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The Evolution of the Disney Princesses: Our Once-Flawed Role Models

I grew up while they talked and danced on the screen. Disney princesses were an integral part of my childhood, dictating the way I spoke, my wardrobe, my perception of gender roles, and how I viewed the wider world. As my first real role models, Disney princesses were an example of what an ideal woman should look and act like, which I carried with me for years. I still regularly reference Disney princesses in conversations that I have with friends. They are universal characters, after all. Disney princesses have been around for almost a hundred years, and in that time, they've perpetuated harmful stereotypes of what it means to be a woman. In recent years, as Disney tried to contend with its past, the public has been deceived by the "fake wokeness" of new characters.

As a naive young girl, I was oblivious to the unrealistic and detrimental portrayal of these characters and the sort of potential impact it could have on the generations of children preceding me and those to come after. A study published in *Child Development* in 2016 that surveyed children in the United States showed that 96% of girls and 87% of boys in the United States had viewed Disney princess media at some point in their life. The target audience for the Disney princesses is children, mostly young girls, from the ages of 4-10. This is an age where vital development and learning begins for life. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze whether the content that they are being shown is providing them with a solid understanding of the roles they'll eventually play in society.

When comparing some of the first princesses like Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Jasmine with the newer princesses like Rapunzel, Moana, and Raya, we can see how the princess stereotypes have evolved over time, especially pertaining to the Damsel in Distress trope.

Snow White was the first Disney princess film to be released. It came out in 1939, a more traditional time period where women predominantly existed in the private sphere, while men were considered the bread-winners, a sentiment reflected throughout the film. Women were granted the right to vote only a decade earlier, after having fought for it for hundreds of years. The Great Depression, which hit at the beginning of the 1930s, greatly impacted the already low number of women that were employed, which furthered their role in the home.

In the film, a jealous queen gives Snow White a poisonous apple which induces a sleep from which she can only be awakened by “true love’s first kiss.” Luckily for Snow White, just this happens. The prince kisses her and Snow White’s eyes slowly flutter open as she quickly utters, “You found me.” To a young girl, this scene may appear dreamy and romantic. However, Snow White clearly represents the Damsel in Distress archetype because she needs a male figure to save her from dangerous circumstances, portraying the princess as helpless, weak, and in need of rescuing.

Sleeping Beauty follows suit with *Snow White*, as Aurora is saved by a prince. This film was released in 1959. This decade was where the United States sowed the seeds of the Cold War. With the red scare and rising tensions with the Soviet Union, citizens across the nation were fearful of standing out and risking the label of a communist. Therefore, women saw a substantial transition back into roles in the home. This was an unfortunate reversal of some of

the progress that women had made in the workplace with the increase in demand for work while men were off fighting World War II.

The film demonstrates these more traditional values through Aurora and her actions. At one point in the film, Aurora arrives home on her birthday excited after meeting a man (who she does not know is Prince Philip) and her three fairy godmothers share that it was declared on the day of her birth that she would have to marry Prince Philip. To make matters worse, the fairies tell Aurora she is forbidden from seeing the man she has just met. Upon hearing this news, Aurora runs to her bedroom and weeps on top of her covers, rather than trying to advocate for her desires or rebel to change her circumstances.

Aladdin, released in 1992, was the first Disney princess film to star a non-white princess. On top of this, Jasmine was dressed in more casual clothing in contrast to the floor length dresses worn by Snow White and Aurora, reflecting the spirit of the nineties—a time when advocacy and reform for equal civil and reproductive rights was on the rise. In previous decades, there was a great deal of legislation facing decisions surrounding women from their standing in gender equality to *Roe v. Wade*. Women took to the streets to demand even more rights in the years to follow in order to build off of the progress that they had made in the eyes of the public. Jasmine's rebellious spirit is reflective of this time period. It is showcased when she sneaks out of the palace, but she faces danger when she almost gets her limb cut off by a storekeeper who thinks she stole his goods. However, she is conveniently saved by Prince Aladdin, a theme viewers know all too well by now.

It seems Jasmine's main power comes from utilizing her appearance, perhaps most troublingly when she is trying to distract Jafar. As Aladdin attempts to break her free, she uses

her sultry expressions and seduction to maintain Jafar's attention. She even goes as far as to kiss him. Jasmine is unable to save herself without Aladdin's aid—and her primary power is her sexualized body. What's the message for young girls watching this movie?

Tangled, released nearly twenty years later in 2010, strove to construct a more realistic and powerful princess with Rapunzel's curious character traits, as they manifest themselves through her journey. This follows suit with women in society making great strides in breaking free of the metaphorical bondages that had been placed on them, as seen by Nancy Pelosi becoming the first woman to serve as speaker of the US House in 2007 and Hillary Clinton becoming the first woman to win a major party's presidential primary in 2008. These were big wins for women as a whole, as they were acquiring major roles in society.

Just like these trailblazing women, Rapunzel ventures beyond what she knows. When Rapunzel sings her healing song, bringing her love interest Flynn back to life, it's a clear reversal of the traditional Damsel in Distress archetype. However, the film does not fully succeed in overcoming the trope. Rapunzel's whole journey and initiative to leave her perch in the tower was because of Flynn Rider, insinuating that a woman needs a man's help or encouragement to pursue her endeavors.

Moana, the next Disney princess film to hit the theaters, finally showed Disney moving past the Damsel in Distress archetype. *Moana* was released on November 23rd, 2016. Hillary Clinton announced her campaign in April 2015 and lost the election just weeks before the film was released. The Trump vs. Clinton election and the socio-political conversations surrounding these campaigns likely influenced much of the plot and the portrayal of *Moana* in the movie. The release of the film also coincided with the emergence of the body positivity movement. The Disney franchise intended to create a more independent princess with a realistic body type.

Notably, Moana was the first Disney princess without a love interest, allowing the focus to be placed on her valiant journey to restore fertility to her island. An important scene that establishes Moana as a strong woman is when she defeats the monster Te Ka. Maui, the male demigod, is yelling at Te Ka, but Moana takes a different approach. Just as Te Ka lifts her arm to throw lava at Maui, Moana intervenes by holding the green light and allowing the ocean to part before her. As she walks toward Te Ka, she sings the ocean restoration song and Te Ka hardens to rock before revealing the inner goddess, Te Fiti, that dwells within. Te Fiti immediately grows lush plants and restores the heart of the island. Moana does all of this by herself, relying solely on her intelligence and empathy to see past the hardened shell of Te Ka and heal Te Fiti.

The most recent Disney princess film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), also attempts to fend off the Damsel in Distress trope by reversing it. In the years leading up to the release of the film, there were several pieces of legislation and a new general sentiment about the how and where a woman should exist and function within society. Raya reflects this, as she is from Eastern Asia, an ethnicity that has not yet been seen before in Disney princesses. There has also been a large emphasis on the growing importance of diversity and inclusion that coincided with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and other causes that embrace cultures and ethnicities.

Raya's fearless solo journey to restore the gem and the original spirit to her kingdom encompass the sentiments of inclusion and newly-acquired positions for women in society. Once again, Raya has no love interest in this film. She uses her knowledge and moral compass to complete her journey and does so without the aid of a man. Compared to the older films, this is progress, but there were times when the filmmakers "woke" allusions were so obvious that they seemed to work against their intentions. Take for instance when Raya meets Namaari and

Namaari awkwardly states “We are both women that despise uncomfortable formal wear.” This is an unnatural vehicle that the filmmakers employed to show their attention to society’s eagerness for progressive allusions in the film but it comes off as stilted and blatant.

Beyond their susceptibility to the Damsel in Distress trope, Disney has done a poor job with creating realistic bodies for the princesses. When the target audience of young girls sees the princesses, each with an hourglass figure and wrists that are smaller than the diameter of their eyes, they will have the wrong prototype of what a woman is expected to look like. If they adopt the belief that their body should look like that, these films could be the source of body dysmorphia for millions of young girls. By implementing more body realistic princesses, Disney will affirm that all bodies are different and that is totally normal.

Disney has also created a problematic relationship between the actual princesses that they create and the merchandise that they sell of these princesses. They establish an image and personality that is specific to each of these characters in the films, but these characteristics are completely discarded when it comes to merchandising.

For instance, the Merida doll from the film *Brave* is sold as a doll holding a hairbrush. This completely discredits Merida’s endeavors, her skill with the bow and arrow, and her love of archery. Merida is meant to represent a powerful and fearless woman to audiences, but when she is being merchandised without a bow and arrow, it shows that Disney prioritizes maintaining the traditional image of women as beauty-obsessed over including the elements of a character that may not usually be deemed “feminine” activities.

The Moana doll is also sold in the same fashion—just with a hairbrush. Anyone who has seen the film *Moana* knows that there is much more to Moana as a character than her

appearance. She sets out on a solo journey across the ocean to restore fertility to her homeland, making her a courageous and extremely capable character. In the packaging, it would be expected for Moana's doll to be holding a paddle and standing on a raft to represent her fearless journey into uncharted territory. However, by only including a hairbrush, Disney is once again reinforcing the idea to children that a woman's appearance is their most important attribute.

Studying the evolution of the Disney princesses over time helps to provide a framework for the headway that has been made in recent years in the portrayal of women in these films. Despite this, there is still great potential for changes to be made, especially in regards to realistic body representation and creating strong female role models. In upcoming princess movies, the creative teams and writers should focus more on realistic body types, diversification, and a continued prioritization of a hero's journey over romantic love. They need to show more women who don't have paper thin waists and small wrists, and continue to include princess stories from different backgrounds, countries, and ethnicities. Finally, the most recent movies have reversed the Damsel in Distress trope, and offered conflict resolution through compromise rather than violence. This has allowed the Disney princesses to have more deeply developed personalities overall, showing young girls that they do not need a man to build a strong sense of self. I look forward to seeing how the next Disney princesses will continue to showcase all the ways a woman can be strong and positively impact the next generation.