

**Framing Women in Fairy Tales: A Historical Analysis on the Relationship Between Disney's
Aestheticization of Femininity and Desire for Profit**

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Introduction

As an individual who was born at the turn of the century, in the year 2001, I oftentimes find myself at the cornerstone of society’s departure from what is now considered “outdated” or “old” Disney. Contemporaneously, Disney launched their marketing campaign of the ‘Disney Princess Line’ during my year of birth, which reappropriated their existing princess movies to “reinvigorate the popularity of the Disney princess[es]...with the ultimate goal of encouraging children to personally identify with these characters so that they will purchase the associated products,” (England et al., 2011, para. 1). Indeed, a majority of my earliest memories contain the Disney films in which my parents and I watched together, I remember the fantastical tales from *The Little Mermaid* (Musker & Clements, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) *Sleeping Beauty* (Reitherman et al., 1959), *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998), *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (Hand et al., 1938), and, *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950). Ultimately, these were the stories that encased my childhood, the narratives that at a young age I cherished dearly and adulated to the extent of worship or ritual (see Figure 1); every sick day I had as a child I refused to watch anything but *The Little Mermaid*, thinking that in some way this movie facilitated my sudden instance of feeling better. Consequently, I reflect back on these times and cannot help but feel so far from what once was, how these stories that I previously considered virtuosic have now become prevalent sites for critical inquiry into their perpetuation and dissemination of gendered and racialized stereotypes.



Figure 1. Scanned image of four-year-old Lily in a Cinderella costume for Halloween. Image captured by Nicola Hobson, 2005. Apart of the Hobson Family Photo Album Collection (Year 2005-2006).

Throughout this body of work, I intend on investigating the various eras of the Disney princesses, specifically how Disney has continuously adapted numerous formations of femininity through their films in order to serve a larger cause; monetary gain through consumer participation. Investigating the broad literature concerning the presentation of princesses and how Disney has or has not perpetuated patriarchal positionalities I have found very little work containing these criticisms with the comparison of contemporary and classic Disney princess films. Furthermore, there was a significant void in investigating the ways in which the power lies in the profitability of the film; the positioning of bad or good in this matter rarely considers the marketability of these representations, and thus fails to facilitate an analysis of the appropriation of femininity for public acceptance and viewer participation. Chiefly, this paper will employ a feminist lens concerning the representation and aestheticization of femininity through the evolution of the princesses in Disney's popular media. Specifically I will be juxtaposing the contemporary revisionist Disney princess live-action adaptations to their predecessor, being the traditional animated Disney princess film. Through my demarcation of these cases and their cyclical narratives I problematize the misogynistic rhetoric or reactions these stories have fostered, the advantages and limitations of both epochs and more largely how conglomerates turn performances of femininity and diversity into sites for monetization. Ultimately, Disney has historically disseminated specific gendered ideals through the aestheticization and representation of their princesses, with each era of this franchise developing various interpretations of womanhood as a methodology for accelerating the profitability of these products.

Traditional Disney Princesses

"Silence! You will do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence." – *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998)

Feminine Ideals: Power(Less) Princesses

Concerning the pleasurable effects of popular content and its ability to engage and disseminate politically charged messaging, Duncum states, "the most innocent of aesthetic experiences have ethical and political consequences...aesthetics is at the core of politics...ideologies are being offered to the masses in pleasurable forms..." (Duncum, 2021, p. 3). Unquestionably, Disney has traditionally placed their pleasurable content in fairy tale worlds

constructed around values that reflect misogynistic ideals. There is an incessant aestheticization of female characters in the original Disney princess films as subordinate and lacking agency, with the formulaic solution being a prince who provides relief and rescue. The assembling of the man as the savior in a woman's story speaks to the broader conversation around society's hegemonic structuring of gender roles and how corporations such as Disney reinforce these dominant cultural norms. Looking at the 'Disney Princess Line' franchise forged by Andy Mooney, we see the union of narratives involving Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Rapunzel, etc. (England et al., 2010, para 2). To contextually analyze the ways in which these films collectively present limited notions of femininity, we first must look at their narrative conventions and the performativity of their princesses.

In the film *The Little Mermaid*, audiences observe the mermaid princess Ariel make a deal to trade in her voice for legs to provide her with the chance to meet Prince Eric, whom she has been secretly pining after. The act of a woman giving up her voice for the possibility of meeting her prince is problematic in and of itself; the lack of ability to speak for oneself fosters limited character development and an absence of agency. Correspondingly, body modification as a necessary transaction in this exchange for one's prince continues this theme of compromising or changing one's autonomy. The concept of bodily modification or altering one's physical appearance for the attention of a male love interest is not exclusive to the story of *The Little Mermaid*. Physical transformations are a recurring theme throughout some of the Disney Princess Line, for example, Cinderella gets a makeover in order to impress her prince at the ball, and Mulan conceals her true gender and transforms into a male soldier, prompting her to fall in love with her prince. Analyzing these concessions, viewers observe the sacrificing of one's essence in order to secure the prospect of encountering one's love – the princesses forgo their pre-existing power and strength in the name of love. Nevertheless, there is a relevant discussion to be had about the deal Ariel made with Ursula, the sea witch; if Ariel fails to obtain Prince Eric's heart, she shall become a poor, unfortunate soul and belong to Ursula. Identically, the subjugation of princesses is unwavering; a common trait amongst many films is the female character's inability to exercise their agency. Snow White is poisoned by the Evil Queen and is forced into a comatose state, Sleeping Beauty is cursed and is induced into an unwanted slumber,

Jasmine grapples to find freedom under the domineering thumb of her father and her arranged marriage, while both Rapunzel and Cinderella are forcibly contained to their home environments with the only way of escape being prompted by a man's assistance. The ideas expressed here are ones of domination and subordination through the act of the villains exercising proprietorship over the princesses, with the consistent solution being a prince. Reading the dynamics of feminine performativity in some of these tales, we can conclude that there is a habitual dependency and centralization of male characters in female storylines. Conclusively, the manner in which these princesses escape their oppression is by finding love. The ideology of love solving all is what Disney proposes as the solution to subverting one's inequality. Conversely, the facilitation of imagined femininity that is intrinsically reliant on the protection and existence of men works to further propagate the ideology of female inferiority. Ultimately, the classical Disney princess narratives and their collective representations of passive femininity are a symptom of the political climate in which they emerged, being that of immense patriarchal influence. The communication of these ideologies to Disney's audience, being child-oriented, strengthens and induces implicit misogynistic prejudice within developing generations.

Language: Communicating Misogyny

The majority of Disney consumers are young and impressionable; audiences comprised of children are designated as the target consumers of these commodities as they have a decreased chance for critical interrogation into the political messaging behind these films. The reality within the dynamics of media made for children and its underlying political messaging is that until audiences can comprehend and decode the motivations behind these images, their primary source of knowledge comes from these representations (Kurtin & McCormick, 2023, p. 48). Assuredly, the problematic representations of femininity in traditional Disney princess films extend beyond the narrative conventions they employ, with the dialogue in these motion pictures being one of the most vital aspects of interrogation. Shakier Begum produced a study that empirically investigates the misogynistic language circulated by the male and female characters within the animated films *Mulan* and *The Little Mermaid*. This study revealed that the male characters notably used more sexist speech than their female counterparts and that the prevalent form of misogynistic language employed by male characters was gender bias. Begum presents

the category of gender bias speech as dialogue that reinforces gender roles and diminishes the legitimacy of feminine capacity (Begum, 2022, p. 222). With that said, the assertion of misogynistic ideals through dialect is not exclusive to the films in which Begum speaks of; in fact, there is a particular scene in *Beauty and the Beast* that is worthy of highlighting, in which Gaston says to Belle, “Belle, it’s about time you got your head out of those books and paid attention to more important things, like me. It’s not right for a woman to read...Soon she starts getting ideas and thinking...” (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, 0:08:34-0:08:50). Though there is a potentiality that this was included for satirical purposes, as most of Gaston’s character is framed through the archetypal portrayal of hyper-masculinity, we come back to the concern of viewership and impressionability. Viewership of media that illustrates and affirms specific biases and inaccurate tropes correlates to the creation of “reductionist stereotypical judgements” (Dixon, 2019, p. 248). Often, the subconscious effect of media’s cognitive priming is the internalization of bias or harmful ideologies, specifically about social groups to which viewers are exposed (Dixon, 2019, p. 248). When isolated, the instance of Gaston’s commentary can be rationalized as innocent irony; however, when considering the actualized effects of repeated exposure to visual and verbal bigotry, the severity of consuming this type of content appears to be of greater significance and concern.

Counterarguments: Debunking “Wokeness”

As I present all of the above propositions, I acknowledge the large number of Disney fans who have grown up with these stories and do not find these narratives constricting how femininity is portrayed to young children. There is a counterargument to be made against the superciliousness occurring in some of the conversations about classical Disney princesses and their feminist interpretations. The primary critique of the feminist interrogation of the princesses is a part of the broader contentions surrounding contemporary feminist theories. This has sparked a divisive debate, with those claiming that the allegations of anti-feminism within the original Disney princess films are prompted by “woke” culture (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tweet stating, “Can we stop with the woke feminists insisting Disney princesses all just pined after a man.” X, August 2023.

https://x.com/SianElisabeth_/status/1690656186394103808?s=20

Initially, the concept of woke culture was exclusive to the consciousness of racialized minorities and their oppression. Latterly, it has been extended through an intersectional framework relating to race, gender, sexuality, female-based violence, and the infrastructures that reproduce these inequalities (Madrid Gil, 2022, para 25). With that said, in no way is wanting love anti-feminist. The critiques of these stories are not based on these narratives prioritizing romantic pursuit but instead on the centralization of men as the cause and then the solution to illustrated feminine weakness. There is a dichotomy between these ideologies; a protagonist who lacks agency in any narrative world would be considered weak and limited. The perpetual depiction of enervated or poorly developed femininity in Disney princess films limits the potential for diverse stories that embrace the protagonist’s abilities. Indeed, Ariel did have a fascination with humans, but for most of the movie, Ariel did not speak; she lacked agency and depth, and without her prince, she would not be able to regain her voice; this is anti-feminist. The Disney princesses do not simply surface as docile and fragile; in many ways, they are brave, intelligent, courageous, and feminine. Despite this, they are rendered as fundamentally weak through their stripping of agency, typically solved or evoked by the desire to have a prince. The Disney princesses and the representation of femininity as progressive or anti-feminist are sites for further dispute, however, the void of agency demonstrates how the female characters lack depth. Ultimately, the traditional Disney princesses consistently possess an inability to act

compared to their male counterparts, and thus, the aesthetic construction of these characters is based on outdated and misogynistic notions of womanhood.

Revisionism and Contemporary Adaptations

“We absolutely wrote a Snow White that [is] not going to be saved by the prince, and she’s not going to be dreaming about true love; she’s dreaming about becoming the leader she knows she can be.” – Rachel Zegler (Variety, 2022)

The New Age Woman: Contemporary (Post)Feminism in Media

As Hennig-Thurau and Houston state, the simulation of experiences and facilitation of entertainment is a “valuable source of knowledge for consumers about many aspects of their world, including people, historical events, cultural and political institutions” (2019, p. 49). The intersection of popular culture and feminism’s contemporary evolution situates the present-day Disney princess. The latest wave of feminist thought is characterized by a multitude of differing subsections, one being post-feminism, which is also categorized alongside concepts like popular feminism and neoliberal feminism. In the text “In Focus: Post-Feminism and Contemporary Media Studies” Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra consider the mainstreaming of post-feminism, outlining that “within contemporary culture it is clear that certain kinds of female agency are recognizable and profitably packaged as commodities...post-feminism already incorporates a negotiation with hegemonic forces in simultaneously assuming the achievement and desirability of gender equality” (2005, para 4). The politicization of entertainment media and branded content’s recognition of feminism as a commodity within popular cultural products is imperative to understanding the reimagining of Disney princesses through live-action adaptations. Disney’s construction of the ‘new age woman’ and revisionism of their former princess tales reveals the corporate desire to attract popularity and sustain revenue by employing feminine sovereignty and autonomy.

Currently, there exists six live-action adaptations of the stories within the Disney Princess Line, those of which being Sleeping Beauty in the film *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014), *Cinderella* (Branagh, 2015), *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), *Jasmine* in *Aladdin* (Ritchie, 2019), *Mulan* (Caro, 2020), and Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Marshall, 2023). Furthermore, two Disney princess live-action adaptations are in the works for release later this decade; *Snow White* (Webb,

2025) and *Moana* (Kail, 2025). From the inception of the initial adaptation of *Maleficent*, there have been debates encompassing whether these renditions effectively appeal to more contemporary consumers while honouring the original purposes of their animated predecessors. The notion of femininity utilized in the recent interpretations of these stories notably diverges from the ones of classical Disney; there is a collective de-centering of male characters for inciting agency, an enhanced prioritization of diversity or authentic representations, and the mediation of passive femininity. For example, in the updated version of *Sleeping Beauty*, the kiss that breaks Aurora's cursed sleeping state is not from Prince Phillip but from Maleficent. The emphasis here is on the power of Aurora and Maleficent's maternal and platonic bond as women, not the requited love of romantic heterosexual unions. The film positions Aurora's father, King Stephan, as the villain, who ultimately dies in a struggle between Maleficent and himself. The conclusion of this adaptation is one of nuance compared to the original; Maleficent and Aurora join forces and lead their respective kingdoms in harmony and cooperation. The presentation of a kingdom with matriarchal governance and the display of empowering femininity through collective dynamics provide young female viewers with active examples of the effectiveness of feminine agency and determination. Comparatively, the traditional animation of *Sleeping Beauty* failed to achieve what Maleficent accomplishes, demonstrating a multi-dimensional princess who makes sacrifices for justice but does not compromise or alter herself for love.

Observing the adaptations of these stories through a post-feminist lens, there is an explicit development of femininity as complex. However, these films suppose that gender equality is accomplished, lacking any legitimate analysis or practices for attaining this in reality. The deductive representation of gender bias and feminine inequality as remedied is what post-feminism postulates. The ambiguous nature of post-feminism exists through its assumption that gender equality has been attained in our present day. Accordingly, the re-imagining of Disney princesses through a post-feminist framework, in many ways, is progressive compared to the original animated versions; nonetheless, they are devoid of credibility as truly "feminist" due to their inference that feminine equality is actualized. Moreover, the framing of procuring equal rights is executed through capitalistic modes of communication; the solution to misogynistic repression is situated in consumer participation in these media texts. Ultimately, consumeristic

participation in these media brands are not based in the real, they may provide Disney consumers with enhanced representations of femininity, however they fail to address the concrete realities of womanhood by simulating gender equality as abstract and fictionalized.

Inciting Anger: Public Reception to “New” or “Other”

Predictably, the fan cultures that exist around the Disney princess franchise have persistently scrutinized and condemned the renewed versions of these stories. The outrage that fans have expressed have not solely been directed towards the films, their narratives, or the imagery, but as well the actresses who have been hired to play these roles. It is no secret that when Disney hired Halle Bailey, a Black woman, to play Ariel in the live-action interpretation of *The Little Mermaid*, fans were quick to express their infuriation about this casting decision (see Figures 3 & 4).



Figure 3. Tweet stating, “They changed the story originally written to fit their woke ideologues.” X, November 2023. <https://x.com/MichaelSummer77/status/1730079337272217808?s=20>

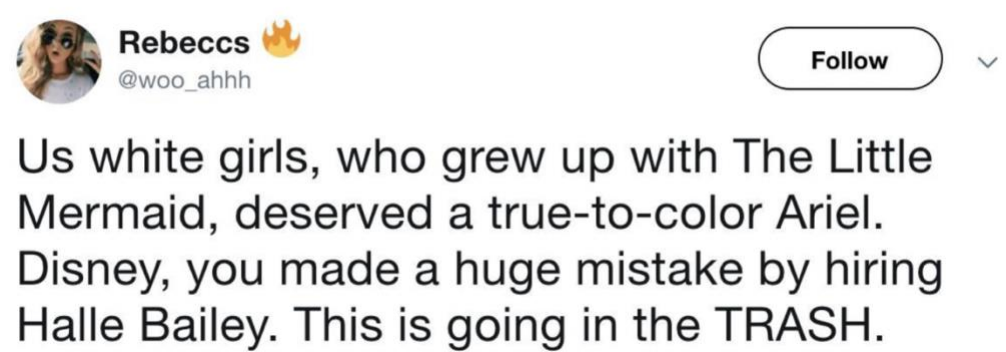


Figure 4. Tweet stating, “US white girls, who grew up with The Little Mermaid, deserved a-true-to-colour Ariel.” X, June 2023. <https://x.com/DemsAbroad/status/1664304804317868033?s=20>

The blatant racism that ensued following the announcement and eventual advertising for this film was widespread; some people directed their dislike for the adaptation towards Disney’s implementation of “wokeness” while others expressed their discontentment towards Halle Bailey

for taking the role and representing Ariel as a Black woman. The polarization within consumers reactions to Bailey’s performance can be analyzed through social identification theories that concern the relationship between media consumption patterns and identity; audience member’s personal identities become associated with their relation to media content that represents their cultural group, and likewise their interpretation of media texts that highlight or concern other group’s cultural and ethnic representations (Dixon, 2019, p. 248). Consequentially, individuals who have identified with the animated version of Ariel due to the character’s race have reacted poorly to the newer interpretation of the story in which she is represented as a different racial identity. The reactionary nature of the debate concerning the contemporary *The Little Mermaid* film, and its subsequent attempts to cancel both Disney and Bailey, exemplify how capitalistic embracement of diversity and female empowerment can propagate opposing rhetorics. The racist and misogynistic dialogues that resulted from the re-presentation of Ariel highlight the limitations of post-feminist media products; discussing progressive ideas in a vacuum constrains the ability for action and legitimacy.

Following the release of *The Little Mermaid* adaptation, Disney announced its next live-action princess movie, being *Snow White*. The lead actress of this rendition is Rachel Zegler, a Latina woman, who has already received backlash concerning her playing this role (see Figures 5 & 6).



Figure 5. Tweet stating “Meet your new “Snow White”: Unfriendly Militant Feminist.” X, September 2023. <https://x.com/bennyjohnson/status/1699425043158028497?s=20>



Figure 6. Tweet stating “Cancel this silly woke propaganda that is the Snow White movie.” X, November 2023. <https://x.com/NaveedParker/status/1729918735140712865?s=20>

The condemnation of Rachel Zegler was not exclusive to her race but to her discussion around illustrating a more progressive version of Snow White. Zegler was asked in an interview what aspects of the original animation were updated in the live adaptation film. Following this, she highlighted her desire in this interpretation to depict Snow White as less reliant on love and more focused on becoming the leader of her kingdom (Variety, 2022). The backlash that resulted from this statement was vile, with people calling for Disney to cancel the film and to cancel Zegler as an actress. In the same manner as the case of Halle Bailey’s Ariel, fans of Disney believe Zegler is tarnishing the original presentation of Snow White. The reductionist mentality of the fans who avidly attempt to threaten or cancel the women who are starring in these princess adaptations perpetuates the very notions that Disney is attempting to revise: misogyny and racism. Simultaneously, Disney’s commodification of the post-feminist princess remains a source of insufficient feminine representation, the production of a fantasy that contains a post-race (Barker, 2016, p. 296) and post-gender ignorance. Assuredly, the post-feminist princess provides audiences with revised feminine ideals that involve increased agency but neglect the nuances of racial and gendered intersections. Furthermore, these revised presentations of Disney princesses have incited racist and sexist reactions, as seen in the above figures, which ultimately speak to the limitations of adopting constrained feminist ideals to produce consumer participation.

Discussion & Conclusion

“By offering feminist ideas back to women in a commodified form, power structures are discounted as the cause of women’s oppression. The feminist movement is consequently also disregarded as a solution to it.” – Jemima Repo (2020, p. 218).

Commodity Feminism: Follow the Money

Lisa A. Daily discusses the concept of commodity feminism in marketing and media spheres, stating, “Feminism as rendered in [a] commodity-form detaches itself from historical contextualization and material conditions. The contradiction is...it allows objects to stand in for politics, justice, and [the] development [of] agendas of empowerment” (2019, para 15).

Correspondingly, the commodification of feminine ideals throughout the decades of Disney princess films are essentially attempts to promote the ideas that best achieve the amassing of capital. The development of femininity in the Disney Princess Line franchise, from a static and male-centered perspective to the falsified “woke” employment of racial and gender diversity, is a symptom of the broader issue of enticing consumerism through ascribing commodities ethical connotations. Markedly, the classical formations of the Disney princesses utilized the subversion of women as a tool for maintaining patriarchal domination over the industry that produces these films. In contrast, the modern adaptations of these princess narratives embrace feminine agency as a tool for reviving the entertainment brand. Commodity feminism prioritizes the individual consumer’s connection to the product, which “swaps the political activism of large social movements for individual caring consumption that has little or nothing to do with public engagement and advocacy” (Repo, 2020, p. 222). Disney’s contemporary incorporation of a multi-faceted princess who is not strictly white nor reliant on a male further sustains the branded franchise of the Disney Princess Line’s lifetime and profitability. Ultimately, the incorporation of commodified feminism in the modern Disney princess film is not a result of Disney’s desire to eliminate gendered biases but rather the cooperation’s attempt to reappropriate the pre-existing franchises through more contemporary ideals for garnering additional financial revenue.

Conclusion: When Old and New Fail to be Feminist

Employing idealized or simulated femininity throughout Disney’s classical and contemporary princess films, regardless of whether their representations are static or dynamic, uses feminine performativity. The aestheticization of femininity is done in an isolated fictitious setting; the imagined story worlds of the Disney princesses do very little to facilitate tactics for mediating gender-based oppression. In classical Disney princess fairy tales, misogynistic and passive femininity was the standardized paradigm in media and, more broadly, society; hence,

these films performed well during the time of their release as they established conventional ideologies. Conversely, the post-feminist princess live adaptation films are restricted in their capacity to promote positive and actualized solutions to misogyny; in fact, they have created disputatious spheres in which individuals who are misogynistic or racist direct their disdain for these individuals towards the actors who play these reimagined versions of Disney's princesses. Though the modernized Disney princess appears more progressive than her predecessor, these films aestheticize commodified formations of feminist performativity. Conclusively, Disney's distinct stylization of femininity through the development of the company's Disney Princess Line exhibits the fostering of harmful rhetorics, whether this is in the film narratives or the fan spheres, more than they have provided change to societal subordination of women; genuine action represents narratives of feminine sovereignty on-screen but participates in facilitating this movement off-screen.

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Figures

Figure 1. Scanned image of four-year-old Lily in a Cinderella costume for Halloween. Image captured by Nicola Hobson, 2005. Apart of the Hobson Family Photo Album Collection (Year 2005-2006).

Figure 2. Tweet stating, “Can we stop with the woke feminists insisting Disney princesses all just pined after a man.” X, August 2023.

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