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Brave: A Feminist Perspective on the Disney Princess Movie

A Senior Project Presented to □

The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment □

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By □

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Few things are more ingrained into modern culture than the children's movies produced by Disney. These films are seen by millions of children and adults both in the United States and abroad. These movies are a huge part of popular culture and have given rise to many well-known and instantly recognizable characters. The Disney princess series has been particularly influential, beginning in 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and continuing to the present with the 2013 release of *Frozen*. The majority of these films follow a similar format, including a plot centered around finding romantic love, a princess in need of rescuing from some physical or emotional danger, and a brave handsome prince. One film in the Disney princess series challenges the traditional princess pattern and offers a new perspective. That film is *Brave*. When viewed through the lens of feminist criticism, it becomes clear that *Brave* makes great progress in resisting patriarchy and offers young girls a female character that is different from models traditionally seen in the media.

Brave presents a strong female protagonist and a powerful plot that features the healing of a mother-daughter relationship rather than romantic love, making it worthy of feminist interpretation. Feminist criticism aims to bring to light examples of patriarchy present in media artifacts. Bonnie Dow explains, "Generally, hegemony or hegemonic processes refer to the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses" (262). Patriarchy and a limited view of roles for women are a part of that dominant ideology, and the media often works those ideas into films and television shows intended for "entertainment" to be consumed by viewers who are unaware of the messages they are receiving. As Kimberly Walsh, Elfriede Fürsich, and Bonnie Jefferson write, "Patriarchal ideology is so embedded in everyday discourse that it becomes normal to

general audiences, and its presence easily goes unnoticed” (126). This is dangerous because even messages that audiences are unaware of inform their values and affect the way they think. Walsh, Fürsich, and Jefferson continue: “Audiences caught in cultural hegemonic patterns may not acknowledge what is happening; it is the responsibility of critics to analyze the subtleties and the patriarchal ideology on television” (126). Issues of representation and patriarchy in the media must be analyzed so that viewers can be informed about what they are really consuming and alter their behavior accordingly.

Analyzing the gender roles present in children’s films is particularly important because viewing the stereotypical depictions of gender present in these movies can have a truly negative impact on children. Researchers Smith, Peiper, Granados, and Choueiti explain, “Children who watch skewed portrayals of males and females while they are developing cognitively may organize their views on gender into schemas driven by these stereotypes” (783). Encouraging gender stereotypes in children can have very harmful consequences. For example, the researchers point out that, “From a very young age, parents regard many of these films as ‘safe’ for young children to view. Psychologically, however, the films may be systematically encouraging youngsters to see the world through a very narrow perspective” (783). If children are conditioned to only see men and women in the way they are consistently represented in G-rated movies, it closes off all other opportunities to them and teaches them to look at the world from only one perspective. This leaves girls feeling like their only choice is to marry and live a traditional life, and this perpetuates patriarchy. Additionally, Smith and her research team state that, “For girls, a lack of representation may affect their perceptions of importance or self esteem. For boys, exposure may subtly perpetuate the status quo and reinforce a hegemonic view of girls and women.” (783). If girls do not have the opportunity to view female characters they can relate to,

it may leave them feeling rejected by society and make them feel like they must conform to the limited, subservient examples of femininity they see supported by the media. Furthermore, movies with stereotypical depictions of gender prevent society from moving away from patriarchy and toward freedom of choice for both genders. Films like *Brave* are needed to challenge the status quo and provide role models of strong, progressive females.

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, feminism is the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and includes organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests ("Feminism"). Feminism as a social movement originated in the eighteenth century (Rampton). Beginning in the nineteenth century, the First Wave of feminism was focused on equal political rights for women, particularly the right to vote. This wave came to an end in 1920 when women successfully achieved suffrage. The Second Wave of feminism was centered around social issues including a woman's right to enter the workforce and receive equal pay, and reproductive issues such as access to birth control. Many of these issues, including abortion and birth control rights, are still being discussed today. The Third Wave of feminism began in the 1990s as a response to Second Wave feminism. This wave is still concerned with social issues but stresses a woman's right to choose a more traditional role as a housewife (Rampton). This is also when feminism expands to include issues of equality for all oppressed groups such as gay and transgender rights and the elimination of racism. These issues continue to be topics of concern today.

Feminism as an approach to rhetorical criticism has its roots in the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. Campbell was the first to argue that feminist works, or specifically the rhetoric of the "women's liberation" movement, comprise a distinct rhetorical category. In her essay "The

Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," Campbell argues that, "... the rhetoric of women's liberation is a distinctive genre because it evinces unique rhetorical qualities that are a fusion of substantive and stylistic features" (562). She states that for females to even request equal treatment and equality with males, which are certainly feminist goals, because of our social structure, these moderate demands "threaten the institutions of marriage and the family and norms governing child-rearing and male-females roles" (564). For Campbell, "the option to be moderate and reformist is simply not available to women's liberation advocates" (564). She writes that, stylistically, feminist rhetoric is unique in that it "... is characterized by rhetorical interactions that emphasize affective proofs and personal testimony, participation and dialogue, self-revelation and self-criticism, [and] the goal of autonomous decision making through self-persuasion..." (568).

Sonja K. Foss, along with Cindy L. Griffin, built on Campbell's ideas about feminist criticism in their essay "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal For an Invitational Rhetoric." Foss and Griffin affirm that rhetoric, as it is currently understood as having a goal of persuasion, is patriarchal in that the attempt to persuade and change others "not only establishes the power of the rhetor over others but also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others" (3). They offer a new kind of rhetoric called invitational rhetoric, which "constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does" (5). They explain that this form of rhetoric is rooted in the feminist values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination which "explicitly challenge the positive value the patriarchy accords to changing and thus dominating others" (4). Foss and Griffin, citing hooks, explain that in working towards equality, "feminists seek to replace the 'alienation, competition, and dehumanization' that characterize relationships of domination with 'intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie'" (4). The

essence of the feminist idea of immanent value is “that every being is a unique and necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus has value”(4). The third value, self-determination, “allows individuals to make their own decisions about how they wish to live their lives” and “involves the recognition that audience members are authorities on their own lives...” (4). These feminist values are important for children to understand and see represented, and are the opposite of the subservient, undervalued, and restricted examples of women that children usually see in the media.

Feminist critical analysis shows how an artifact constructs gender roles and how that construction reveals a message about patriarchy. *Brave* is a new kind of artifact. It takes a genre often plagued by patriarchy, the fairytale, and uses it to fight patriarchy by presenting a lead character who embodies the feminist values of immanent worth and self-determination, and by creating a plot that does not involve a romantic love interest. According to Griffin, feminist criticism involves “a perspective that views gender as one of the organizing features of all communication interactions and constructs” (26). *Brave* offers a new kind of artifact to analyze from a feminist critical perspective. Since gender influences all communication, studying a unique form of gender construction and interaction can lead to a better understanding of communication.

A popular film that resists patriarchy as *Brave* does can have a significant impact on a young audience’s perceptions about femininity and gender roles. Stacy Smith, Katherine Pieper, Amy Granados, and Mary Choueiti conducted research about gender portrayals in G-rated films and found, “the landscape of G-rated movies is one plagued by issues of representation and tradition” (784). They discuss the harmful implications of this finding, writing, “Heavy viewing of such portrayals may function as a cognitive rehearsal to strengthen gender role schemas and

skew children's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about their own behaviors and occupational aspirations" (775). Children learn about gender roles from the films they watch and, as Smith and her team found, many of these lessons on gender are detrimental. Instead of viewing women that embody the feminist values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination, children see countless examples of princesses who are subservient, apprehensive, and dependent upon men. *Brave* is an important alternative to the problematic portrayals of women in most children's movies, and is an example of how to better represent women.

Representation of Women in Disney Movies

Viewing *Brave* from a feminist critical perspective reveals that it is not filled with instances of patriarchy, as past princess movies have been. Many feminist critics have analyzed other Disney princess films and found that, though many of them have positive attributes, they also include many examples of patriarchy and value masculinity over femininity. Libe Garcia Zarranz states, "The construction of Disney's heroines has become a controversial site for discussion in terms of stereotyped femininity and sexuality following the demands of a pervasive patriarchal system" (55). For example, Gillan Youngs analyzed *Mulan*, a movie often praised as being "a story about breaking conventional gender boundaries and roles, about the ability of the female to be as strong, as aggressive, as cunning as the male" (312). *Mulan* certainly broke the traditional princess role of being dainty and preoccupied with marriage. However, Youngs found that, "*Mulan* is a woman in a man's world" (312) and, "In the end, *Mulan* is too much a pseudo or substitute man. She is standing in for the son her family does not have" (313). *Mulan* had to pretend to be a man and largely surrender her femininity to be respected. This is problematic because it implies that femininity is bad and the only alternative to the traditional role of women is to become masculine. Rather than celebrating femininity in its many forms, *Mulan* devalues it.

Unlike Mulan, Merida, the princess in *Brave*, did not want to become less feminine and more masculine, she wanted to be respected as a feminine being and have the right to choose whatever path she desired.

One way in which nearly all Disney princess films show patriarchy and express hegemonic norms about the role of women is through a plot focused on the princess finding romantic love with a “prince charming.” Bridget Whelan writes, “Even spirited female characters, who could otherwise serve as excellent role models for young female readers and viewers, have historically crumpled so readily under the male gaze” (27-28). Even seemingly progressive princess characters always end up focusing on men. For example, Rapunzel, the princess in Disney’s *Tangled*, is smart, resourceful, and adventurous and uses these traits to achieve her dream of seeing floating lanterns at the palace. However, as Whelan states, “The culmination of her narrative is not the fulfillment of her life’s dream but her marriage to Flynn Rider” and “like Mulan, Belle, Jasmine, and Ariel, Rapunzel’s story ends with romance” (32). This reinforces the harmful idea that the only way women can find meaning and live happy lives is through marriage. *Brave* does not share this message. The plot of *Brave* is focused on healing a relationship between two women, a mother and daughter, not romantic love. Merida does not want to be married, perhaps ever, and she fights for her right to choose whether marriage is the right path for her. The film ends without her having any kind of love interest, and Merida is very happy with that. This is important for girls to see and realize that they can choose whether or not they wish to obey the traditional standard of getting married.

Brave shows a feminist message in Merida’s resistance to being told what to do and insistence that she choose her own fate. Patriarchy is rooted in a belief that women are inferior and should therefore relinquish their free will to men. The entire plot of *Brave* centers around

fighting this patriarchal message as Merida fights for the right to choose her own path in life. However, Merida is not the first Disney princess to fight for the right to make her own choices. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* also fights to attain free will, though the movie is plagued by other problems with female representation, including a princess who quite literally gives up her voice in order to pursue a man. Zarranz explains that, “Ariel systematically rebels against the norm of the Father, aspires to grow intellectually and strives to achieve agency in the film” (56). Ariel and Merida both fight against a patriarchal system that constrains them in traditional roles that they do not wish to participate in. However, Merida is particularly significant because she fights for free will in the context of a film that does not represent women as being willing to give up anything, even their ability to speak, in pursuit of a man, as is the case with *The Little Mermaid*.

Brave is a big step for Disney toward a positive representation of women and an upholding of feminist messages. The film takes many of the positive elements present in past Disney princess movies, such as a strong female lead seen in *Mulan* and *Tangled* and a refusal to accept predefined roles shown by Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, and combines them while avoiding the problematic aspects of those films, such as the portrayal in each of these films of romance as the ultimate goal of women’s lives. *Brave* offers viewers an alternative model to the traditional princess and, because it was released by Disney, it has been widely viewed and has made a substantial impact.

Description of *Brave*

Brave is an animated movie produced by Disney/Pixar and was released on June 22, 2012. The plot focuses on Merida, a young princess, and the development of her relationship with her mother, as well as her quest to find her own place in the world. Merida lives in the Scottish Highlands with her mother, Queen Elinor, her father, King Fergus, and her three

younger brothers. Merida spends much of her life enduring lectures from her mother about how a proper princess should behave, but she lives for the days she can spend going on adventures on her horse Angus and perfecting her considerable archery skills. When Merida's parents tell her it is time for her to marry one of the sons of the three lords of the kingdom, she is horrified and expresses that she is not ready, and may never be. Nevertheless, an archery competition is arranged to determine which of the suitors will win Merida's hand in marriage, but she defiantly shoots for her own hand and expertly beats all three suitors.

Merida's act of defiance results in a huge fight between Merida and her mother, during which Merida slashes a tapestry depicting the family, resulting in a large tear between the images of her and her mother. Merida runs away into the forest where she finds a witch who agrees to give her a spell to change her mother, which would then change her fate. The witch gives Merida the spell in the form of a cake and, to both Merida and Elinor's surprise, upon eating the cake Elinor turns into a bear, though she still thinks like herself. Merida and Elinor escape to the forest where Merida uses her archery and outdoor skills to get proper food. They learn that the cure for the curse is to "heal the bond torn by pride," which they believe is the tapestry, so they return to the castle, where Merida must give a speech and command the crowd of lords and their clans in order to sneak Elinor past everyone into the castle. During Merida's speech, she and her mother share a moment where Elinor communicates that she no longer wants to force Merida into marriage and she wants her to be "free to write her own story."

Before Elinor and Merida are able to fix the tapestry, King Fergus finds them and attacks Elinor, believing she is a vicious bear, and chases her into the forest. Merida follows on Angus while sewing the tapestry, and gets there in time to stop her father from slaying her mother, declaring "I'll not let you kill my mother" as she grabs a sword and fights back her father. A

demon bear named Mor'du appears and attacks Merida, but Elinor saves her and kills Mor'du. Merida throws her arms around her mother, and Elinor changes back to human form. The film ends by showing Merida and Elinor riding horses together as Merida states, "There are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it."

Analysis

Brave's lead character, the feisty princess Merida, breaks with the patriarchal princess tradition in many ways, beginning with her appearance. Merida's most noticeable feature is her large mass of unruly bright orange curls. Her messy hair is strikingly different from the perfectly styled hair seen on other Disney princesses and goes against stereotypical conceptions of feminine beauty. Even when her mother tries to tuck her hair under a bonnet so she looks dignified in front of the clans, one curl resists and hangs out, and Merida embraces the rebellious curl and pulls it back out whenever it is tucked in. Merida's hair is untamable and mirrors Merida's refusal to obey. Merida also has quirky freckles and does not have the "airbrushed" look of past princesses. While still slender, she has more realistic body proportions than past princesses, with a slightly protruding belly and wider hips, and overall is not hyper-sexualized. Merida's face is noticeably rounder than her fellow princesses and she does not have the super refined features traditionally recognized as beautiful. Finally, though Merida does wear a dress, she insists that her clothing be comfortable so she can enjoy her active lifestyle. She detests the restrictive lady-like dresses that are more traditional for a princess in her territory, and when she is forced to wear one she purposefully rips the dress to allow a better range of motion to aim her bow and arrow. Overall, Merida looks like a real young woman rather than a male fantasy.

Merida's appearance differs from past princesses and fights patriarchy by going against traditional ideas of beauty.

Merida has a strong personality that goes against the patriarchal idea of a weak, submissive young woman. Merida does not partake in the "womanly" domestic activities championed by patriarchy and often performed by past Disney princesses. Princesses like Snow White and Cinderella are often shown cleaning, cooking, or sewing, but Merida enjoys physical activities such as horseback riding, rock climbing, and archery. She loves her prized bow, despite her mother's belief that weapons are not appropriate for a lady. She is confident and does not hesitate to take control when she ought to, such as coming up with a plan to sneak Elinor in bear form out of the castle or procuring food when she and her mother are in the woods. She insists on thinking for herself, which is a model embodiment of the feminist principle of self-determination. Though her decisions may not always turn out the way she intends, she is strong enough to make her own choices instead of just doing what her mother or father tell her to do. When told she must marry one of the three lords' sons, Merida asserts her position that she is not ready and insists that her parents respect her wishes. "I suppose a princess just does what she's told?" she asks defiantly when told she must marry (*Brave*). She does not show a subservient reaction and comply with the demand; she respects herself enough to fight for what she believes is right by going to the old witch in an attempt to change her fate. She insists that her thoughts and opinions have value and does not passively give up when others dismiss her opinions. Though going to the witch ended up being a mistake, it showed bravery and determination that Merida actively tried to better her life, and also showed more strength of character when Merida later admitted she made a mistake and took responsibility for it. Merida's personality defies the stereotypical princess persona and the patriarchal notion of women as submissive.

Merida's actions also challenge stereotypical gender roles in that she performs many things traditionally associated with male characters. For example, one day Merida rides off into the woods and climbs a huge rock to drink from a waterfall, called the Fire Falls. When Merida tells her family about her adventure that day, her father responds, "Fire falls? They say only the ancient kings were brave enough to drink the fire" (*Brave*). The feat Merida accomplished was thought of as something only men of power could achieve, a very oppressive patriarchal view. Merida rejects this patriarchal view and her father is proud of her for this. She also goes against her prescribed gender role when, instead of allowing her suitors to compete to win her hand in the archery contest, she defiantly announces "I'll be shooting for my own hand," and beats her suitors in the competition (*Brave*). Merida's brazen break from tradition also shows intense self-determination, since she was intent on making her own choices rather than yielding to what society determined was proper behavior for her. Merida bravely and consistently completes actions deemed "inappropriate" for a woman despite the disapproval of those around her, and in doing so acts as a strong model for others who do not fit into society's narrow conceptions of gender.

Merida is not the only character featured in *Brave* that demonstrates a move away from gender stereotypes. The character Elinor, Merida's mother, also defies the patriarchal concept of women being second to men. Though Fergus is king, it is clear that Elinor is just as powerful in the kingdom. When everyone begins fighting in the castle hall, Elinor is able to end the entire fight simply by walking calmly through the hall and retrieving her husband and the other three clan leaders, and insisting that they behave respectfully. This shows that the people of the kingdom highly respect Elinor. Elinor's influence is also apparent when, knowing a decision about the suitors must be made, the lords go to her, rather than the king, to request an answer.

The lords' high respect for the Queen, rather than just the King, shows an openness to look beyond gender. They go to the Queen because she is skilled in diplomatic matters, regardless of her gender. Elinor is an example of a woman being portrayed as strong and intelligent, and gaining high respect for these admirable qualities.

Feminist values are also shown through the male characters in the film. Though men such as the king and the lords can be tough and competitive, they very clearly respect women and view them as equals. This is shown by king Fergus' relationship with his wife, and by the lords listening to and obeying the queen. Furthermore, Fergus has no issue with his daughter living her life the way she chooses, which shows that he respects her and knows that she is competent in living her own life. Feminist values can be seen in Merida's three younger brothers in that they are raised in a way that encourages them to make their own decisions and enjoy a high degree of self-determination. While initially the mischievous boys "get away with murder" and there are gender differences in how they are raised compared to Merida, this issue is resolved as the film progresses and the characters grow and change.

There are several characteristics of the plot of *Brave* that break traditional fairy-tale stereotypes and show that the film is an important step away from patriarchy. One example is that the plot is centered on the relationship between a mother and her daughter. The relationship between Merida and Elinor is full of misunderstanding, struggle over conflicting ideas, and love. In almost all past princess movies, including *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, *The Beauty and the Beast*, *The Princess and The Frog*, *Frozen*, and *Aladdin*, the princess' mother is deceased or in some other way out of the picture. This makes it even more remarkable that in *Brave*, repairing the relationship between the princess and her mother drives the plot of the movie. Bringing the exploration of relationship dynamics between two close

females to the forefront of a film is significant because it highlights an important struggle that women face. It also downplays romance and highlights family dynamics, which counteracts the message that romance is the only goal worth pursuing for girls, a message they get from other princess stories where marriage is the only goal that is typically focused on. Additionally, while both mother and daughter are flawed, with Merida being headstrong and Elinor being a somewhat stubborn perfectionist, ultimately both are portrayed as likeable characters with valid ways of being. This means that the film offers two suitable models of empowered females.

Another important pro-feminist feature of *Brave* is that there is no love interest throughout the film. Merida's three suitors play only minor roles in the film and are used primarily for comedic value. She has no romantic interests and she is perfectly happy with that. She has other ambitions beside love, and insists on finding love when she is ready, and at one point mentions that she may never be ready. As she is practicing what she wants to say to her mother about marriage she states, "You can just tell the lords the princess is not ready for this. In fact she might not ever be ready for this." This sends an important feminist message that it is alright if love and marriage do not fit into women's current or future plans and that they are free to pursue the goals they choose, rather than be bound to the traditional roles of wife and mother. Additionally, in so many princess movies the princess is taken away from all of her troubles by her love interest, but Merida must solve her own problems. There is no handsome prince that sweeps the princess off her feet and provides a new life for her. Merida believes in her own self-worth, and she does not need a man to define her or show her how to live her life.

The final feature of the plot of *Brave* that goes against stereotypical gender roles is that women perform all of the rescues shown in the movie. The first rescue occurs when Merida and Elinor, in bear form, find the ruins of the old kingdom and Merida falls into the throne room

where she is attacked by the bear Mor'du. She uses her own rock climbing skills to reach the hole in the roof, and then Elinor grabs her and she rides to safety on Elinor's back. When Merida is in trouble, she uses her own skill and the help of another woman to escape. She does not need a man to rescue her. This sends the message that women have the ability to handle dangerous situations.

The final climatic scene of the movie includes a two-part rescue, both performed by women. The first portion of the rescue occurs when Merida's father, Fergus, sees Elinor in bear form and believes that the bear killed his wife, rather than seeing the truth that the bear *is* his wife. Instead of passively watching and waiting for a man to save her mother, as so many princesses in past Disney films do when someone is in trouble, Merida grabs a sword from one of her father's men and bravely fights to keep Fergus away from the bear. "I'll not let you kill my mother," she says firmly (*Brave*). This act shows that Merida is willing to take control of situations and defies gender roles in that fighting is something stereotypically done by male characters, especially in princess movies. It also reinforces that Merida, a woman, can be brave, strong, capable, and willing to stand up to and hold her ground against a man. The second part of the final rescue occurs when, in the middle of the sword fight, Mor'du attacks and tries to kill Merida. Elinor, in bear form, comes to her rescue and kills the beast using both great strength and cleverness, since she kills him by unsteading a huge stone and letting it fall on him. This once again offers a representation of women as self-reliant, bold, and quite capable of executing rescues. This is a sharp contrast from past Disney movies in which, if a physical rescue occurs, it is usually a man rescuing a damsel in distress. For example, *Snow White*, *Tangled*, *Aladdin*, and of course *Sleeping Beauty* all include dramatic rescues where men save helpless princesses. *Brave's* portrayal of a woman as the rescuer also goes directly against the stereotype that women

are weak and require men's help in order to survive and succeed. This final rescue scene challenges the patriarchal construction of women as being in need of help and men as being the brave rescuers.

Effects

Viewing traditional films filled with gender stereotypes has psychological effects on children. Elizabeth England, citing Sherryl Graves, states, "The constructivist approach and cultivation theory both suggest there may be an effect of viewing gendered stereotypes upon children" (557). England explains that, "The constructivist approach proposes that children develop beliefs about the world based on their interpretations of observations and experiences" (557). These observations and experiences can come from media such as films and television shows as well as life experience. Therefore, as England determines, "viewing stereotyped or egalitarian depictions of gender roles will influence children's ideas about gender" (557). The events and characters that children see in films mix with what they have witnessed in real life to help form their views about the world. When children view film after film that portray women as submissive and dependent upon men, children incorporate these representations into their beliefs about how women really are. A film like *Brave* provides a counterexample to the meek, reliant princesses portrayed in other films and can help children understand that women can be powerful and heroic too.

The cultivation theory also suggests the media children consume have an effect on their views about gender. England, citing Gerbner, writes, "Cultivation theory posits that exposure to television content helps develop concepts regarding social behavior and norms" (557). Children learn what ideas are accepted and what behavior is appropriate in their culture by observing others, in their own lives and in the media. England continues, "Thus, children's media

influences a child's socialization process and the gendered information children view may have a direct effect on their cognitive understanding of gender and their behavior" (557). When a child sees, for example, that in every film with a female lead they view, the story culminates in that character getting married, they learn that all females must get married and that, if they are female, marriage is necessarily the only goal they should be working towards. The fact that Merida does not marry, and states that she may never marry, shows children that they have options and helps teach them that it is okay if a woman chooses not to marry. Merida is different from the princesses typically shown in children's films, and this helps children learn that there is variety in the lives and characteristics of women, not just one stereotyped version of womanhood.

Having a variety of positive role models for women and girls is extremely important for a society. As Diana Damean writes, "Media provide images and figures that spectators can imitate and identify with. These images play an important part in socializing and educating individuals using social and sexual role models... that value certain patterns of behavior and a certain style, while discouraging any others. This is particularly true when we refer to women's representation in the media" (90). Depictions of women in the media act as models for viewers. A media landscape that is full of subservient and traditional representations of women, such as the Disney princesses before Merida, leads to a population of women that emulate these models and perpetuate patriarchy. Damean goes on to explain, "Women are supposed to have a variety of models to choose from when constructing their image and assuming their roles, but the truth is that their options are quite limited and induced by the media discourse" (93). When models are limited, women are confined to a small range of roles, and opportunities to express parts of themselves that differ from tradition are lost. This is particularly true of young girls who, due to

their limited real life experience, are particularly dependent on media models to show them what it means to be a woman. Additionally, when most of these media models are deeply rooted in patriarchy, it leads to a society that is unable to shake this imbalanced, destructive social system.

Conclusion

One remarkable thing about *Brave* is that it challenged the patriarchal status quo and represented feminist values in a film that had mainstream success. *Brave* was eagerly anticipated by critics, as it was the first princess movie that Pixar created with Disney. The film met the high expectations of the critics well, earning a “Certified Fresh” rating of seventy-eight percent from Rotten Tomatoes (“*Brave* (2012)”). Many critics applauded the strong heroine, Merida, and the shift toward a theme of family relationships rather than romance. Writing for *USA Today*, Claudia Puig writes, “Princess Merida is endearing, but she's no simpering *Sleeping Beauty*. Indefatigable and fierce, she's a role model for girls in the 21st century.” She writes that the importance of *Brave* is that “...it introduces audiences to a new breed of Disney princess - one brimming with self-confidence, strong opinions, athletic skills, determination, loyalty and a head full of unruly curls.” This strong heroine is a source of important messages about what it means to be a powerful woman. Puig also notes how *Brave* “...realistically captures the complex shadings of familial relationships, particularly those between a mother and her teenage daughter.” Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* agrees, writing, “Merida embarks on an adventure that pivots not around the search for true love but the fractured relationship with her mom -- an anti-Freudian twist that gives *Brave* a novel psychological frisson.” She goes on to say that it is refreshing “to see family dynamics, rather than romance, define the fulcrum of the story...” The fact that the main relationship development in *Brave* occurs between two female characters

offers a rich source of messages about women, patriarchy, and the assumptions made about the female gender. *Brave* is important because it showed how filmmakers can make films that combat the poor representations of females and offer young girls a strong model of what it means to be feminine while still making a living and enjoying commercial success.

People, and particularly children, use what they see in films to learn about gender roles, and the majority of children's films perpetuate gender stereotypes. Films like *Brave* have the opportunity to counteract this negative effect, and use children's ability to learn about gender roles from films as a positive learning experience. Viewing *Brave* from a feminist perspective shows that it is a film that breaks the patriarchal mold of past Disney princess films and offers viewers a model of femininity that is strong and self-reliant. This is important because, by seeing *Brave* as a new model of feminism, it can be used as an example for future children's films to encourage a more positive variety of representations of women. A better selection of models for young girls will help them become stronger women and help disrupt society's deeply ingrained reliance on patriarchy.

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