

"A Whole New World": Redefining Gender in Disney Films from the 20th to 21st Century
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The Disney Dynasty is as familiar to American culture as apple pie. Sitting on land that is twice the size of Manhattan, the Disney Kingdom has expanded over the years to create a whole new world; a world seriously considered by cultural theorists like Baudrillard, as a simulacrum, a symbol so close to reality that it becomes hyperreality. Before water parks and resort hotels, before Disney bought out the land of orange groves and walnut trees in Anaheim, California, the Magic Kingdom began its conquest on American ideology. The Walt Disney Company started in 1923 as “The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio,” and churned out films that embodied American ideals. Oftentimes, these films were set in 19th century rural America and featured an American hero -- usually Mickey Mouse, who could outwork and challenge any enemy big or small with his bravery. An embodiment of American ideals, Disney films became loved and endeared by audiences during morally depleting times, like the Depression years (“How Disney Came to Define What Constitutes the American Experience”). Audiences latched onto these ideals, seemingly stable, even when external factors were not.

In 1938, Disney shifted gears into feature films with his vision of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Although many had their doubts, after three years of work *Snow White* was released and it quickly became the highest grossing film of all time. Feature films became the money makers for Disney and the start of consumer fascination with Disney culture (“Disney Animation Is Closing the Book on Fairy Tales”). Contemporary cultural conversations about Disney ideology are abundant -- theorists, writers and fans are fascinated by the effect that Disney films have on consumers and audiences, especially children. In this paper, I will examine the way that Disney Princess films in the 20th century upheld ideals of a patriarchal world, specifically the reinforcement of the male gaze, the masculine ideal self, and the system of True Womanhood. In contrast, 20th century Disney Princess films have taken a different direction -

oftentimes featuring a more empowered princess with her own capabilities. These films subvert the idea of the domestic woman and deconstruct the importance of the male gaze but also have their own limitations.

Mulvey's Visual Pleasure and Lacan in Disney Princess Films

In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey politicizes the idea of visual pleasure by examining it through notions of the male gaze, which is primarily concerned with seeing the ideal male self manifested on the screen, and utilizing a woman’s body to reinforce this self. By applying psychoanalytic theory to cinema, Mulvey argues that film is a “political weapon....[structured by] the unconscious of patriarchal society” (Mulvey 833). The male centered world is fascinated with ideas of the phallus, a construction that is entirely dependent on the “castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (Mulvey 833). In psychoanalytic theory and film, it is clear that the weakness of the woman is needed in order to reinforce the power of a man. Therefore, a woman only exists in relation to her subservience and thus becomes a projection of the man, an Other that is “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command” (Mulvey 834). Now Othered, woman becomes the carrier and bearer of meaning instead of the maker, her presence valued only when it symbolizes the importance of man and the phallogocentric world.

The need to see the completed man on the screen (a brave, strong, man who marries a domestic, beautiful woman) is related to Lacanian development, a mirror stage where the individual realizes that the reflection in the mirror is representative of the more complete self. The need to see the complete man repeated in cinema is a result of the “terror of the potential lack in phantasy” (Mulvey 835), a terror that threatens a man’s understanding of himself. This terror manifests itself in cinematic control over the female characters in films, who serve only to

reinforce a man's more ideal self. Of course, women develop notions of self through Lacanian development as well. Depiction of princesses in 20th century Disney films embody a woman's more complete self -- beautiful, selfless, pious and domestic. However, the difference between these two portrayals is that a man receives visual pleasure and agency by seeing his depiction, while a woman remains trapped in the patriarchal order. Disney films in the 20th century embody the male gaze through the creation of the quiet, strong Prince, who has no fault or weakness regarding his romantic partner. There is never a doubt that the Prince will be rejected by the Princess, and his stoic nature represents an unwavering confidence in his manhood. This is deconstructed as early as *Cinderella*, but becomes intensely critiqued in 21st Century Disney films like *Tangled* and *Brave*, which feature clumsy, unconfident men who are oftentimes outwitted by the princess. In this way, Disney films move to a more progressive depiction of Princes and Princess that are uncontrolled by the male gaze.

True Womanhood and the Ideal Self in Disney Princess Films

In 20th century Disney Princess films, the stoic, confident Prince figure is constructed as the more ideal version of a man who is struggling through the mirror stage. Similarly, the depiction of domesticized Disney Princesses embody Barbara Welter's conceptualization of the True Woman, a woman whose virtue and morality remains untainted by temptations, which contributes to her physical beauty and romantic attainment. Like the Prince figure, the True Woman Princess is a reflection of a woman's more complete self. In her article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860," Barbara Welter argues that although the nineteenth century man was continuously encountering a materialistic, industrialized society, he could remain assured that he "had left behind a hostage...to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly...it was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth century

American women had -- to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand” (Welter 152). Welter’s conversation fits in with Mulvey’s conversation concerning the message carrying women - in this case, the True Woman embodied the moral virtues of a constantly changing world, and her four cardinal virtues were to remain untested “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). The True Woman was religious and found her domestic place at home to be a reflection of her moral standing. The True Woman did not fall prey to desire, as “purity was essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine” (Welter 154). If a woman expressed desire or acted on it, she was seen as a “fallen woman” undeserving of a romantic partner or marriage. Man, and the external world he represented, would attempt to taint a True Woman’s virtue but if she was strong, she could demonstrate her superior power, ““the purity of women is the everlasting barrier against which the tides of a man’s sensual nature sure’” (Welter 156).

Disguised as a representation of female superiority, the cult of True Womanhood persuaded women through magazines, books and pop culture that she should remain pious. This construction of the True Woman was to be rewarded at the end of her journey with a marriage, a moment that recognized her moral accomplishments, “woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage, was, literally, and end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it” (Welter 158). In 20th century Disney films, the construction of the True Woman is embodied by characters like Snow White and Cinderella. Both Snow White and Cinderella are restricted to the domestic sphere and are happy to remain there, as it symbolizes their morality and virtue. Snow White uses her domestic economy to prove her virtue to the dwarves, who initially believe her to be immoral because of her unsupervised traveling. Although *Cinderella* seems to demonize

domesticity by making Cinderella unhappy with her duties, it is clear that she is more than happy to commit to her womanly duties and her only resistance comes from the maliciousness of her stepmother and stepsisters. The idea of the True Woman is solidified in *Cinderella* by the masculinization of Cinderella's stepsisters Anastasia and Drizella, whose gangly feet and uncomely appearance is directly tied to their resistance to cook and clean like the virtuous Cinderella. In 21st century Disney Princess films like *Tangled* and *Brave*, Disney Princess actively resist the ideals of True Womanhood and are rewarded for it -- oftentimes they weaponize their femininity or adopt to traditional masculine identities. In addition, newer Disney films are not as concerned with a marriage scene or a kiss. This is a big shift from earlier Disney films, where women who acted outside of the True Woman order were demonized or killed. For example, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula, the inversion of the True Woman, is viciously killed and penetrated by a ship. Her sexuality and knowledge of the weaknesses of the True Woman villainizes her, a moral inferiority that is reflected in her appearance, a gendered trait that correlates a woman's virtue to her beauty. Women who resist ideas of True Womanhood in earlier Disney films are quickly written off as evil, fat or undeserving, while women who subscribe to True Womanhood are beautiful, virtuous and deserving of a Prince. This dichotomization of women is manifested in Disney Princess films and directly correlates with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theorization of womanly masks.

Gilbert and Gubar's Womanly Masks in Disney Princess Films

In their book *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the extreme depictions of women in literature through the concepts of angelic and evil masks. Both Gilbert and Gubar

point to folktales as an exemplification of the dichotomous nature of symbolic women, “as the legend of Lilith shows, and as psychoanalysts from Freud and Jung onward have observed, myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts” (Gubar 201). In the chapter “The Queen's Looking Glass,” Gilbert and Gubar concentrate on the ways that women are villainized through the male gaze, “the images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervade women's writing...the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly....a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image that lives on...’the crystal surface” (Gubar 17). This simplistic understanding of women is harmful for women writers who struggle to understand their creative self, a difficult process to undergo when their identity is defined by a patriarchal understanding of womanhood. The idea of womanly masks in Disney is seen through the dichotomic characterization of women characters --- there is the evil stepmom/queen and the virtuous princess/soon-to-be princess. These masks are reinforced in Disney Princess films by the trope of the True Woman -- True Woman wear angelic masks, while untrue woman wear the evil masks. At the core of both the idealization of the angelic, true woman is the patriarchal order and the male gaze, forces that receive pleasure from seeing women simplified and restrained in a domestic sphere. In 20th century Disney Princess films, the evil masks that women wear are displayed through transformations. This is seen through the evil Queen in *Snow White*, who transforms to a homely peasant, Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, who’s drag-queen like persona and traditionally unattractive appearance create her evil mask, and the awkwardness and ugliness of Cinderella’s stepsisters, who’s masks are a reflection of their lack of womanhood. In 21st century Disney films, there exists still a dichotomy between the evil woman and the angelic

woman -- but it becomes less relevant to the story as the princess attains agency. *Brave* places these two womanly masks in conversation with one another through the mother-daughter conflict between Queen Elinor and Merida, instead of killing the evil mask. 21st century Disney films resist Gilbert and Gubar's argument that the female writer (in this case viewer) must "kill in order to dissect" (Gubar 17) and instead envisions a reality where both masks can live in the same space and subvert their oppression through communication.

The Male Gaze, True Womanhood, and Womanly Masks in Disney Princess Films

Disney Princess films in the 20th century, notably ones made in the Golden and Silver Age of the studio's production, uphold the superiority of the male gaze by portraying Disney princesses as symbols of the True Woman, forcing them to participate in the domestic household and wait for their Prince to initiate their agency and freedom. The Princesses inability to stray away from their portrayal as an item of consumption and sexual/social control and desire make them unable to claim a motive other than marriage as agency. The patriarchal gaze is manifested through these earlier Disney films by placing men as the strong, capable heroes who gain a romantic partner at the end of the film. The dichotomization of evil and good women in these 20th century Disney films only serve to reinforce the superiority of the True Woman, who's virtue was dependent on piety, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 160). Women who are aware of their social place and attempt to manipulate or resist it are oftentimes villainized through their appearance (they are often old, fat or not traditionally "beautiful") all supposed weaknesses that are tied to their sexualized role in society. In this paper, I will examine the way that 21st Century Disney films in the Revival Era resist (and sometimes participate) in social structures relating to the male gaze, the myth of womanly masks and notions of True Womanhood. I will examine Disney's shift toward more progressive gender politics through three lenses: Lauren Mulvey's

analysis of the male gaze and Lacanian notions of the Other, Gilbert and Gubar's theorization of womanly masks and Barber Welter's tenets of True Womanhood. I will also examine the ways that these advancements may be limited to a capitalistic, neo-liberal framework, considering that Disney's changes are financially motivated.

Snow White (1937)

Snow White was produced by Disney in 1937 and is still widely recognized one of the most historically significant film creations of the 20th century. Although it was the first animated feature to be made in English and Technicolor, many doubted that adult audiences would sit through a full length movie about dwarves, including Disney's wife, Lillian. On December 21, 1937, *Snow White* premiered in Hollywood and was given a standing ovation, Charlie Chaplin telling the *Los Angeles Times* that the film "surpassed our high expectations. In Dwarf Dopey, Disney has created one of the greatest comedians of all time" ("SNOW WHITE' AT 50: UNDIMMED MAGIC"). Watching the film in the 21st century, the whimsical nature of the dwarves and their welcoming hospitality toward Snow White still has its charm. However, when comparing the 20th century creation of *Snow White* to the 21st century film *Tangled*, it is clear that Disney films are not only a product of their time, but of societal expectations regarding gender.

The Male Gaze in Snow White

In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues that the male audience takes pleasure in watching both female and male subjects on the screen. In her critique of cinema, Mulvey argues that films replicates power dynamics embodied in reality. The cinema offers pleasure to viewers, and male centered desires are usually the premise of a film. One of these desires is "scopophilia...taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and

curious gaze” (Mulvey 59). In *Snow White*, the male gaze is fulfilled through the depiction of the domesticized Snow White and the heroic Prince. The Prince does not have many speaking lines in the film, and it is this stoicism that characterizes his confidence - he does not need to fret or outwardly chase Snow White. She is already in love with him at first glance, and he is able to claim the Princess at the end of the film through his kiss, casting him as a hero once more. The Prince character in Disney films is seen as the more complete, idealized self of the male gaze, the “image of his like set in an illusion of natural space...gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” (Mulvey 63). In *Snow White*, the dwarves, the other male figures, do not embody the image that a man deems as his more complete self, since they are fractured and at the will of Snow White, making them inferior. However, the Prince controls Snow White’s survival and Snow White is eternally grateful for his existence in her life, satisfying a man’s desire to see a woman serving the desires of a man. The Disney Prince figure also changes alongside the Disney Princess, and oftentimes becomes more flawed and fractured, shifting away from the need to fulfill the male gaze.

True Womanhood in Snow White

In this 20th century film, Snow White is depicted as the perfect representation of a True Woman: she is virginal, innocent and does not desire to leave her domestic space. Snow White’s happiness with performing her domestic duties is rewarded through her physical attractiveness, a gendered trait that makes her the target for the Evil Queen’s maliciousness. The start of the film opens up in Snow White’s home, where she is sitting by a fountain, surrounded by non-predatory animals as she sings “I’m Wishing / One Song.” Snow White sits close to her domestic sphere and even cleans the spillage from the fountain, with no expression of desire to wander outside the confinements of her garden, a place of social control. In “The Cult of True Womanhood,”

Barbara Welter argues that a woman's placement in the domestic sphere was important for controlling her virtue, as "the true dignity and beauty of the female character seem to consist in a right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties" (Welter 162). Other magazines during the time argued that "there is composure at home; there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind" (Welter 162). These "delusions," were oftentimes desire, and Snow White's constraint towards her desire is symbolic of her virtue. Although the lyrics of "I'm Wishing/One Song," are representative of her desire (and perhaps lust) for a Prince, it is clear when the Prince arrives, that she should not be expressing this desire publicly. She rushes into her home, and her confinement in isolated spaces argue that her lust is unwomanly and should be hidden from public display. As the Prince sings of *his desire* publicly, Snow White remains hidden inside and sends a female dove to kiss the Prince a representation of her physical immobility.

When Snow White arrives in the home of the dwarves, their initial detestation of her comes from their belief that she is impure or a temptress. Without her relationship with the domestic space, Snow White's womanhood is questioned and she temporarily dons the evil mask of other unwomanly characters, "Why, i-it's a girl!" "She's mighty pretty." "She's beautiful, just like a angel." "Angel, hah! She's a female! And all females is poison! They're full of wicked wiles!" Snow White's beauty and attractiveness is understood as temptation by the male dwarves, who think that her unchaperoned navigation of the social world is unladylike and dangerous. When Snow White arrives at the dwarves home, her status of True Womanhood exists in a limbo, although her beauty suggests that she is spiritually pure, her lack of husband or domestic identity suggests that she is undeserving of virtue. It is only when Snow White proves

her worthiness through her domestic economy that the dwarves are reassured, “If you let me stay, I’ll keep house for you. I’ll wash, I’ll cook.” The dwarves are less concerned with Snow White’s tempestuous nature when they discover her cleaning and cooking abilities, allowing them to engage again with their mining work in the social sphere. However, the hyper masculine dwarf Grumpy remains skeptical of Snow White’s womanhood, and urges the dwarves to keep Snow White in her place when they start to enjoy her company, ““Hah! Her wiles are beginnin’ to work. But I’m warnin’ ya, you give ‘em an inch, and they’ll walk all over ya!” Although women are allowed to claim a superior virtue through their domestic role, it is clear that women should not attempt to find control or agency through this role, ““whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her”” (Welter 159). It becomes clear in the film that a woman’s virtue is treasured if the woman does not notice its power, but once a woman attempts to exercise any agency, her looks become associated with the maliciousness/temptations of her allure. Femininity is thus detested if it desires to capitalize off of itself or override masculinity, such as the Evil Queen’s femininity. Grumpy, upset with the dwarves devotion to Snow White, proclaims ““Next thing ya know... she’ll be tyin’ your beards up in pink ribbons...and smellin’ ya up with that stuff called, uh, ‘perfoom.’ Hah! A fine bunch of water lilies you turned out to be.”” According to Welter and the declarations of Grumpy, a woman is able to be virtuous and morally superior as long as she does not override the power of masculinity and men.

Grumpy’s fear is manifested in women like the Evil Queen, who does not embody the tenets of True Womanhood and instead inverts them by being a powerful, active character who can transform and attain agency. The Evil Queen is not tied to the domestic space and does not

have a husband, aspects that suggest her lack of virtue and womanhood. Her knowledge of temptation through the poisoned apple makes her a figure likened to Grumpy's initial judgement of Snow White, a immoral woman who is able to tempt with her magical feminine ways. The Evil Queen is predatory but active, men work for the Queen and she is able to move about spaces freely. In "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter argues that without purity, a woman was not seen as a woman at all, but instead a fallen woman "unworthy of the celestial company of her sex....to contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime...brought madness or death" (Welter 154). In *Snow White*, the Evil Queen is depicted as a fallen woman who does not represent True Womanhood. However, it becomes that through her donning of the evil mythic mask, she is able to subvert parts of her oppression as a woman, even though she must prey on the angelic figure to do so, operating again under the patriarchal gaze.

Womanly Masks in Snow White

Womanly masks are present in *Snow White* through the dichotomization of Snow White and the Evil Queen. In this film, the Evil Queen dons the monster mask that Gilbert and Gubar propose, and her knowledge of her placement in society inverts the tenets of True Womanhood and thus makes her evil. Gilbert and Gubar argue that *Snow White* dramatizes the "angel-woman and monster-woman...relationship between these two women: the one, fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer...the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch" (Gubar 36). The Queen is the only female character in the film that is knowledgeable about the power of her appearance. Although her actions against Snow White are unquestionably wrong, it is her knowledge and manipulation of a man's gaze that makes her evil -- female characters who understand their placement in society and who are able to use it to their advantage are villainized. The Queen's ability to

transform provides a stark contrast to Snow White, the virginal character who cannot move between spaces. This is seen when the Evil Queen morphs into a beggar before she tricks Snow White, “now, a formula to transform my beauty into ugliness. Change my queenly raiment to a peddler's cloak. ‘Mummy Dust’ to make me old. To shroud my clothes, the black of night. To age my voice, an old hag's cackle. To whiten my hair, a scream of fright.” The ability to transform is not only reflective of the Evil Queen’s wickedness (aligned here with dark magic) but her acknowledgement of appearance as an important facet of her existence as a woman. This knowledge allows the Evil Queen to attain an agency that Snow White does not, but her “‘unnatural’ craftiness must be punished with death because it is an expression of her physicality and her assertive creative energy” (Bacchilega 3). The Evil Queen is demonized because of her knowledge but also because her beliefs are at odds with the angelic mask of True Womanhood. She tempts virginal Snow White’s pious nature with the poisoned apple, “‘It's apple pies that make the menfolks' mouths water. Pies made from apples like these.’ ‘Oh, they do look delicious.’ ‘Yes! But wait 'til you taste one, dearie. Like to try one? Hmm? Go on. Go on, have a bite.’” The Queen is masculinized through her evil ways, tempting Snow White’s sensual nature (“menfolks mouth water”), aware that although Snow White appears pious, she, like every being, can be tempted. Snow White must meet her death after accepting the apple because she defies the tenets of True Womanhood, “all True Women were urged, in the strongest possible terms, to maintain their virtue, although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it” (Welter 155). In this way, the Evil Queen adopts the usually masculine position of the tempter and reveals the weaknesses in the angelic masks that women wear.

Cinderella

Produced by Walt Disney Studios in 1950, *Cinderella* was Disney's twelfth animated feature film and held a great stake in the continued success of the production company. After losing connections to the European film market due to World War II, Disney studios faced a period of sales depression - with films like *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia* and *Bambi* falling flat in the box offices on initial release. Before *Cinderella*'s release, the studio was facing four million dollars in debt, and it was this desperation that pushed Disney and the animators to turn back to feature film production, after short films like *Make Mine Music* proved to be unsuccessful ("Cinderella"). *Cinderella* was extremely successful upon release, raking in \$7,000,000, making it the third most popular film of the year. The film quickly became the biggest commercial hit for the studio since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and won three Academy Award nominations.

There are significant differences between *Cinderella* and *Snow White* both in ideological teachings and characterization of the princesses. *Snow White* seems to originate from an idyllic garden, without any parents, making her a creature of divine creation and inherent purity. Although *Cinderella* is characterized as a morally superior being to her stepsisters, *Cinderella*'s personality is manifested through a resistance to a corrupt household, headed by her evil stepmother. *Cinderella*'s character is more active in her moral and personal choices -- she sides with the marginalized mice instead of the pompous cat and is giving and dutiful. She upholds the tenets of True Womanhood by completing her domestic duties, but instead of seeing these actions from a positive perspective, *Cinderella* shows how domestic roles can be used to confine and abuse women. There is a slight shift away from *Snow White*'s mute character and the film makes a more active decision in casting the evil stepmother as giver of domestic duties. However, through the characterization of the awkward and gangly stepsisters, it is clear that without domestic household chores, women will become greedy, obsessed with their

appearances and unable to control their desires, a theory supported by True Womanhood pieces. *Cinderella* muddles the notion of the superiority of the male gaze by casting a Prince unconcerned with appearances, while also suggesting that femininity and womanly beauty can be shattered as easily as the glass slipper. Through *Cinderella*, Disney moves away from *Snow White*'s ideological beliefs about true womanhood, desire, and the evil masks worn by women and in an obscure way moves into more progressive territory concerning women, although it is limited by Cinderella's marriage at the end of the film.

True Womanhood in Cinderella

From the opening credits of the film, notions of true womanhood are established through the description of Cinderella and her inevitable romance with Prince Charming. The omniscient narrator comforts Cinderella, "Though you're dressed in rags /You wear an air of queenly grace /Anyone can see /A throne would be your proper place / Cinderella /If you'll give your heart a chance / It will lead you /To the kingdom of romance." Whereas *Snow White* focused singularly on Snow White's beauty to prove her value, *Cinderella* suggests through these opening lyrics that there is something beyond appearances that make a woman destined for greatness, like an "air of queenly grace," a superior soul. However, the lyrics do not stray too far from the *Snow White* formula, Cinderella is richer in spirit than most woman, but this will not provide her with individual agency or an ability to escape or rebel from her current standing, but rather "to the kingdom of romance," the ultimate goal of every true woman. Cinderella, like Snow White, is a true woman who represents the "four cardinal virtues -- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity...with them she was promised happiness and power" (Welter 154). Although she is indentured to a life of cleaning and taking care of the household, she never seems to complain or feel wronged. The True Woman considers domestic chores a necessary part of her life, and any

desire to act outside of this role is seen as sinful. Much like Snow White, who transports her desire through doves, Cinderella is unable to vocally express her desire to leave the home and engage in a romance. At the start of the film, Cinderella is sleeping when her mice companions wake her up. When they ask her what she was dreaming of, she replies with a song “A dream is a wish your heart makes,/ When you're fast asleep / In dreams you will lose your heartaches /Whatever you wish for, you keep.” As a true woman, Cinderella does not express unhappiness with her role in the home, and instead diligently serves her stepmother and stepsisters, as well as supply food for all the animals. The animals around Cinderella act out notions of True Womanhood as well, as the female mice sweep and sew while the male mice run around the home and get into mischief. Much like Cinderella and her stepsisters, women are confined to the private space and are kept inside until a man allows them access into the public. Cinderella is the perfect woman to be indoctrinated into the cult of true womanhood, since she has a natural maternal instinct toward the animals, attempting to quell their spats and taking care of the difficulties they face roaming around the home. While Cinderella represents notions of the true woman, her sisters embody the very opposite -- by not participating in the domestic economy, the stepsisters fall into all of the traps of womanly weaknesses, including obsession with their appearance and clothing. Their inability to adapt to the conformity of the True Woman is indicative of a weakness apparent through their uncomely appearances, another representation of Gilbert and Gubar’s womanly masks.

Mulvey's Visual Desire in Cinderella and Differing Masculinity

With characters like Prince Charming, it may seem like *Cinderella* is the ultimate manifestation of Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze - the perfect representation of a patriarchal figure who represents the more complete and satisfying self of the male viewer. Although Prince Charming

can be likened to the Prince in *Snow White*, he is not very vocal about his desires and commands attention. Although Prince Charming attains the “object” he desires at the end of the film, it is clear through the contrast of other male characters that *Cinderella* shifts slightly away from the traditional idea of the Prince, since he does not conform to his father’s outdated understandings of marriage.

The start of the film creates a strong contrast between Prince Charming, the King and the Duke, three different representations of men. The Prince does not desire to search for a maiden to marry, seemingly fine with living a life in isolation without a wife. His desire to marry would only arise from real love, not an arranged encounter, making his character a representation of the chivalrous, romantic man. His father, on the other hand, is emotionally distraught and his desire to see his son wed is almost comical, “You don't know what it means to see your only child grow farther, farther, and farther away from you. I'm...I'm lonely in this desolate old palace.I... I want to hear the pitter-patter of little feet again.” The start of the film creates a strong contrast between Prince Charming, the King and the Duke, three different representations of men. The Prince does not desire to search for a maiden to marry, seemingly fine with living a life in isolation without a wife. His desire to marry would only arise from real love, not an arranged encounter, making his character a representation of the chivalrous, romantic man. His father, on the other hand, is emotionally distraught and his desire to see his son wed is almost comical: “You don't know what it means to see your only child grow farther, farther, and farther away from you. I'm...I'm lonely in this desolate old palace.I... I want to hear the pitter-patter of little feet again.” The King in *Cinderella* is goofy and melancholy, as well as hyper emotional. His inability to control his emotions and his desire to see children makes his character distinctly more feminine, straying away from the hyper masculine characterization of men in Disney films pre-*Cinderella*.

Although traditional Disney movies cast characters representative of the True Woman and hyper masculine, patriarchal male figures, *Cinderella* shows a distinct shift away from this formula. In her essay, Laura Mulvey argues that there are two reasons for a male gaze to be satisfied while watching visually pleasing films, “the first...arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen” (Mulvey 61). As a highly emotional man who loves children and wants to see his son married, the King represents the antithesis of hyper masculine representations. He does not represent the traditional desires of masculine viewers, who would rather see a heroic, strong man on the screen. Although he is emotional, it is clear that this does not make the King innocent of toxic patriarchal notions. Although the Prince wants to marry for love and not just for status or reproduction, the King, frustrated, tells the Duke “Let him alone? With his silly romantic ideas?...Just a boy meeting a girl under the right conditions. So, we’re arranging the conditions....Soft lights. Romantic music. All the trimmings! It can’t possibly fail.” In this way, the King argues that romance can be constructed, and that women and men can be wooed into marriage under the right conditions, in this case, the conditions of the patriarchal order that force women to marriage for validation. This can be seen in the performance of the ball, where eager maidens line up to talk to the Prince. Their desperation is a reflection of their low status and limited freedom -- whereas the Prince is uneager to marry, these women are jumping at the chance to leave their mothers domestic home and enter their domestic role in their own home. The male gaze in the film is prevalent in Cinderella’s depiction as the true woman, forever dutiful, the demonization of the stepsisters who do not conform to notions of true womanhood, and the unbothered, stable Prince Charming, who remains firm in his desire to marry for

romance. However, the slight shift away from a stoic Prince, as seen in *Snow White* thirteen years earlier, creates a more dynamic Prince character who has desires and motivations other than marrying a random girl. This movement away from a passionless Prince foreshadows the development of other Disney Prince's, like Flynn Rider, whose loud personality makes for a more communicative relationship with Rapunzel.

Womanly Masks in Cinderella and Othering

In *Cinderella*, Gilbert and Gubar's conception of the masks that women are forced to wear in society is represented through the characterization of the evil stepmother, the awkward stepsisters, and the fairy godmother. While Cinderella represents the tenets of true womanhood, a stable force of purity in a masculine, patriarchal world, the other female characters in *Cinderella* represent not only the mystical nature of femininity but the dire consequences for women who do not follow their domestic and womanly duties.

The clearest example of women who do not uphold the tenets of true womanhood are the gangly stepsisters in *Cinderella*. Although their cruelty towards Cinderella can be the reason for their demonization, it is clear that their depicted ugliness is a punishment for straying away from their domestic duties and expectations. While Cinderella is revered by the animals in the film for being the caretaker of the home, the sisters are marginalized for lounging too much, and not serving. The stepsisters cannot sing, while Cinderella's voice is beautiful. The correlation between domestic duty and beauty argue that *real* beauty in women is found in sacrifice -- something that a true woman should always be willing to do. The sisters adopt more masculine characteristics as well, hitting each other and getting into fights while their stepmother carelessly says, "Girls, girls. Remember, above all, self-control." It is clear that it is too late to save the stepsisters, whose love for fabric and appearances, taint their innocent and virginal womanly

nature. In “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” Sherry Ortner argues that “we can account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice, and the strong presence of feminine symbolism in the realms of art, religion, ritual, and law)” (85) by understanding the way that women are meant to mediate definitions of nature and society, a representation of social/moral laws and expectations. Women are the product of the domestic home and the embodiment of socialization and “the significance of her mediation...between nature and culture, would thus account not only for her lower status but for the greater restrictions placed upon her activities” (85). When women do not correctly embody the social laws decreed by nature (God and religion) or the actions that are deemed acceptable by a patriarchal society, women are devalued and unrewarded, in this case the stepsisters cannot find a suitable husband because they neglect their responsibility in mediating these worlds correctly. Seeing that Cinderella is the ultimate figure of true womanhood, the Fairy Godmother uses her power to allow Cinderella to participate in the social world, a privilege not afforded to her as a domestic servant. However, this approval of Cinderella as the true woman and the Fairy Godmother’s desire to support her, is not completely empowering, since she is only placed in the public sphere so that she can serve her purpose as a woman and engage in a marriage with Prince Charming.

The Little Mermaid (1998)

Loosely based on the Danish fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* was released in 1989 by Disney Studios and was met with critical acclaim. The film follows a mermaid princess, Ariel, who wishes to leave her controlling underwater world. One day, while

exploring above water, Ariel falls in love with Prince Eric and it is this potential to escape that threatens King Triton's power and the patriarchal structure. *The Little Mermaid* earned \$84 million in the box office after its initial release, and was impactful for many reasons, "two decades after Walt Disney's death...[*The Little Mermaid* was] the picture that launched the Disney Renaissance that soared with *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*" ("How *The Little Mermaid* Cued the Disney Animation Renaissance"). *The Little Mermaid* is also a turning point for the Disney Princess canon, Ariel verbally and physically revolts against her father in order to fulfill her desire, an act that would be taboo in *Snow White* or *Cinderella*. Roger Ebert, an American film critic for the Chicago Sun-Times, argues that Ariel significantly defies the expectations and realizations of her predecessors, "Ariel is a fully realized female character who thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny. Because she's smart and thinks for herself, we have sympathy for her scheming" ("The Little Mermaid Movie Review (1989) | Roger Ebert"). In comparison to contemporary Disney films like *Tangled* and *Brave*, it is clear that *The Little Mermaid* has a long way to go in embodying feminist values -- after all, Ariel is defying her father to enter yet another male-centered sphere, marriage with Prince Eric. Lenika Cruz of *The Atlantic* argues that although Ariel is now seen as a regressive Princess in terms of feminist politics, it is clear that upon its release, she created a shift in the canon, "'Before *The Little Mermaid*, Disney had a short roster of titular female leads, many of whom spent a good chunk of the film asleep—Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Alice, and Snow White. So what if Ariel spends most of the film without a voice? At least she's awake" ("The Feminist Legacy of *The Little Mermaid's* Divisive, 'Sexy' Ariel"). As the first born of the Disney Renaissance and a shift away from traditional Disney princess formulas, *The Little Mermaid* is a major turning point for the

studio, but still has its limitations regarding gendered/sexual freedom in a male dominated economy.

Deconstructing the Male Gaze in *The Little Mermaid*

From the start of the film, the sexual depiction of Ariel and projected heroism onto Prince Eric fulfills traditional notions of the male gaze and desire. However, *The Little Mermaid* instead highlights the importance of *female* desire, a desire that is tied to rebellion against the patriarchal order and the male gaze. Ariel breaks away from the idea that she is a projection of the male gaze, from “a world ordered by sexual imbalance...the determining male gaze [that] projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 62). From the very start of the film, it is clear that women are set up to be spectacles in King Triton’s world. Ariel’s sisters perform for the other mercreatures, but they are only the side show to Ariel’s wonderful voice. When the clam shell opens, however, Ariel is not there. Instead, she is exploring the outer world and the trinkets dropped by sailors. This is the first instance where Ariel breaks the male gaze. She does not subject herself to performing for her father and instead defies the “presence of woman...[as] an indispensable element of spectacle” (Mulvey 62). In the film, Ariel is expected to be the object of desire and spectacle to both her father and Sebastian, a male crab. When she returns from her exploration, Sebastian shouts, “This concert was to be the pinnacle of my distinguished career. Now thanks to you I am the laughing stock of the entire kingdom!” Ariel’s musical talent is another object of desire that the male figures are able to capitalize off of, and when King Triton recognizes that she was seen by men out of her domestic sphere, he shouts “How many times must we go through this? You could've been seen by one of those barbarians - by - by one of those humans.” Ariel’s father is not angry that Ariel may have been caught by the fishermen, but rather than she could have been “seen” by a gaze other than his own. This is

interesting, considering that the opening scene shows King Triton watching his daughters. Here, it is clear that Ariel is deemed a spectacle by her father, and it is up to him to control who is able to gaze. Ariel decidedly breaks away from his superiority and instead decides to follow her own desire, a significant message emphasized by the song “Part of Your World.”

The film deconstructs the male gaze by instead focusing on the female gaze and Ariel’s motivations to explore the outside world and leave the patriarchal dominion. In the song “Part of Your World,” Ariel expresses her interest in the human world, “If only I could make him understand. I just don't see things the way he does. I don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things - could be bad...Look at this stuff / Isn't it neat? / Wouldn't you think my collection's complete? / Wouldn't you think I'm the girl / The girl who has ev'rything?” The items surrounding Ariel symbolize not only her class but trinkets that should quell her desire. A similar notion is understood in the consumer culture of domestic households -- if a housewife had a new kitchen set, she would see herself as superior to other wives without recognizing the limitations on her freedom. For Cinderella and Snow White, the domestic household is a way for them to express their personal value, not a symbol of inferiority. In “Part of Your World,” Ariel defies the idea of domestic comfort, “I've got whozits and whatzits galore/ But who cares? / No big deal / I want more / I wanna be where the people are / I wanna see / Wanna see 'em dancin' / Walkin' around on those / Whad'ya call 'em? Oh - feet / Flippin' your fins you don't get too far / Legs are required for jumpin', dancin'.” By emphasizing her desire for feet, Ariel argues that she wants physical freedom and the ability to move, a freedom seen when Ariel catches the sailors dancing on board Eric’s ship. Ariel wants to leave her father and the patriarchal domestic sphere and instead enter the external, male centered world, a desire that King Triton tries to aggressively shatter. After Ariel returns from saving Prince Eric and admits that she was above water once

more, King Triton reminds her of the social rules regarding human/mercreature contact, “Contact between the human world and the mer-world is strictly forbidden. Ariel, you know that! Everyone knows that!” When Ariel answers with a statement of desire, “Daddy, I love him!” King Triton is so infuriated that he destroys Prince Eric’s statue, a symbol of her desire. Ariel threatens to destroy notions of the male gaze in King Triton’s world and this resistance toward ideas of True Womanhood is what makes her a punishable yet progressive Disney Princess.

True Womanhood in The Little Mermaid

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel defies traditional notions of True Womanhood by making individual choices concerning her physical and social autonomy. However, it is clear through the demonization of Ursula that notions of True Womanhood are not entirely deconstructed in *The Little Mermaid*. Although the domineering King Triton attempts to stop Ariel from venturing to the surface, she decides to rebel against him and request the services of Ursula. When Sebastian attempts to stop her from encountering the devilish woman, Ariel defiantly snaps back “Why don't you go tell my father? You're good at that.” Instead of prioritizing what her community may think of her rebellious acts, Ariel chooses to pursue her own desire, a venture away from the True Woman, who “judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society” (Welter 152). Although she attempts to leave her father’s space, Ariel’s desire is momentarily quelled until Ursula prompts her to visit. Much like *Snow White*, the temptress reveals to the princess that she has a desire, however, unlike Snow White, Ariel’s defiance provides her with physical freedom. In *Snow White*, the princess is put to sleep for acknowledging her desire for the prince. Ariel not as concerned as Snow White with the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, and it is this dismissal that makes her actively seek Ursula’s help. Unlike Ariel, Ursula directly defies notions of True Womanhood by capitalizing off of

male desire and utilizing female sexuality in order to manipulate others. Her activeness concerning her sexuality is what demonizes her and it is clear through her appearance that she is a sexually promiscuous woman, her red lips, large breasts and plunging neckline is an external depiction of her impurity and marginalization. Ursula's obsession with her appearance also breaks the humble codes of True Womanhood. Women were supposed to acknowledge that their sexuality and virginity was precious without ever taking action or using it to their advantage, as "purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order" (Welter 154). This depiction of Ursula as a unfeminine woman, stripped of moral integrity, coupled with her gruesome death at the end of the film, detracts from the feminist elements of *The Little Mermaid* and directly relates to ideas concerning Gilbert and Gubar's womanly masks.

Gilbert and Gubar's Masks in The Little Mermaid

In *The Little Mermaid*, notions of angelic and monstrous womanly masks are characterized through Ursula and Ariel - it is Ursula's sexual nature that demonizes her and her ultimate death is symbolic of Gilbert and Gubar's argument that women must kill the monster figure, constructed by the male author. Gilbert and Gubar critically argue that women, created by a male author, must kill the images of herself that he has created, both the "extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her...we must 'kill' the 'angel in the house.'" In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been "killed" into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the "monster" in the house" (812). Although it may seem empowering to destroy the image that the male authorial voice has created, it is clear through *The Little Mermaid* and more contemporary Disney films that this may not be the answer. Ursula is a

depiction of a marginalized woman, a “monster” who is villainized through her unfeminine attributes. Her sexual nature is represented by black magic and the sickly looking eels that wrap around her chest. Ursula is also distinctly older, with her gray hair and raspy voice, contributing to the harmful belief that older women should abandon their sexuality since they are no longer desired by men. Although Ursula is a monstrous figure created by the male author, she is also the first (and only) plus size Disney icon. She subverts expectations of her gender through her social and physical agency despite her hypersexuality, unsettling the structure while empowering herself. Although Ursula harmfully tricks Ariel into sacrificing her voice, it is clear that the marginalized woman understands and manipulates the male dominated, patriarchal world, “And I fortunately know a little magic / It's a talent that I always have possessed / You'll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don't underestimate the importance of body language! Ha!/ The men up there don't like a lot of blabber / They think a girl who gossips is a bore / Yes, on land it's much preferred / For ladies not to say a word / But they dote and swoon and fawn / On a lady who's withdrawn / It's she who holds her tongue who gets her man.” In “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” Ursula reveals that she is aware of the pressures placed on women and argues that men love “withdrawn” women, i.e. the True Woman. By taking away Ariel’s voice, she punishes her for sacrificing it so easily for a man’s attention. In this way, Ursula teaches Ariel that her own womanly voice is just as important (or more) than legs and its associations (physical agency in an external world). However, following Gilbert and Gubar’s logic, Ursula must be killed as a male authored female monster. This argument is limiting because it fails to acknowledge how these figures can be potentially invert the structures they are subjected too. For example, in her *Mic* article “The Untold Story of Ursula, Disney’s First (and Only) Plus-Size Style Icon,” Rachel Lubitz argues that although Ursula has a protruding stomach, pudgy arms and curves, but she

“showed girls and boys and those in-between that a woman who isn't as tiny as Ariel still has some self-worth. Having a few back rolls doesn't stop her from doing a damn thing. And that's an important aspect of her character...Ursula never had to comment on her size or shape or the way she carried herself to be considered a valuable and important character and being” (“The Untold Story of Disney's First (And Only) Plus-Size Style Icon”). Contemporary understandings of Ursula’s character complicates the idea that she is simply a monstrous being, but that she can instead be revolutionary in her subversion. In this way, *The Little Mermaid* is one of the first Disney princess films that muddy understandings of Gilbert and Gubar’s masks. Later Disney Princess films scrap the idea of the inherently villainous monster woman, and 21st century films (especially *Brave*) argue that communication between the male created angel and monster woman is more empowering than the need for killing.

Mulan 1998

Created in 1998, *Mulan* is based on the Chinese legend Hua Mulan, a Chinese warrior described in the Ballad of Mulan, who disguises herself as a man in order to take her father’s place in the army. The film was Disney’s 36th animated feature film and the ninth film of the Disney Renaissance, a period considered to be the “11-year creative span from 1989 through 1999...[where Disney] saw the production of 10 of the most profitable feature films, which earned acclaim in the form of several Academy Award and nominations” (“From Zero To Hero: Disney's Renaissance Period (NYSE:DIS)”). Although *Mulan* was successful in the box office, raking in \$304.3 million, it was comparatively less popular than other Disney Renaissance films, like *The Lion King* which brought in \$968.5 million or *Aladdin* (\$504.1 million). The creation of *Mulan* was a purposeful, political business tool used by the Disney studios. Three years prior to

Mulan, Disney released the film *Kundun*, a biography about the Dalai Lama that the Chinese government found insulting and provocative. *Mulan* was the studios attempt to repair their relationship with China, in order to take advantage of the booming population and consumer markets in their country. China only allowed ten foreign films to be screened in their country, and *Mulan* just barely made it onto the list (“Foreign Films in China: How Does It Work?”). The animated film did not do too well there, taking only \$30,000 at the box office in three weeks (“ENTERTAINMENT | Chinese Unimpressed with Disney's *Mulan*.”). In the United States, *Mulan* had its fair share of critics, many of who point out problematic facets of the films representation, including “racist and cultural slurs against Chinese culture” (Balboa 1). Some critics also believed that although the film was revolutionary in deconstructing ideas of masculine desire and gendered expectations, the end of the film falls flat by placing *Mulan* back in the domestic space, with approval from her father Fa Zhou and the warrior (Prince) Li Shang. *Mulan*, released after the *The Little Mermaid* and the initiation of revolutionized Disney Princesses, is representative of the shift in consumer desire to see a princess who rebels against typical princess formulas. The film does just that by belittling heterosexual desire, poking fun at the performative nature of masculinity and creating a female character who is physically and mentally superior to the male soldiers.

True Womanhood Deconstructed in *Mulan*

From the very start of the film, *Mulan*'s placement as a woman in a traditional Chinese society forces her into a constricted identity - that of a beautiful, dutiful woman who takes care of the home and her husband. In “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter argues that the notion of the true woman was so ingrained in patriarchal ideology that even in “a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social

and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman” (151-152). The stress on women to uphold social and moral codes is directly linked to the idea that woman held a “divine right, a gift of God and nature,” (Welter 157) and that this gift must be shared with the world and her domestic home. If a woman should avoid this responsibility, she would be deemed worthless in society and shunned from marriage and social life. In the song “Honor to Us All,” the idea of a virtuous woman representing morality in a social setting is seen from the very start of the film, as Mulan must bring honor to her family “A girl can bring her family/ Great honor in one way / By striking a good match / And this could be the day.” Here, the older women are attempting to prepare Mulan for a matchmaking ceremony, and teach her that her marriage will bring honor and respect to her family name, much like the way women who adopt the codes of true womanhood bring respect to the country and domestic household. This opening song clearly points out a woman’s role in traditional society, “Men want girls with good taste/ Calm / Obedient / Who work fast-paced/ With good breeding / And a tiny waist / You'll bring honor to us all.” The lyrics emphasize the work ethic that real women must adopt, but also genders this argument by saying that a woman must also be beautiful. By preparing Mulan with beads and primping her hair, the older women ask “How could any fellow / Say "no sale"?” once more arguing that a woman is an object made to be consumed and bought by the male gaze.

Mulan is aware of the standards expected of her from her society and openly defies them, making her a promising candidate for a revolutionary Disney Princess. She remarks to herself that she must be, “refined, poised, punctual, delicate, quiet,” cardinal virtues upheld in the society of the true woman. However, on the day of her matchmaking, she arrives at the home on a horse, with her hair disarrayed, loudly proclaiming “I’m here!” Mulan’s entrance on a horse is

a significant shift away from previously physically isolated and entrapped Disney Princesses, her physical movement and traditionally manly vehicle foreshadows Mulan's rebellion to her status as a woman. The film itself also rebels against the constrictions of womanhood, arguing that these vain and dependent expectations hinders a woman's ability to problem solve. When Mulan spills a pot of tea on The Matchmaker, her robe is lit on fire and her screeches are seen as a comical humiliation of the female subject obsessed with her appearance. She helplessly runs around, until Mulan throws the pot of tea on her to quell the flames, and her makeup proceeds to run down her face. Here, the film is criticizing standards of appearance and suggests that adapting to gendered expectations is not necessarily the rational or correct choice. Although the film does deconstruct ideas of the true woman in this scene by showing Mulan to be a smarter and more active character, it does so at the risk of humiliating another woman, one who is purposefully fat and has a mustache. The film is progressive in resisting these gendered expectations but shows its limitations in empowerment by devaluing and humiliating a woman who does not meet the expectations of beauty in the male gaze. Although it resists the idea that a woman is valuable only in domestic work, it supports the toxic idea that a woman's value/protection is dependent on her validation under the male gaze.

Although there are critiques in the way that the Matchmaker is depicted, it is clear through Mulan's characterization that notions of true womanhood are dismantled and reenvisioned into a new concept of womanhood, one that is empowered through agency and ability to outwit and outfight men and their expectations. In the song "A Girl Worth Fighting For," the soldiers sing about women that they wish to marry after the war, "I want her paler than the / Moon with eyes that / Shine like stars... "I couldn't care less what she'll / Wear or what she looks like / It all depends on what / She cooks like." Instead of participating in the masculine

culture, Mulan vocalizes an opinion that exists outside the tenets of true womanhood, “How 'bout a girl who's got a brain / Who always speaks her mind?” Although Mulan is dressed and performing the role of a man, in this instance she proves that this trivialization of women is unacceptable and unwarranted, as she is a woman and does not conform to any of the warriors' desires. In addition, Mulan weaponizes her femininity throughout the film instead of completely disregarding its strength. Although Mulan must cut off her hair in the start of the film and trade her face fan for a sword, by the end of the film it is clear that these exchanges are not meant to underscore the value of feminine attributes.

Masculinity as a Performance and Visual Desire in *Mulan*

Mulan's decision to join the male-only army is revolutionary as a resistance to her domestic home and the traditional notions of womanhood in society. However, it is also clear through the training and battle scenes that hypermasculinity is a performance, devaluing the idea that men are inherently stronger or more capable than women. As a whole, the film forces the viewer to question a woman's inferior placement in society - if Mulan is able to participate and outrank the men around her in battle, how can claims about a man's superiority be true?

From the start of the film, the miniature dragon Mushu is called upon by Mulan's ancestors to help the princess find her honor. However, Mushu is quick to realize that Mulan will not be deterred in her mission to participate in battle. He trains Mulan in the ways of being a man, an interesting concept, seeing that Mushu, a nonhuman being, is closer to manhood than Mulan is, as a human. Before entering the army, Mushu directs Mulan, “Okay, this is it! Time to show them your man-walk. Shoulders back, chest high, feet apart, head up, and strut! Two three, break that bone, two, three, and work it!” In this way, Mushu shows that manhood is a performance that can be taught, a concept wildly different from the way that manhood is usually

portrayed in cinema and in earlier Disney films. Mulvey argues that films made under the patriarchal gaze are meant to manipulate visual pleasure and allow the male viewer to avoid “terror of potential lack in fantasy...[by] finding a glimpse of satisfaction...its play on his own formative obsessions” (59). *Mulan* teases out the idea of the male gaze by critiquing the pleasure that the male, patriarchal gaze receives by looking at representations of hypermasculine men. By allowing Mulan to perform the part of a man, the film proves that the desire to see hypermasculine representations of men come from a man’s insecurity in his own manhood. The performative nature of masculinity strays away from a man’s desire to see his perfect self displayed on the screen and instead pokes holes in this identity, as Mulan declares to Li Shang “You know what it is when you get those manly urges ... just gotta KILL something,” she criticizes the unnecessarily violent nature of toxic masculinity. In fact, Mulan is so good at performing the role of a man, that most of the soldiers do not catch on, even when she is bathing in the water and her body parts would give away her physical identity. Another way that the film addresses the performative nature of masculinity and manhood is seen at the end of the film, where the rest of the soldiers dress up as women in order to sneak into the hall. The soldiers in the film acknowledge the fact that women are usually seen as passive and weak creatures and capitalize off of this knowledge by disguising themselves as women. However belittling the confirmation of these views are, it is also clear that by dressing the men up in a woman’s clothes, the film suggests that there is a very thin line between gendered ability -- since both womanhood and manhood can be performed and enacted by the opposite gender.

Deconstructing Womanly Masks Through Exploration

Mulan is remarkable in its ability to deconstruct the notion of manly superiority without devaluing or simplifying womanly qualities into “wrong” or “right” notions of womanhood,

avoiding Gilbert and Gubar's critique of womanly masks. Except for the earlier instance with *The Matchmaker*, the film does not focus on the way that a woman's socialized nature is weak but rather critiques the society that forces women to wear a hyper masculine or hyper feminine mask. The film does not argue that Mulan's ability to succeed in the army implies that domesticity/maternalism/traditional womanhood is inferior, but rather places emphasis on the way that both masculine and feminine attributes can be used to create a hero.

Roger Ebert, an American film critic and historian argues that *Mulan* was revolutionary because it featured a "lead female character [that] doesn't use strength to prove herself, but rather wit. This is even more jarring after we spend a good deal of time watching Mulan not only meet her fellow soldier's feats of strength, but outdo them. By neglecting her successful training in the camp, this moment undercuts the value of physical strength (and indeed masculine traits) entirely" ("HOW DISNEY'S 'MULAN' BRAZENLY CHALLENGES GENDER AND SEXUALITY"). The final battle scene deconstructs the idea that femininity should be villainized or rewarded, but argues that it can be a useful tool, and has inherent value, as the soldiers scale the side of the palace using their sashes. When Mulan instructs the soldiers to use the lessons she learned in her hyper feminine trainings, the soldiers are not less able to fight but instead are able to trick the guards and gain access, invalidating the idea that femininity represents weakness and masculinity represents strength. This scene rejects the previously established notion of womanly masks by realizing that a woman who explores is not "evil," and a woman who stays home is not "pure," and vice versa. The film blurs the line between evil and good women by suggesting that this distinction relies on unfounded notions of weakness and strength in a patriarchal society. *Mulan* suggests that a woman who is seen as evil because of her inability to adapt to feminine social codes says more about the weakness of the society than the

weakness of the individual. Unlike 20th century Disney Princess films, instead of adopting the “evil” and “good” masks *Mulan* recognizes the impact that these masks have on women. In “The Madwoman in the Attic,” Gilbert and Gubar argue that a woman’s “essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (812-813). This patriarchal intervention prevents women from establishing a clear conclusion about her identity, making her a perpetual object instead of a subject. *Mulan* shows the pain that a woman faces in a suffocating patriarchal society through the song “Reflections,” sung after Mulan fails to impress the Matchmaker, “Look at me/I will never pass for a perfect bride / Or a perfect daughter / Can it be I'm not meant to play this part / Now I see / That if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart.” Here, the film complicates ideas about identity and instead addresses the fact that Mulan feels split between a “perfect bride” and who she truly believes herself to be. This scene in the film, where the makeup physically splits Mulan’s face, symbolizes the split that women feel between their expected role and their desired one, creating a schizophrenic understanding of her identity, “Who is that girl I see / Staring straight, back at me / Why is my reflection someone I don't know / Somehow I cannot hide.” The film argues that these mythic masks of wrong or right ways of being a woman are harmful to individual woman, torn between tradition and freedom. *Mulan* is radical in addressing these concerns, and pinning the unhappiness of women on the failings of a patriarchal, traditional society.

Tangled (2010)

In *Tangled*, Disney takes a more progressive approach to a woman’s agency -- Rapunzel is the vehicle for change and her exploration of the outside world is rewarded with her freedom, regardless of Flynn Rider’s involvement. Whereas Snow White must use animals to express her

desire and accepts her role as a domestic servant, Rapunzel expresses a need to escape and vocalizes it to her stepmother. Rapunzel's character is representative of a more developed individual, with a resistance toward her stepmother's core beliefs and her own personal value system. Unlike Snow White, Rapunzel disregards the male gaze by ignoring the desires of the male characters in the film, like Flynn Rider, and instead reverts and deconstructs masculine politics. However, there is still an evil female character in *Tangled*, much like the Evil Queen, Goethe is demonized for acknowledging and understanding the threats of the patriarchal order. Although both films are limited concerning a woman's agency, it is clear that *Tangled's* shift regarding exploration and trivialization of the male character is representative of Disney's desire to fulfill audience's desires in the 21st century and create more progressive princess characters.

Tangled, released in 2010 by Walt Disney Animation Studios, is a modern twist on the German fairy tale *Rapunzel*, and offers its own contemporary critiques on the princess character. Released seventy three years after *Snow White*, the film tells the story of a young girl named Rapunzel, who's mother hoards her in a castle in order to "protect her" from the outside world, simultaneously concealing her hidden agenda - to keep Rapunzel's magical hair close. Rapunzel accepts the help of the criminal, goofy Flynn Rider in exploring the outside world and soon finds her birth parents.

Tangled came out during a distinct shift in Disney's agenda. Although princesses have become iconic figures in the Disney portfolio, box office numbers are pointing to a 21st century shift away from hyper-feminine princess characters, exemplified in the popularization of new Disney figures such as Buzz Lightyear, Woody, Jack Sparrow and other superheroes. By the time *Tangled* was in the works, a year after *The Princess and the Frog* fell flat with a \$271 million box office, the studios realized that princess stories were no longer popular amongst

contemporary audiences, “although critically acclaimed... ‘The Princess and the Frog’ was the most poorly performing of Disney’s recent fairy tales” (“Disney Animation Is Closing the Book on Fairy Tales”). One year after *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* would hit theaters, and this time Disney was hyper-conscious of the way that the film would be received. Instead of titling the film after the princess, the studios decided instead on *Tangled*, a gender-neutral pick that paired well with the “marketing [of] the film’s swashbuckling male costar, Flynn Rider” (“Disney Animation Is Closing the Book on Fairy Tales”). The film’s shift away from the traditional princess formula is seen through the characterization of Rapunzel - she publicly and adamantly desires her own freedom, pursues the outside world despite her stepmother’s orders, rescues Flynn in almost every situation, trivializes his masculinity and wields her femininity as a weapon to deconstruct traditional hyper masculine spaces. There is no doubt that the film is progressive in regards to the Disney canon of princess films, but there are still limitations concerning the storytelling presence and narrative control of the story, perpetually and seemingly purposefully hijacked by Flynn Rider, the male “hero.”

True Womanhood in Tangled

Much like *Snow White*, the start of *Tangled* features Rapunzel trapped inside an isolated castle by her stepmother Gothel. Snow White, lacking a mother figure, must hide her desire by receding inside and sending over doves in order to keep her purity intact. Gothel attempts to persuade Rapunzel that her isolation is for virginal protection as well, “the outside world is a dangerous place. Filled with horrible, selfish people. You must stay here, where you’re safe. Do you understand, flower?” By demonizing the outside world, Gothel alludes to Rapunzel’s potential for contamination by comparing her to a flower, a symbol of purity, natural beauty and sexual innocence.

Unlike Snow White, Rapunzel is not content with her role as a domestic servant. Rapunzel finds her role in the castle distasteful, a reversal of the trope of the submissive True Woman, who is “expected to realize [her] primary identity within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers and housekeepers” (Delikonstantinidou 54). Rapunzel finds cleaning and stereotypical feminine activities like knitting, cooking, and candle making boring as she wonders “when will my life, begin?” Rapunzel’s boredom with traditional domestic duties is representative of the fear that many had in the nineteenth century regarding women and their desire to roam. The ideology of the True Woman was created to “control the social transformation of American middle-class women who...had too much knowledge and too much free time...it sought to...reverse the tide that had been set in motion after decades of feminist struggle to untie women from the private sphere of the home and widen their choices and opportunities” (Delikonstantinidou 56). Rapunzel also differs from her other Disney counterparts not only in denying the myth of true womanhood, but in her ability to reclaim femininity in an empowering, instead of subjugated, way. While Snow White is seen as a “wicked wile” when she enters the dwarves home, a woman who is likely to trick the men with her charming looks, when Flynn discovers Rapunzel’s healing, magical hair, he revers her power instead of demonizing or fearing it.

Deconstructing the Male Gaze and Patriarchal Visual Desire

Much like Snow White, the idea of a male gaze and the threat of sexual violence is present in *Tangled*. Whereas Snow White is warned to stay in her position as a true woman, fear of the outside world is voiced by Gothel, who lectures Rapunzel when she wants to venture past the castle walls on her eighteenth birthday. In the song “Mother Knows Best,” Gothel tells Rapunzel, “It’s a scary world out there... Mother knows best. One way or another, something will

go wrong, I swear. Ruffians, thugs, poison Ivy, quicksand. Cannibals, and snakes, the plague. Also large bugs, men with pointy teeth.” Much like the dark forest scene in *Snow White*, Gothel warns Rapunzel that by exploring the outside world as a woman, she is opening up opportunities to be attacked and consumed by “men with pointy teeth,” likening Rapunzel to the item of consumption under a male gaze and desire. Although Rapunzel listens to her stepmother in fear of the consequences, it becomes clear that the introduction of Flynn Rider changes her perceptions of the male gaze and the threat of the outside world.

Running away from his latest robbery, Flynn Rider happens upon Rapunzel's castle with a need to escape from his chasers. When he scales the castle, Rapunzel hits the unwelcome intruder and ties him up with her hair, weaponizing an attribute commonly associated with feminine beauty and, in Rapunzel's case, social control. Rapunzel's rebellion toward her mother's infantilization and victimization is vocalized after she knocks Flynn senseless with her pan, “Too weak to handle myself out there, huh Mother? Well, Tell that to my pan here.” Through the character of Flynn Rider, Disney makes a decided jab against former Disney Princes, who's gallantry is so forced that it becomes offensive to the princess's intelligence. Flynn deconstructs the traditional romantic language of the Prince, “I know not who you are. Nor how I came to find you. But may I just say. Hi! How you doing? The names Flynn Ryder. How's it going, huh?” In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey argues that cinema has become a product of the patriarchal system, where a man's desire to construct fantasy and objectify women play out not only in the depiction of the female character, but also the relationship between the viewer and the film. The phallogentric order is reinforced by depicting woman as a symbol of pleasure and eroticism, and without this the male viewer will feel “alienated...torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in

fantasy...the satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history...must be attacked” (Mulvey 59). In Flynn’s and Rapunzel’s initial interaction, the film deconstructs the fantasy of the True Woman by creating an active woman character, who does not hesitate to use violence against a man to protect herself. Rapunzel also represents the cunningness and manipulation that the Dwarves feared in *Snow White* -- she steals Flynn’s satchel when he is passed out and negotiates with him in order to equalize the power dynamic, “You will act as my guide, Take me to these lanterns, and return me home safely. Then, and only then, will I return your satchel to you.” Rapunzel does not live up to the standard expected from Disney Princesses, she ignores her captive state in order to gain agency and is unaffected by Flynn’s romantic advances. When he smolders at her in order to persuade her to return his satchel, she raises a confused eyebrow at him, unmoved. Flynn, surprised by her reaction, says “This is kind of an off day for me. This doesn't normally happen.” Rapunzel deconstructs the ego manifested in male characters by remaining grounded in her desire, resisting a man’s romantic manipulations in order to remain in control.

This shift away from the gallant, persuasive man in *Tangled* is significant not only because it portrays a more realistic modern encounter between a woman and a man, but because it disrupts the hierarchy between Rapunzel as the object and Flynn as the controller/the gaze. Mulvey argues that the relationship between characters in film and the depiction of male/female characters are important because they are representative of the power structures present in reality. Male characters who control are manipulate the female characters are created to satisfy the ego of the masculine viewer, who takes pleasure in seeing his “ideals...expressed” (Mulvey 61). However, Rapunzel breaks down these ideals by ignoring Flynn’s advances and feminizing

hyper masculine characters. Interestingly, *Tangled* does not have a classical ballroom scene but rather a violent, masculine bar scene. Flynn takes Rapunzel to the pub to scare her from the real world -- he is aware of the way that she should be conditioned to feel as a woman and manipulates his power so that he can have his satchel back (which contains his precious crown). When she encounters a growling male character, Hook Hand Hug, who attacks Flynn and threatens to hurt him. Instead of remaining silent, Rapunzel shouts “Put him down! Okay, I don't know where I am, and I need him to take me to see the lanterns, because I've been dreaming about them my entire life. Find your humanity. Haven't any of you ever had a dream?”

Appealing to sentimentalism, Rapunzel attempts to remove the hypermasculine threat of violence and instead uses emotions to soften Hook Hand. In the song “Tangled Dream,” that follows this scene, it is clear that Rapunzel’s efforts have been successful, as he sings, 'I'm malicious mean and scary. My sneer could curdle dairy. And violence-wise my hands are not the cleanest. But despite my evil look, and my temper and my hook. I've always yearned to be a concert pianist..Though my face leaves people screaming. There's a child behind it dreaming.” Next, the other brutish men in the bar confess to wanting to be a “florist,” “interior design,” making cupcakes, puppet shows and “ceramic unicorns.” In this scene, it is clear that Rapunzel has more control over her fate than previous Disney Princesses. She is also able to use her training in femininity and her understanding of True Womanhood to manipulate and control masculinity, a power move untested by 20th century princesses.

Womanly Masks in Tangled

In *Tangled*, Rapunzel’s stepmother Goethe is the evil female character, locking away Rapunzel in a tower in order to keep her from discovering the outside world. However, it is interesting that Goethe, like many Disney female villains, is demonized not because of her

malicious intent - but rather initially because of her appearance, her age and her ability to understand and manipulate her placement as a woman in the patriarchal structure. The demonizing of these female characters argue that although Disney has come a long way in casting more agent female characters, there is a limit to their ability to dispose of ideologically constructed mythic masks that “male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her ‘inconstancy’ and by identifying her with the ‘eternal types’ they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly” (Gilbert and Gubar 811). This desire to simplify women into “evil” and “good” is not only a manifestation of the patriarchal gaze, but the associated attributes of these women represent the system of value that women are meant to understand and participate in. Goethe is trapping Rapunzel in the tower not solely to hide her hair from the world, but to keep herself from growing old, an anxiety that is manifested in the start of the film through her plucking of magical flowers to keep her youth intact. Instead of creating a redeeming narrative for Goethe by deconstructing her indoctrination into the idea that an older woman is not valuable, the film decides to villainize her insecurity and kill her off at the end. Although Gilbert and Gubar categorize the “monster woman” as a villainous creation of the patriarchal order that must be murdered, it is interesting to see that although Goethe is evil, she is aware of the world around her and her placement within it, affording her an intelligence and agency that Rapunzel does not have. Although misguided, Goethe’s criticisms of Flynn point out larger structural flaws in patriarchal heterosexual relationships, making her aware of the place that Rapunzel inhabits. When Rapunzel returns to the castle after leaving Flynn, Goethe lectures her about Flynn’s real intentions and Rapunzel’s naivety regarding romance, “Dear this whole romance that you've invented, just proves you're too naive to be here. Why a kid like you? Come on now, really. Look at you, that face, that ancient dress... Rapunzel knows best. Fine, if you're

so sure now. Go ahead then give him, THIS! Trust me my dear, that's how fast he'll leave you.” Although Goethe is misguided in the way that she addresses and controls Rapunzel, it is clear that she is also making a valid critique in the way that men regard women -- notably that men value a woman’s appearance over her intelligence or will, and that men will discard of women when they are no longer offering them what they desire. Like *Snow White*, *Tangled’s* evil female character embodies the patriarchal belief that younger women are more valuable than older women and that older women are constantly striving to retain their youth as an economy in a hypersexualized world. These extreme divides between the characters solidify this harmful ideology and prevent girls from “deconstruct[ing] the dead self that is a male ‘opus’ and discover[ing] a living, ‘inconstant self’” (Gilbert and Gubar 814). The end of the film shows that these masks are not only harmful to women but also ungrounded in reality or morals, as Rapunzel uses her innocent daughter persona to trick her stepmother into thinking that she will stay in the castle forever, “if you let me save him... I will go with you...I'll never run, I'll never try to escape. Just let me heal him. And you and I will be together. Forever, just like you want. Everything will be the way it was. I promise. Just like you want. Just let me heal him.” Goethe gives in to Rapunzel’s request, only to meet her death later when she cuts off her hair. The over simplified dichotomization of female characters is a product of a patriarchal ideology and harms rather than helps women in their development.

Brave (2012)

Released two years after *Tangled*, *Brave* follows the progressive Disney Princess trajectory. Set in the Scottish Highlands, the film is centered on Princess Merida, who defies the traditional custom of arranged marriage. Chaos ensues when Merida refuses to marry any of the men from from the Scottish clans, and instead competes for her own hand in marriage. *Brave*

earned \$273.3 million in America, making it the 13th highest-grossing film of 2012 and the third highest-grossing animated film that year after *Ice Age: Continental Drift* and *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*. The film was not expected to succeed as well as its recent predecessor *Toy Story 3* which was released in 2010 and made \$1.067 billion. Critics thought that the Princess movie would not connect “with men in the same way as Pixar movies like *Finding Nemo* or *The Incredibles*...current expectations have *Brave* earning slightly less (\$55-\$60 million)” (“Forecast: Pixar Aims for 13th-Straight First Place Debut with 'Brave'”). The film hit the upper end of the analyst's predictions but had a surprising 43% male and 57% female audience, suggesting that the Princess movies were shifting away from a female-exclusive audience. Disney faced controversy when they reenvisioned Merida's appearance when inducting her into the Disney Princess Collection. The newly constructed Merida had tamed curly hair, was significantly slimmer and “sexier” as she looked like an older woman. The redesign initiated backlash from girls and women, who launched a change.org petition to prevent Disney's rebranding, “the redesign of Merida in advance of her official induction to the Disney Princess collection does a tremendous disservice to the millions of children for whom Merida is an empowering role model who speaks to girls' capacity to be change agents in the world rather than just trophies to be admired” (“Sign the Petition”). The reaction speaks for the message of the film itself -- contemporary viewers are tired of seeing a Princess defined by her appearance and seen as an item of consumption.

Disney's *Brave* challenges the idea of True Womanhood by creating a Princess that refuses to be courteous, attractive or the object of a man's gaze. The film posits Merida against her mother, Queen Elinor, who's beliefs at the start of the film align with 20th century Disney Princesses. Instead of finding herself through the love of a man, Merida forms a stronger bond

with her mother when the two realize that both tradition and change is important -- defying Gilbert and Gubar's womanly masks and the argument that the "angel" and "devil" female characters must be murdered. Instead, *Brave* argues that traditional and contemporary renditions of Princesses (and womanhood) can exist through understanding and communication. The film also pulls away from the male gaze by depicting men as foolish, unworth of Merida's hand and not as capable as her both physically and mentally. *Brave* disrupts the idea of the evil masks by allowing Merida and Queen Elinor to inhabit the same space and coexist. The only evil woman in the film, who curses Queen Elinor, does not appear again in the film after her initial introduction, emphasizing that the importance of the film is the mother-daughter relationship instead of the destruction of a female figure.

True Womanhood in Brave

In *Brave*, Princess Merida is told by her mother that she must marry the oldest Prince from a unifying clan. The mother-daughter relationship in the film is the representation of the conflicting ideals of True Womanhood and the New Woman, embodied by the contemporary Disney Princesses. In "The Cult of True Womanhood," Welter argues that literature circulating in the 19th century emphasized the importance of a woman telling "her daughter a few facts to keep her mind at rest" (Welter 158). This included keeping her virginity intact, warding off tempting men and placing marriage before education in her development. Similarly, Queen Elinor establishes this relationship with Merida even before she is asked to be married, she lectures her daughter on being a proper lady and princess, "From the top...A princess must be knowledgeable about her kingdom...She doesn't make doodle!... a princess does not chortle!...Doesn't stuff her gob!... Rises early...Clean! And above all, a princess strives for...well, perfection!" It is clear that Merida refuses to abide by her mother's expectations and

outwardly expresses her distaste for traditionally domestic work, like sewing and cleaning.

Merida capitalizes off of the one day that she is free to act outside of her princess role, and takes that to mean a day of freedom “But every once in a while, there’s a day when I don’t have to be a princess. No lessons, no expectations. A day where anything can happen. A day when I can change my fate.” As she rides through the forest on her horse and shoots her arrows at different targets, Merida finds solace in the outside world, a new concept for Disney Princess. In *Snow White*, Snow White is threatened by the dark forest, and in *Mulan*, she is looked down upon for riding horses into the town and engaging in combat, a place outside of her assigned domestic role. However, Merida’s freedom and solace in the forest (represented by the spirits that speak only to her) creates a new standard for the Disney Princess - one who leaves the domestic space and explores freely. This shift into the external world is significant for *Brave* and the Princess role, as it deconstructs the idea of the True Woman who must remain at home, “the true woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside -- as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother... ‘the true dignity and beauty of the female character seemed to consist in a right understanding of faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties’” (Welter 162). Merida completely disregards this expectation, instead venturing outside and refusing to be married to a man. Her resistance is emphasized when she decides to shoot for her own hand in marriage, competing against her suitors. Here, she rips her dress in order to aim the arrow, despite her mother’s protestations “Merida, stop this!...Don’t you dare release another arrow!...Merida, I forbid it!” This scene is the major turning point in *Brave*, where it becomes quite clear that Merida will not be indoctrinated into the cult of true womanhood and will instead embody the expectations of the new Disney Princesses - who explore, rebel and do not care for a male savior. This shift is only emphasized in the dialogue and conflict between Merida and

Elinor later in the film, where the True Woman and the New Woman clash, a parallel to the monstrous and angelic masks proposed by Gilbert and Gubar.

Deconstructing the Male Gaze and Patriarchal Visual Desire in Brave

Much like *Mulan*, *Brave* deconstructs the male gaze by creating flawed, feminine, and insignificant male characters who do not live up to the potential of fulfilling a man's ego. Equally important to finding pleasure in the cinema is "developing scopophilia...its narcissistic aspect...curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition" (Mulvey 60). *Brave* pokes fun at the more complete male self through characters like King Fergus, whose purpose in the film is more for comedic effect than significant change. While Queen Elinor attempts to deal with the domestic and political conflicts in her household, Fergus takes a supportive, instead of dominating role, understanding that Queen Elinor's decision is more important than his own. In a humorous scene, he tells his wife to speak to him as if he is Merida and impersonates her in a high pitched voice, "Right, here we go. I don't want to get married! I want to stay single and let my hair flow in the wind as I ride through the glen, firing arrows into the sunset!" Here, King Fergus allows Queen Elinor to take hold of the situation, instead of forcing her to punish Merida. He acknowledges the importance in communication between the two female characters and places his masculinity at expense in order to save his wife from trouble. This is in strong contrast to former Disney Princes, who dismiss a woman's domestic/gendered trouble in order to reinforce their masculinity. The deconstruction of the male gaze is also seen in Merida's suitors. The men are ridiculously fighting over Merida's hand through outrageous tales, even though Merida seems extremely uninterested in their politics. When one man shouts "Lies!" toward a man's tale, a brawl ensues, showing the

insecure and self-conscious nature of masculine politics. It is only when Queen Elinor disrupts the crowd that the men humbly apologize and bow to the Queen. The need to perform masculinity in this scene shows the inherent weakness in its definition, and Merida's ability to out-shoot everyone in the archery competition deconstructs any belief in the superiority of a man over a woman. Mulvey argues that the male projection in cinema embodies the desires of a man in reality, "the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (Mulvey 63). By creating a cast of male characters who are insignificant, impulsive and inferior to Merida, *Brave* follows the standards created in *Tangled* by deconstructing the male gaze.

Womanly Masks in Brave

Brave radically reenvisioned traditional Disney Princess films by eradicating the idea that a monstrous woman must be destroyed by a more angelic figure. Unlike *The Little Mermaid*, *Tangled*, or *Mulan*, *Brave* argues that instead of destroying one another, female figures who are ideologically opposed can learn to survive and empower one another - through communication and understanding. This agreement is at odds with arguments made by Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that a woman must destroy both the angel and the monster in order to create their own sense of "I am." 21st century Disney Princess films venture away from 20th century ideals by venturing outside of the prescribed order of monstrous and angelic female masks, complicating and subverting the tropes created for them. In "The Queen's Looking Glass," Gilbert and Gubar argue that women have been "authored by a male God and by a godlike male, killed into a 'perfect' image of herself, the woman writer's self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text...an enraged prisoner: herself" (Gubar 15). This suffering is true for all Disney Princesses, but instead of focusing on

understanding each other through the idea of a male God, new Disney Princesses understand their identities as tied to past expectations and attempt to deconstruct this through sisterhood and empowerment.

In *Brave*, Queen Elinor drags Merida back into the castle to admonish her for her resistance. Merida shouts at her mother, her creator, in a way that woman writers may shout at the godlike male, “You’re never there for me! This whole marriage is what you want! Do you ever bother to ask what I want? No! You walk around telling me what to do, what not to do! Trying to make me be like you! Well, I’m not going to be like you!” In *Brave*, Queen Elinor wears the “male-defined mask” (Gubar 19) of the evil woman, who attempts to destroy Merida’s freedom. However, when watching the film, Queen Elinor’s correlation to evil is complicated by understandings of culture and tradition. Queen Elinor and Princess Merida are unable to speak to one another and instead communicate through King Fergus, a male character. Through the montage of the female characters speaking over one another through the King, it is clear that communication is creating the trouble -- not hatred of each other’s perspectives. The confrontation and struggle between the Princess and Queen symbolize the ultimate fight between the angelic and monstrous woman, tied closely to understandings of True Womanhood and the developing New Woman. After their verbal confrontation, Merida takes her sword and slashes her mother’s tapestry creation. Here, the sword becomes the symbolic antithesis to the needle -- although both have pointed edges, they symbolize different things for those who wield it. The sword, as seen in *Mulan*, represents the outside dominion, the warrior, the (male) hero. The needle, as seen in *Cinderella*, is a hyper feminized tool, usually belonging in the domestic sphere. Here, Merida wields the sword and rips her mother’s tapestry, completely obliterating notions of True Womanhood. However, in this encounter it becomes clear that neither Merida or

Elinor are empowered, as Elinor throws Merida's bow in the fire and the tapestry, created in the shape of their domestic family, is torn. Merida's representation of the New Woman replaces the "cult of domesticity and the doctrine of spheres as well as...the Ideal of Real Womanhood" ("A Definition of the 'The New Woman' from... by Ruth Bordin"). However, at the end of the film, it is clear that neither Merida's destruction of the True Woman or the triumph of the True Woman is a successful representation of empowerment -- instead, the film suggests that both women can coexist through communication. At the end of the film, Merida must fix her mother's tapestry with the needle in order to break the curse. Her warrior-like skills are not as powerful as her love for her family in this scene, as she uses a domestic skill to save her mother. This act does not devalue her womanhood or enforce her mother's womanhood, but rather argues that both can coexist in order to save one another. Seemingly simple, this act is revolutionary because it defies Gilbert and Gubar's belief that "women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house" (Gubar 17). *Brave* argues that neither the angel nor the monster must be destroyed in order for women to attain freedom. The end of the film, when Merida and Elinor are riding horses through the forest, prove that communication and understanding is what is needed to reverse tradition. Merida does not need to marry and Elinor lets her hair down, representing a symbolic, freeing change (as seen in *Mulan*, *Tangled*) that is similar to her daughter's wild hair.

Conclusion

21st century Disney Princesses are rebels, domineering heroes, lovers of the external world, fighters and dreamers. Instead of completely discarding the idea that a Princess is an unworthy being, contemporary Disney films reenvision the genre by providing their characters

with physical and social agency. By deconstructing notions of True Womanhood, the male gaze and womanly masks, these films depict a world where Disney Princess don male costumes, enter war, reject marriage, and rebel against their father's authority. Comparing the passive, domestic princesses seen in 20th century films like *Snow White* and *Cinderella* to the adventurous, courageous heroines in *Mulan*, *Tangled* and *Brave* it is clear that this shift is an illustration of changing ideological expectations and consumer desires. During a time where women are constantly accused, doubted and refused access, consumers are turned off by films that replicate the oppressions women may face in reality. Audiences desire a Disney Princess that makes her own choices regardless of a man or his system -- and it is this longing that drove the production of progressive Disney Princess films. The shift away from traditional "damsel in distress" characters is most recently seen in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, where adventurous, loud, brave Vanellope Von Schweetz defies Ralph's expectations to stay by his side, and instead engages in a violent video game. Along with the other traditional Disney princesses, Vanellope defies the androcentric view of how women should perform, declaring "I'm a princess too!" rather than belittling the other characters. The other Disney princesses join in on the critique of the patriarchal order, "'Do people assume all your problems got solved because a big, strong man showed up?'" asks Rapunzel. "Yes! What is up with that?" Vanellope replies" ("*Wreck-It Ralph 2: Disney Princesses Unite over Feminism*"). With this sly self referential move, Disney acknowledges that Princesses need a refresh. The Princess character is not inherently weak - Vanellope proudly declares that she is a princess although she has none of the traditional attributes - but this moment reminds the viewers that it is their situations that create their weakness, a critique of the society instead of the Princess. Disney's newest Princess, Elena of Avalor is the first Latina Disney Princess, and another example of the newly defined

expectations of Disney Princess films - she wields a sword, has no romantic interest and a claim to her own throne. Disney films are important ideological tools and symbols - they create culture while also representing it. For many reasons, these shifts are significant. However, it cannot be ignored that these progressive depictions exist in a limiting framework. As a major conglomerate, Disney works from an investment-driven perspective and thus changes are market and consumer driven, a product of specific class desires. After all, another reason why Disney Princesses have become more active (other than media blasts from critics like Peggy Orenstein) is because Disney wants to attract more male viewers, and boys want a story of adventure, not romance, once more playing into the male gaze. Despite its advancements and limitations, it is clear that Disney Princesses are subliminally ingrained into American culture. Princesses are powerful because they are symbolic, a tool that can be used to ensure marginalization or demand freedom -- it is this potential that makes every narrative critical to younger audiences. Disney Princesses in the 21st century have only just begun to leave their castles. Only time will tell where they will end up.

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