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Nothing out of the Ordinary

It has been widely published that Disney movies display strong gender stereotypes. Some writers even go so far as to suggest that Disney is actively trying to reinforce stereotypes. However, very little has been written about how stereotypical presentations of men and women affect the most easily influenced part of society, children. The effect of Disney movies on children is critical to the argument that Disney movies reinforce traditional gender stereotypes in society, but has been largely ignored by those that deride Disney for its sexism, leaving a relatively hollow argument.

Everything produced by a society inevitably shows the social biases of its creators. Disney movies are no exception to this rule, nor should society expect them to be. Disney movies have undeniably displayed men and women in stereotypical roles and in stereotypical body forms. Some critics would suggest that this is the result of ulterior motives, while in reality it is only a side effect of common societal norms and the very nature of animation. Devoid of all other considerations, Disney movies could be seen as a very sexist influence on children only starting to form their views of the world. However, when considered with the society that created them, Disney movies fall in line with the sexual biases that exist in society. A child that watches Disney movies will be no more sexist than one that does not. In the end, all prejudices come from society as a whole and all children will be exposed to them, regardless of Disney.

However, there are two elements of Disney movies that can lead to the characterization

that they impart sexist views on developing children. The first of these elements is the timelessness of the movies. Compared to most forms of entertainment, Disney's animated works have remained very much in the public consciousness despite their age. Faith Popcorn notes this in a *Brandmarketing* article:

Mothers want to hand-down the same movies that they watched in their childhood. Bambi, Dumbo, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White are still as cherished today as a half-century ago. [...] With so many other areas of "cutting-edge" consumerism, it's reassuring to find that in this new millennium, "the more things change," the more these things don't. (Popcorn 33-34)

While Popcorn may find this comforting, there is another effect. Old Disney films, that represented common social views fifty years ago, are still being watched by children today. The views presented are undeniably out of step with current ones, however it seems unfair to blame Disney for the sexual prejudices of the past. It would not be surprising to see a sexist comment in a book written in the 1940s, why should animation be held to a higher standard.

The second element that leads to sexist characterizations is the stylized nature of Disney's characters. Unlike other types of media, animators are not forced to use real people as their actors and actresses. Instead, they create their own characters that end up reflecting both social prejudice and the Disney tradition. Large eyes, large heads, muscular male bodies, and thin female bodies are all characteristics of the heroes and heroines, while villains are most often ugly.

In an article that presents Disney as attempting to reinforce sexist views, Kathi Maio writes:

The 'imagineers' at Disney obviously look to reinforce cultural assumptions and push a few buttons in their audience members, if for no other reason than it's the most efficient way to tell a story. Boyish Tom Cruise look = Good guy. Swarthy, hook-nosed Basil Rathbone look = Villain. Most audience members don't even notice when this happens. (Maio 14)

This statement draws a false assumption when it implies that Disney's goal is to "reinforce cultural assumptions." The end of the first sentence is closer to the truth. Using images that

people recognize is an easy way to tell a story, and most likely comes from the subconscious of the animators. The fact that society often equates outer beauty with inner good does not originate with Disney, nor should Disney be blamed for an incorrect social prejudice.

After discarding these two attempts to make Disney appear sexist, it is easier to see the truth. A sexist society produces sexist entertainment, even for its children. It is not just movies for children that support stereotypes either, a recent article in *The Independent* pointed out sexism in children's books (Duckworth). The two qualities of Disney animation, its age and its stylization, make sexism much easier to see, and have resulted in much more criticism for Disney than for other companies producing entertainment for children. The fact that Disney movies are marketed toward children also increases concerns that they support sexism and for good reason. Society does not want to impart sexist views on its youth.

However, the effect of Disney movies on children has received little study (Close). It is a relatively astounding fact that it has not received more attention when Disney has received so much criticism for supporting stereotypes. In order to prove the argument that Disney movies promote sexism among children, it would be necessary to do a real scientific study on the subject. The evidence right now is the opinions of Disney's strongest adult critics. What children see when they watch a movie is a very different matter.

Maio says the message of *The Little Mermaid* is for young women to "shut up and be beautiful" (Maio 13), but a child could very well get the message that women are free to choose what they want to do with their lives. In *The Little Mermaid* Ariel made her own choices and did not follow her father. In that way she broke the stereotype that young women must be loyal to the family above all else.

In *Beauty and the Beast* a child could understand the message of the movie as love can be

a powerful force against hate and fear. After all, the love of a woman changes a horrible beast into a handsome prince. However, Maio would argue that the message is “if a young woman is pretty and sweet-natured, she can change an abusive man into a kind and gentle man. In other words, it is a woman’s fault if her man abuses her” (qtd. in Mourby 17).

In both these instances, an adult looking at a work written for a child can see sexism that the child will most likely not imagine on his or her own. The idea that children are given sexist views from Disney movies stands on weak ground. The last argument posed by Disney critics is that the stylized images of the beautiful heroes are unhealthy body types for children to aspire to. Although, as written by Ajay Close, “children are more discriminating than they are given credit for. They can distinguish truth from fiction, reality from fantasy; they know a fairytale when they see one” (Close). The stylized images of animation pose much less risk to children than the equally unattainable, but yet real, images of Brittany Spears and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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