a more feminized setting as a form of punishment or consequence; for example, after failing to fulfill his ‘masculine’ duties as a local superhero, Mr. Incredible is forced to work as a stay-at-home Dad, which proves much too emasculating and unfulfilling for him to handle (*The Incredibles*, 2004). In *Cars*, Lightning McQueen is consistently juxtaposed with his sidekick Mater, whose inability to appropriate hegemonic masculinity – he finds speaking to female characters extremely difficult, is often characterized as an outcast or loner, and is constantly ridiculed for his lack of self-awareness – acts as a foil to compliment McQueen’s own masculinity (*Cars*, 2006). In order for Disney’s modern masculine heroes to achieve success within their narratives, they are consistently placed in necessary opposition to various female characters or embodiments of femininity; these

gendered representations impact children's identity formation as they attempt to understand competing cultural messages about "appropriate" performances of masculinity and femininity.

Despite the problematic nature of Disney's progressive narratives of masculinity, it is evident that this international conglomerate is still impacted (however slightly) by modern movements toward a more comprehensive understanding of gender politics; this trend highlights a mutually constructive relationship between overarching cultural beliefs and multi-billion dollar corporations, rather than an inequitable relationship where one completely dominates the other. John Stephens (2002) elaborates:

while the Disney culture industry is in general shaped by radically conservative metanarratives, resulting in frequently anachronistic representations of gender politics, it is not unresponsive to wider interest in the cultural production of gender. (Stephens, 2002, p. 116)

One of the few benefits of these modern productions is their acknowledgment of gender as performance within a given culture, and the subsequent rejection of gender as immutably tied to biological sex. Stephens specifically highlights how in films such as *Mulan* (1998), *Hercules* (1997) and *Tarzan* (1999), protagonists of both sexes are not equipped with the necessary gendered abilities expected of them and must learn appropriate cultural understandings of gender throughout their narrative trajectories. He writes, "these most recent films explore the notion of masculinity as a social construction...which must be learned" (Stephens, 2002, p. 116). However problematic, the social construction of gender within these heroes' narratives challenges assumptions concerning inherent and "natural" demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity demonstrated in earlier Disney productions.

While the young boys who consume Disney's vast line of gendered productions may not understand concepts of hegemonic masculinity or gender performativity, cultural messages surrounding masculinity and femininity still become embedded in their individual identity formation. Gendered products aimed at reinforcing

hegemonic masculinity teach young boys what is appropriate in intimate relationships, how to lead a successful life in a capitalist economy, and ultimately teach them how to “become a man”. Stephens (2007) explains how these lessons orchestrate the development of deeply-seated beliefs in gender inequality, specifically the subordination of females:

In a modern capitalistic commodity culture, masculinities ... are as much in the service of female desire as male insecurity and patriarchal ideology, especially insofar as female desire is constructed via its submission to the (dominant) paradigm of romantic love. (Stephens, 2002, p. 131)

Children absorbing these messages are both “shaped by and filtered through the patriarchal and conservative metanarratives that dominate the Disney culture industry” (Stephens, 2002, p. 117). Despite the outwardly “progressive” appearance of Disney’s representations of gender, their male-centered films still consistently define masculinity in reference to heterosexual, physically active/able, aggressive, and power-driven male heroes. In order to one day move beyond this narrow definition of masculinity, we must maintain a critical perspective on the inherent lessons embedded in Disney’s extensive body of cultural productions, and as well on the ideological values underwriting them. The exploration of how Disney narratives negotiate larger social trends and ideologies while maintaining and upholding a hyper-masculine ideal for male heroes can be a powerful critical tool for deconstruction of these prescriptive gendered representations.

Cultural representations of femininity in Disney productions have also attempted to reflect larger social movements which promote gender-based equality and the liberation of women and girls as autonomous individuals; however, female characters in Disney productions are consistently denied full independence and are primarily characterized by their (subordinate) relationship to the patriarchal realm in which they are constructed. Princess images are seemingly inescapable and virtually limitless in their representations, from their affixation to gender-specific objects – such as bikinis designed for young girls – to their seemingly inexplicable presence on gender-neutral objects like dental floss. An illustrative example of this

is the multi-million dollar line of Princess products that Disney manufactures, which provides young girls with endless orientation toward the patriarchal realms and ideals of the princesses they are positioned to idolize.

Karen Wohlwend (2009) in "Damsels in discourse: girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney princess play" explores the various implications of what happens when young girls are targeted consumers of these images. Implicit messages about gender are embedded in these cultural transmitters. Wohlwend writes of the Princess ideal that it is "the archetype in a pervasive cultural norm of feminine beauty ... femininity operating through beauty ideals objectifies the princess as the prize" (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 66). The archetypal representations of Princesses that dominate Disney's early film productions provide useful insight into larger social values about femininity within their contemporary historical context. Continuously objectified and valued solely in terms of their external appearance, these early Princesses affirm dominant cultural conceptions of feminine subordination. The early Princess have acted as the standard to which generations of young girls measured the "legitimacy" of their own femininity. Although these early princess are afforded a greater degree of complexity in characterization when compared with their Prince Charming counterparts, these representations are similarly troubling for their denial of gender experiences outside a patriarchal dichotomy. Parallel to the limitations imposed by Disney's limited scope of masculinity, these early Disney films provide young girls with an extremely limiting understanding of gender experience while subtly reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies of gender.

As cultural definitions of femininity have expanded, the Disney Company has been compelled to move beyond the archetypal representation of subservient and passive women such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. Their recent Princess films such as *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Maleficent* (2014) depict young women rebelling against the confinements of their patriarchal environments, and at first glance seek to disrupt existing hierarchies of power. Despite their high ambitions, however, each one of these heroines inevitably falters and regresses back into the

victim's role – a Princess in need of saving. Although the modern “saviour” characters fall outside of the stereotypical Prince Charming category, and the role of rescuer is taken up by maternal figures or sister characters who help the Princess to complete her narrative journey, Disney still propagates the inferiority and incompetence of women and girls by scripting their inability to save themselves. In her *Maclean's* article entitled "Princesses are finding their own happily ever after", Emma Teitel (2014) playfully challenges the claims of liberation and self-sufficiency professed by Disney's modern princesses.

After all, man or woman, a rescue is still a rescue. What's rare, then, in any fairy tale isn't a heroine who rebels against matrimonial convention or manners, but one who makes her own way, by herself. (Teitel, 2014)

Teitel's analysis of these “liberated” Princesses exemplifies the undercutting of modern representations of femininity in Disney films by a lack of autonomy and independence. The problematic nature of these modern representations is not located within the mutual cooperation of female characters in order to accomplish their goals, but rather it lies within the total and complete denial that a female could achieve her aims on her own; ultimately, both historic and modern Disney heroines rarely save the day, rescue the kingdom, or achieve success independently. This patriarchal reinforcement of feminine dispossession generates immense social implications and, effectively, engineers young girls' internalization of notions of both dependence and inferiority while forming a gendered identity.

Amidst these narratives of limited female independence, the Disney Company has, very recently, begun to break down a small number of patriarchal conventions that dominate their earlier productions. Historically, female characters who look to disturb existing patriarchal power structures have been characterized as inherently evil, undesirable, and even ugly; these “femme fatale” characters are prevalent in movies such as *Snow White* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Cinderella* (1950), and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Disney's female characters who seek to dominate other men or gain power within patriarchal organizations exemplify patriarchal ideas concerning excessive and uncontrolled femininity; within these constructs,

domination over and control of the characters who represent these forms of femininity are crucial to the maintenance of existing power hierarchies. However, as Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004) points out, films like *Brave*, *Frozen* and *Maleficent* resist this historical pattern:

[The modern Princess] still exists ostensibly in a patriarchy in which her father has vested power, but where once it was the role of the femme fatale to disrupt patriarchal continuity, under Team Disney, the princess herself has taken an active role in the disruption. (Do Rozario, 2004, p. 57)

Whereas historical Disney Princesses have been rendered utterly helpless in their own narrative trajectory, Disney has recently afforded their modern Princesses a greater degree of power in the determination of their future. Do Rozario continues, highlighting that “the Disney kingdom may still seem a man's world, but it is a man's world dependent on a princess” (Do Rozario, 2004, p. 57). These thoughts illustrate a limited progression of autonomy granted to Princesses within Disney's recent films. Despite the increase in Princesses' abilities to disrupt various power structures and hierarchies inside her kingdom, the Princess still functions in – and ultimately lives “happily ever after” within a patriarchal world.

Children's internalizations of gendered representations in mass media have profoundly detrimental consequences to them, in terms of psychological development and well-being. The continuation of these gendered representations in Disney productions only works to promote existing Western gender stereotypes and to strengthen patriarchal hierarchies of power. Despite the seemingly harmless representations of gender binaries evident in Disney films, as a 2014 Ontario Human Rights Commission report highlights, rigid binaries can form the basis of justifying violence and prejudice against people who do not fit neatly inside them:

Social stereotypes about gender, and prejudice and fear towards trans people are often at the root of discrimination and harassment. Negative attitudes about a trans person's racial identity, family status or other grounds can combine or intersect to make things worse. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014)

Evidently, there are profound real-life consequences that go along with perpetuating and internalizing gender stereotypes. Children who consume gendered images may not only have inhibitions in their own identity-formation, but may also implicitly learn to reject others who do not fit into binary gender categories. In a nationwide study examining gender-based violence in elementary schools, researchers found that

boys and girls who do not conform to dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity or femininity are also vulnerable to sexual violence and bullying ... by focusing on gender-based violence in and around schools, this report highlights a significant, systemic, but mostly invisible problem that is a serious barrier to the advancement of girls' human rights across the world and here at home. (Greene, Robles, Stout, & Suvilaasko, 2012)

These analyses further demonstrate how systemic reproductions of patriarchal gender norms invariably lead to gender-based violence among children who consume those reproductions. Throughout the extensive reign of the Disney Company, their films have consistently subordinated and underrepresented gender identities that do not fit within the strict patriarchal binaries of hegemonic masculinity and femininity.

Ultimately, the Disney Company is not only manufacturing social understandings of gender and sexuality that are readily consumed by children, they are also dominating other corporations and organizations that might be working to provide children with a broader and more inclusive understanding of gender spectrums. Author Peggy Orenstein (2006) comments:

...when one thing is so dominant, then it's no longer a choice: it's a mandate, cannibalizing all other forms of play. There's the illusion of more choices out there for girls [and boys], but if you look around, you'll see their choices are steadily narrowing. (Orenstein, 2006)

Here, Orenstein critically engages with Disney's steadily growing monopoly which continuously influences children's developing understanding and formation of

gendered identities. The seemingly inescapable grasp of this international, multibillion dollar corporation is carefully reinforcing a misogynist and patriarchal society through their denial and erasure of gender identities outside Western binary categories. Wohlwend notes that:

... identity messages circulate through merchandise that surrounds young consumers as they dress in, sleep on, bathe in, eat from, and play with commercial goods decorated with popular culture images, print, and logos, immersing children in products that invite identification with familiar media characters and communicate gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be. (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 57)

Wohlwend demonstrates how identification with Disney characters that promote implicit social values have a direct impact on children's understanding of what constitutes socially-acceptable norms of masculinity and femininity. Feminists looking to dismantle patriarchal reinforcements of hegemonic masculinity and femininity must explore the critical link between gendered messages inherent in Disney films and products and the formation of gendered identity in young children. Without access to comprehensive representations of a gender spectrum, young children are continuously socialized into a patriarchal, dichotomized understanding of gender.

Having reproduced Western, patriarchal ideals over generations, the Disney Company has provided their extensive and impressionable audiences with an extremely limited scope of gender constructs. Despite appearing to respond to overarching social ideologies, and occasionally adopting the appearance of a more comprehensive understanding of gender spectrums, the Disney Company has consistently underwritten their cultural productions and their gendered products with misogynist, patriarchal ideological reinforcements. Ultimately, our greatest tool as cultural consumers is our awareness. In order to one day move beyond Disney's narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity and femininity – and to ultimately reduce and eliminate gender-based violence within our society – we must maintain a critical perspective on the implicit patriarchal values presented to

young children as they form a gendered identity. Exploration of how Disney simultaneously creates yet dismantles social trends and ideologies, all the while maintaining and upholding patriarchal ideals is a critical tool in the deconstruction of their powerful gendered representations.

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