

Ben Cacak

Dr. Kandy Robertson

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Emphasized Femininity in Disney's Trifecta

Walt Disney, most famous for his animated films targeted towards children, made what are called princess movies. These films depict young women of royalty, usually in their teenage years, who go on a journey to get married. Walt Disney started the genre with his three films during the time when he was alive, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, then *Cinderella*, and finishing with *Sleeping Beauty* before he died. During the mid-twentieth century, around the time these films were produced, the movement known as second-wave feminism had yet to occur. Women were expected to conform to ideals of emphasized femininity, and arguably still have to today. Emphasized femininity is defined as the idea in which women comply with men's power. This can take on the form of a woman being a sexual object for men, women maintaining certain beauty ideals, or participating in the daily tasks of domestic work on the behalf of men. *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—the trifecta of Walt Disney's original princess films—contain rhetoric that implies women should conform to emphasized femininity in terms of beauty ideals and gender roles. These are misogynistic notions about gender from the era of pre-second wave feminism that socializes young audiences to these beliefs.

A common theme in Walt Disney's three original princess films among the is the isolation of the princess-protagonist. All three of them in these films are kept away from

mainstream society. Cinderella in *Cinderella* arguably has it the best as she is not forced to live out in the wilderness. Her stepmother who is portrayed as wicked and cruel keeps her in the house completing chores all day long. Even though Cinderella is an original member of the family as the stepmother married in, she is treated like a second-class citizen. Unlike *Cinderella*, Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is banished from her kingdom by her stepmother. This is on account of Snow White's beauty. In both the Grimms' original fairy tale and Walt Disney's adaptation, White's stepmother looks into her magic mirror and asks if she is the fairest of all the women in the land. The mirror answers no, citing Snow White as the fairest. The stepmother hires a hitman to take White into the woods and cut her heart out. He fails to do this on the account of her sweetness. There she is left to live in the cottage of seven dwarfs, only to leave when her Prince Charming resurrects her after her death. Princess Aurora's situation in the Film *Sleeping Beauty* is similar to Snow White's in the sense that she is sent out into the woods. However, unlike Snow White, Princess Aurora is forced to leave when she is an infant. This is on the account of the antagonist, Maleficent, putting a spell on Aurora that will have her kill herself on her sixteenth birthday. As a measure of protection, she is sent out into a remote section of the forest to live with three fairy godmothers as a peasant girl until she is 16-years-old and ready to marry the one she is betrothed to.

Gender Roles are prevalent in the three films as evident by the theme of isolation. Women's isolation corresponds to the gender role that women are supposed to be reserved; that women are supposed to shy away from men. These films are perhaps an allegory for purity, claiming women need to be locked away until they are ready to be married to their husbands. This is evident because the "Prince Charming" character is the one to save them from their

isolation via marriage. However, Disney does not limit messages about gender roles to a woman's purity. All three of the princess-protagonists are submissive and sweet. They are the very definition of the emphasized femininity as they cater to the patriarchy's idealized feminine attitude. In *Snow White*, White is seen singing with the local fauna while making her way to what she will know as the Dwarfs' cottage. She has a high pitch voice and the animals that follow her indicate her sweet and innocent personality. In *Cinderella*, Cinderella gives in to her stepmother's ludicrous demands, indicating that she is compliant. Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* runs away from Prince Philip when she meets him in the woods while berry picking. She says that she is not supposed to talk to strangers, which is true, but refers back to the aforementioned gender role of being shy and reserved. It is also necessary to point out that the princess-protagonists in all three of these films get married at the end, and they do so at a very young age. Snow White is 14 when she rides off with her prince charming, Princess Aurora is 16, and Cinderella is 19. The marriage of the three princesses implies that a woman's goal in life is to get married to her prince—and to do it before she grows old.

Sleeping Beauty, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are also responsible for instilling beauty ideals in young viewers. Douglas Brode, the author of *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, believes that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is more about White's inner beauty than her appearance. He argues: "Disney's burly fellow—like the slender prince—is moved by Snow White's personality: her innocent approach to life, her concern for others, her essence as a human being" (174). However, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* uses the same symbolic colors that reflect beauty ideals as in the Grimms' fairytale: black, white, and red. These colors, of course, pertain to black hair, ghastly white skin, and rosy red lips. The beauty

ideals are carried on by repetition in the latter two films. Cinderella is blonde, white, and thin. The same is can be applied to Princess Aurora while the title of her movie even contains the word *beauty*. It is also important to note that at the beginning of *Sleeping Beauty* before Maleficent puts the curse on the infant Princess Aurora, the fairy, Flora, grants her the wish of beauty. This wish is granted to Aurora at such a young age, which suggests to the target audience who happen to be of a similar age range that beauty is a quality a grown woman needs to have. Disney's rewriting also portrays the protagonists as just girl— Snow White a fourteen-year-old—which communicates the idea of youth as a necessity for being beautiful. The idea of being the most beautiful woman is also perpetuated in two of the three films. The entire plot of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* revolves around White's stepmother's prerogative to be the fairest women in all the land. The idea of her stepdaughter being fairer than herself eats her alive. In *Cinderella*, the stepsisters are jealous of her beauty so they force her to wear rags and fill every minute of her day with demeaning chores whether they need to be done or not. To challenge Brode's point, *Snow White* conveys messages telling young girls that they need to be beautiful in order to prove their femininity just like the other two films, thus perpetuating emphasized femininity.

Disney perpetuates emphasized femininity by defining women's work. According to the films, women's work is inside the private sphere; domestic work. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, White organizes an animal cleaning crew upon entering the dwarfs' cottage. It is her first instinct upon arrival, and she enthusiastically takes the broom as if it is her privilege to do so. Brode claims that Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is more feminist than the Grimms' version because White asks the dwarfs if she can cook and clean in return for room and

board (177). The Grimms' version has the dwarfs make the proposition to White, reversing the transaction: "if you will keep our house for us, and cook, and wash... you may stay" (Grimm). Despite Brode's point, this is not a marvelous move on Disney's part. It would have been just as easy for him to rewrite *Snow White* where White went to work with the dwarfs in the diamond mine. Their cottage had gone without a domestic laborer before. Cinderella in *Cinderella* eventually gives in to the asinine tasks of her stepmother too as she does the chores that were demanded of her. The visuals of women participating in cleaning the house is an implication that says there is something inherent between femininity and being a homemaker.

It is evident that views of women seen in the original Walt Disney Princess films are an outdated and misogynistic view of women—that the emphasized femininities portrayed in these three works are just a sign of the time. This is a true statement, but it minimizes the problem that these films are still viewed by young people today, and the young viewers who watch these films are socialized to take the messages about gender. According to Susan Witt of the University of Akron, things seen on the television have a strong socializing influence on children, thus influencing the behavior of them based on their gender. The gender roles that children see on television are in turn reinforced by the people and institutions in the lives of them (Witt). The film *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* makes this evident as well. There is a scene of where a young girl is teasing her hair in a playful manner and batting her eyes to the interviewer—a behavior picked up from a feminine role model in a Disney Film. *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* also shows two nine-year-old girls discussing one of Disney's later films, *Beauty and the Beast*, and what they would do if Belle was their friend and they saw the abusive nature of the Beast. One of the girls, Melina, says "If that was [sic] my friend, and I've seen [sic] her go through this whole thing, I'd

probably say keep on being nice and sweet like you are, and that will probably change him, and in the movie, it does” (Sun). There is another scene in the *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* where a young boy takes the film *Pocahontas* as literal truth: “I liked *Pocahontas* kind of because the person who made the movie made a real story about Pocahontas. *Pocahontas* is true, and Pocahontas was real, and John Smith was real, and the Plymouth were real [sic], and the [Native Americans] were real” (Sun). If *Beauty and the Beast* can socialize young girls to believe that they can change a man who is abusive in a relationship, then the first three Disney princess film can instill values about emphasized femininities into the same audience. The same concept applies to the young boy and his take on *Pocahontas*. If he takes this film and its stark falsification of history as a literal truth, then there is no reason for him to not internalize the messages about gender in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*.

Despite the aforementioned arguments and supporting evidence, which claims the trifecta of Walt Disney’s princess films place a heavy emphasis on the emphasized femininities, many argue that Disney is no more than innocent entertainment. Douglas Brode makes a clear argument that Walt Disney’s Snow White is a socially progressive protagonist compared to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s Snow White, stating that she is “as feminine as she is feminist” (180). This is a weak argument as Disney did not have the power of the second and third wave women’s movement to pull off of. The only views of women held by the public eye were people who conformed to the idea of emphasized femininity. People who aim for unrealistic goals of beauty; who are submissive, compliant, and reserved; and who participate in domestic work, presumably for men. All of these are evident by watching Disney’s *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *Sleeping Beauty*.

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