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**National College of Art and Design**  
Faculty of Design

Department of Visual Communication

**A Discussion of the Portrayal of Women in Disney  
Feature Length Animated Films**

**by Cliona Cunnane**

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# Introduction

“In American cinema, two kinds of narrative can be seen; those that affirm the positive myth propounded by the culture and those that question it. Disney has gone from one to the other, from demonstrating the disparity between myth and reality, to wholly affirming the myths of culture”(Anon 1997, p.2).

In 1937, the Walt Disney Film Group brought *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to the screen, the first fully animated feature length film ever made. It was feared that it wouldn't be accepted by an adult audience but in fact it turned out to be a huge success. It was the best selling film of 1938, in its first release grossing \$8 million at a time when movie tickets averaged 23 cents for adults and 10 cents for children (Thomas 1981, p.77). The Disney corporation went on to make several fully animated spectacles from this first success until Walt Disney died in 1966, the best known films from this era (apart from *Snow White*), being *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The animated feature *The Little Mermaid* (1989), under the direction of Walt's nephew, Roy Disney, was the company's first commercially successful animated film since Walt's death and the first in a new batch of animated features that re-establishes Disney as

“one of the largest producer's of ‘acceptable’ role models for young girls”(Sells 1995, p.176).

Disney have always, consciously or unconsciously, told stories that reflected the common cultural myths of the day. The look and feel of Disney animation have changed over the years from the earliest films to the new batch of creations, just as the cultural myths and ideals behind them have changed. As cinema has progressed from the high period of idealism in the '50s, through the depths of depression in the '70s, and rebounded with the synthetic happiness of the '80s and '90s, Disney have changed with it and have reflected these cultural changes in their animation.

Women have also changed and previously held ideals of what a woman's role in society should be have also changed in response to the feminist movement in the '60s and '70s. Have Disney reflected changing attitudes to women in their animation, or



are they still stuck in traditions of the past in their portrayal of female characters? Are Disney female characters in their animated features good role models for young girls in reality?

These are the questions I aim to answer throughout this thesis. I will discuss the early Disney female characters in comparison with more recent ones in terms of character as well as how each one has been animated. I will also outline how Disney films reflect society, particularly American society and how the influence of Hollywood cinema has played a major role in Disney's creations. I will base my discussion on six Disney animated features, three early films, *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* and three recent ones, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). I have deliberately chosen films in which the female is the main character so as to give a more detailed analysis of their characters. The fact that four of these animated films are adaptations of fairytales is an important feature of this discussion; this I will outline in chapter 3.





# Chapter 1 The Early Disney Films

The three Disney feature length animations I will discuss in this chapter are *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

These films have a lot of similar qualities, the fact that all three are adaptations of ancient fairytales being the major common factor. Another major characteristic running through these films is Disney's portrayal of the female characters. All three main female characters in these early Disney movies, Snow White, Cinderella and Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, are very similar in both personality and appearance. All three are wholesome and sweet and full human kindness and goodness. They are all portrayed as innocent victims at the hands of cruel villains, yet they don't complain or protest. Instead, they act as martyrs, cheerfully going about their daily tasks and singing about their wishes for romance with a handsome prince. Female passivity and helplessness are the catalysts for destined marriage and wealth which, according to Disney, is the ultimate reward for a woman.

Snow White, with her big, dark eyes and small pouty mouth is depicted as the epitome of innocence (see Fig. 1). She was based on the leading actresses of the day, when romantic comedies were very popular and the quest for a mate was the main plot. Snow White is first seen as the film opens, cheerfully scrubbing the steps in the garden, while dreaming of the one she loves as she sings, 'Some Day My Prince Will Come'. She is fantasising about her man coming and rescuing her from her harsh lifestyle instead of taking the initiative and doing something about her predicament herself. Even though Snow White is the central character in the film, she does nothing to move the film along; she is the one that things happen to, not the one who actually *makes* things happen. It is the male characters in the form of the seven dwarves and Prince Charming who are the protagonists; they're the ones who move the film along, helping Snow White and protecting her from the Wicked Queen. The Queen is the only female character that plays an active role in the film but she is killed in the end for her deeds anyway. Even the huntsman, who is ordered to kill Snow White by the Queen, protects Snow White. He cannot bring himself to kill her as she is portrayed as such an innocent and sweet girl, so he tells her to run for her life. The woodland

The American Medical Association is a non-profit corporation organized for the purpose of promoting the interests of the medical profession and the public. It is composed of members who are physicians, surgeons, dentists, and other medical practitioners. The Association is organized into sections, each of which is devoted to a particular branch of medicine. The sections are: Internal Medicine, Surgery, Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ophthalmology, Otorhinolaryngology, Dermatology and Syphilology, Radiology, and Pathology. Each section has a representative on the Association's Council, which is the governing body of the Association. The Council is composed of representatives from each section, and it is responsible for the management of the Association's affairs. The Association's main office is located in Chicago, Illinois, and it has a large staff of employees who are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Association. The Association's primary concern is the promotion of the highest standards of medical practice, and it is committed to the improvement of the medical profession and the public health.

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Figure 1: Snow White





animals then show her to a cottage where she can stay and so she takes refuge in the dwarfs' home where she is protected by seven men for whom she does all the cooking and cleaning. Here the influence of Hollywood cinema as well as society in general of that time is very apparent as the gender roles are so clearly defined. The male characters become heroes while the female character stays at home and is nothing more than the love-interest. Terri Martin Wright, in his article on Disney's adaptation of *Snow White* states

“Popular Hollywood films of the 1930s commonly included the motif of a heroine taking refuge in the living quarters of men to avoid an unpalatable destiny arranged by others”(Wright 1997, p.104).

It is suggested that the Prince's search for Snow White is continual throughout the film (even though he is not visible for most of it) after meeting her at the start of the film until he eventually finds her and rescues her at the end. The male character, the Prince, actually goes out and searches, while Snow White, the female, waits and hopes that with a bit of luck, he'll show up and save her. She doesn't make her own destiny; the male characters of the film are her fate.

Snow White is portrayed as being extremely naïve, not only because she possesses such a high pitched squeak for a voice, but more importantly in her actions. Despite the warnings from the dwarfs not to talk to any strangers or let anyone into the house, she still lets the old woman (who is the Queen in disguise) into the house and places her trust in her. This also happens in the original fairytale, in fact she lets the Queen get the better of her not once but three times, so it could be said that Disney should not be criticised for this. However, Disney have altered this series of events and it is the way in which she is tempted by the Queen in their adaptation of the fairytale that is a matter for concern. The Queen is aware of Snow White's dreams of romance so she plays on this to get the better of her. When she tries to tempt Snow White with the poisonous apple, she says that

“Apple pies are the way to men's hearts”

She again tries to persuade her to bite the apple by saying that if she makes a wish and takes a bite, the wish will come true, knowing full well what Snow White wishes for,

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2. The second part of the report deals with the management of the company and the measures taken to improve its efficiency and productivity.

3. The third part of the report describes the various projects and initiatives undertaken by the company during the year, and the progress made in each of them.

4. The fourth part of the report discusses the company's financial performance and the results of its investments and operations.

5. The fifth part of the report deals with the company's social and environmental responsibilities and the measures taken to address them.

6. The sixth part of the report discusses the company's future plans and the strategies to be implemented in the coming year.

7. The seventh part of the report discusses the company's relationship with its stakeholders and the measures taken to improve it.

her Prince to come. The lure of romance leads to the temporary downfall of Snow White at the hands of the disguised Queen. Snow White's only ambition is to get her Prince. In a review of Disney's *Snow White* on its re release a few years ago, in Sight and Sound magazine, the reviewer wrote:

“ In these very different times, it looks embarrassingly patriarchal in the most painfully conventional way, with Snow White like the big passive beauty queen she is, cheerfully slaving away for her seven men and wishing for the one she loves, rather than a fulfilling career and a relationship based on equality” (Sharman 1994, p.56).

The portrayal of the character of Cinderella in Disney's 1950 feature length film is not as extreme as the character of Snow White, but she is not exactly a radical change for Disney either. Like Snow White, Cinderella is based on Hollywood actresses of that era (see Fig.2). Elizabeth Bell thinks she is reminiscent of the sophisticated elegance of Grace Kelly (Bell 1995, p.110), while Robert Ebert likens her to the 'Draw Me' girl with that “bland post-war” look of the 1950s (Ebert 1987, p. 1).

Not unlike Snow White, Cinderella is portrayed as a really sweet and wholesome girl, full of optimism that someday her wishes will come true while in the meantime making the best of her misfortune. This is very apparent when the film opens as she breaks into song about how a dream is a wish your heart makes, wishing herself out of her situation, albeit an unfortunate situation, as slave for her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. The active roles in *Cinderella* are played by the animals that initially were additional characters used to ‘flesh out a thin story’(Ebert 1987, p.1) but as it turns out, they are the characters that contribute mainly to the plot while Cinderella is busy living in a fantasy world. The little mice do everything to help and protect Cinderella just like the dwarfs do for Snow White. They risk their lives to get material to make a dress for Cinderella so she can go to the ball, and sacrifice themselves again towards the end of the film as they manage to get the key for the cellar door behind which she is locked. She is then able to try on the glass slipper and marry the Prince. Another negative aspect about this film is that it is only through magic, the intervention of her fairy godmother, that Cinderella manages to get to the ball and meet the Prince.

A movie also entitled *Cinderella*, which was made in 1986 by Erika Beckman, recreates the old tale into a contemporary manner that I found quite interesting. The







Figure 2: Cinderella







film itself basically retells the ancient Cinderella story; the heroine gets the dress, attracts the Prince, loses the shoe and has to be home by midnight. She is beautiful, well dressed, compliant, and is therefore marriageable, i.e., marketable. Like the original tale, she fails to be home by midnight three times, however, in this film she is taunted because of this. Eventually though, this Cinderella sees that the Prince is interested more in her outer packaging than in her self and so she finally rejects both the Prince and the dress which stands for the conventionalised image of woman and femininity.

“Disney’s *Cinderella* suggests to girls that in order to get their prince they must be beautifully packaged. It is precisely this ideology that Beckman’s *Cinderella* dramatises, exposes, finally rejects” (Dika 1987, p.32).

This movie is a feminist re-enactment of this famous story that reflects modern times and modern women. It is representative of popular culture today just like Disney’s *Cinderella* is a reflection of popular culture of the 1950s. Cinderella cannot possibly go to the ball in her rags; she has to be beautifully packaged. It is a very image-conscious ideal.

Even the mice are divided into their specific gender roles. This is very apparent in the scene in which they are making Cinderella a dress for the ball when one of the female mice says to Jacques and Gus, the male mice,

“Leave the sewing to the women...You go get the trimmin”.

Jacques and Gus then embark on a big adventure to get the ‘trimmin’ for Cinderella’s dress and bravely succeed, living up to their gender defined roles as male-heroes, courageous and daring.

Princess Aurora in Disney’s 1959 feature length film, *Sleeping Beauty*, is extremely similar to the character of Cinderella. There is nothing very unique or individual about Disney’s early heroines; nothing about their personalities sets them apart from each other and because of their ‘too good to be true’ characters, they seem rather aloof.

“One of the main criticisms one can make of the early Disney films is that the heroines were rather bland and ineffectual” (Preston 1996, p.1).).



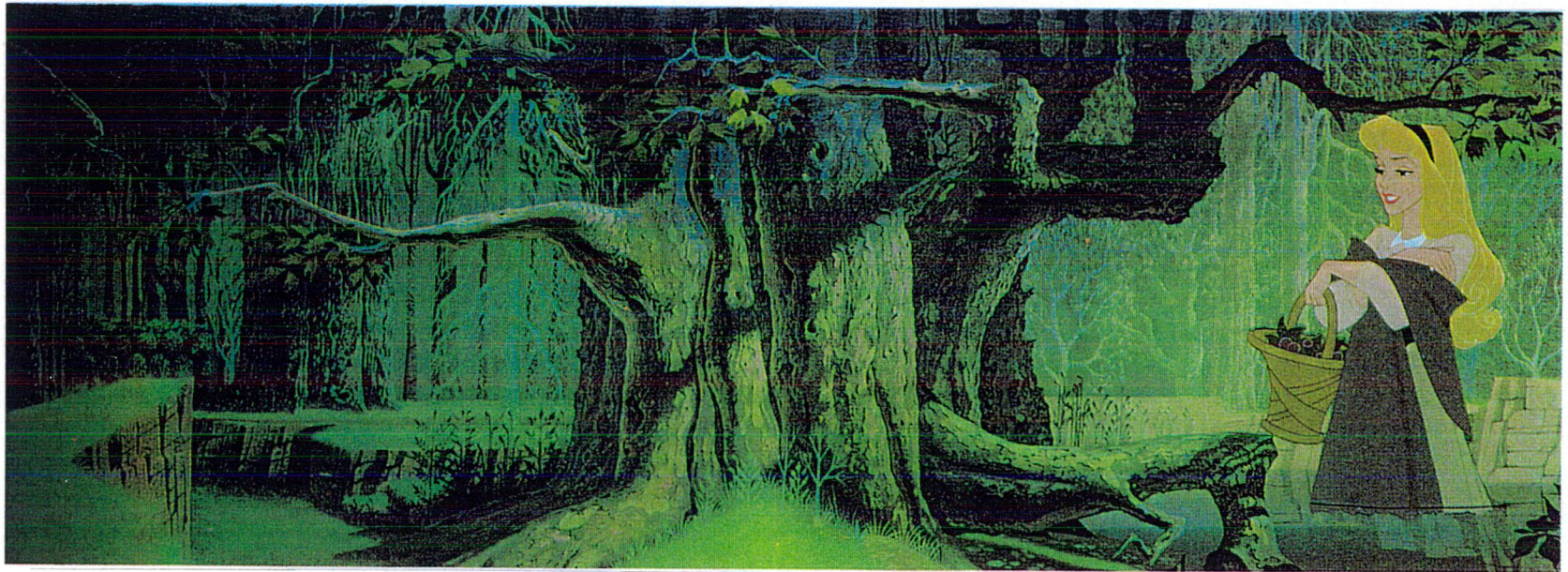
The only aspect about Princess Aurora that sets her apart from the previous two heroines is that she is regarded as Disney's most beautiful heroine (Solomon 1989, p.198; qtd in Bell 1995, p.110).). She bears a very strong resemblance to the contemporaneous Barbie doll with her long, flowing golden locks, big blue eyes and ultra-feminine figure (see Fig.3). Like her predecessors, Aurora does nothing to move the plot along. It is the magic created by the three good fairies and the deeds of Prince Philip that provide all the action in this Disney film. Prince Philip first falls in love with Princess Aurora or Briar Rose (as she is called before becoming aware of her royal status) as she is dancing with the woodland animals in the forest. That is another common theme running through the three early Disney films. Snow White befriends the woodland animals whilst fleeing from the wicked Queen; Cinderella has a great rapport with the animals and the birds in the house and out in the yard; and again Briar Rose is seen singing and frolicking with the animals in the forest. Disney is portraying these heroines as gentle and caring girls and uses the animals and birds to emphasise their gentle nature, increasing their femininity. This feature makes them come across as maternal, nurturing characters, qualities that indicate that they will be good mothers, therefore making them more marriageable. All three Disney heroines, Snow White, Cinderella and Princess Aurora are reflections on society of the '30s, '40s and '50s, a world before the feminist movement of the '60s. These teenage 'heroines' are all representations of the conventional 'good girls' of their era who were 'seen and not heard'. These female characters are also reflections of females that appeared in Hollywood cinema of that time, where, according to Laura Mulvey, the woman as the passive character was featured for the gaze of the male spectator and tended to halt the plot instead of contributing to it.

"The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 1975, p.309).

Despite the fact that the main female characters in these three early Disney films are supposed to be the central characters, their presence is almost insignificant to the storyline while the male characters become the most important in the plot.







**Figure 3:** Princess Aurora



Elizabeth Bell, in her essay on the construction of Disney's animated women, states that these 'heroines' as she refers to them, were modelled on the bodies of ballet dancers and that this aspect makes them appear more upper class. According to Bell, these early Disney characters have a regal, superior quality about them and they are rendered as

"too much of a princess" (Bell 1995, p.111).

This is quite true, particularly when one looks at the depiction of Briar Rose in *Sleeping Beauty*. Despite the fact that she is totally unaware of her royal status as Princess Aurora and has been brought up as a peasant girl, she moves with the grace and elegance only of a princess. The same can be said of Cinderella, who before being whisked away by her Prince Charming into the world of royalty, moves as if she is above the status of a servant girl and is destined for royalty and knows it. Bell goes on to say that the ugly stepsisters are animated in stark contrast to Cinderella. Their strides are always,

"heel first, bent knee exaggerations of incorrect ballet postures and movements" (Bell 1995. P.112).

While Cinderella is portrayed as being so feminine and graceful, Anastasia and Drizella are portrayed as everything that is unfeminine and unattractive in popular culture (see Fig.5). They are portrayed as inferior characters to Cinderella, and they seem to reflect working class origins in contrast to the proud Cinderella. In fact, in the original Brothers Grimm fairytale, the stepsisters were physically beautiful, yet inwardly ugly. Class and wealth issues are very apparent in these early Disney animations, a reflection on American society of that era. *Snow White* was made in the latter years of the Great Depression, while *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* were made in the post-war years, a time when the American economy wasn't at its best; issues of status and elitism seemed to be important in the minds of Disney studios back then. Bell seems to be saying that Disney are sending out the message that females should be formal and move with the grace of a ballerina in order to be marriage material.







“The Disney apparatus buys into and sells the twofold fantasy of little girls who want to grow up to be princesses *and* ballerinas”(Bell 1995, p.111).

However, there is a suggestion that Disney were beginning to break away from their preoccupation with class and wealth in *Sleeping Beauty*. Prince Philip falls in love with Briar Rose, the peasant girl, oblivious to the fact that she is really a princess. In response to his father’s refusal to allow him to marry a peasant girl, Prince Philip says,

“Now father, you’re living in the past...this is the fourteenth century!”

Prince Philip accepts Briar Rose as a peasant girl, in her peasant-like clothes, whereas in *Cinderella*, the Prince never sees her in her rags; he only knows her from her outward appearance that was created by magic in the first place.

In her essay, Bell divides the early Disney women into three categories; the heroines i.e. Snow White, Cinderella and Princess Aurora; the femme fatales i.e. the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*, Lady Trumaine in *Cinderella* and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*; and the third group, the Grandmothers i.e. the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* and the three good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*. Firstly, the main female characters do not deserve to be referred to as ‘heroines’. They don’t do anything constructive enough or heroic enough to achieve this title; yes, they are portrayed as good, decent people but they don’t do anything to help themselves out of their situations; they are portrayed as martyrs. It is the male characters that are portrayed as heroes because they are the ones who rescue the ‘damsels in distress’.

However, what Bell says about Disney’s cruel women resembling the femme fatales of Film Noir movies of that era is quite true. The Film Noir femme fatales were portrayed as totally evil with no redeemable qualities whatsoever. Disney’s Wicked Queen, Lady Trumaine and Maleficent, according to Bell, were drawn on the likes of popular femme fatales of that era such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich who ooze sexuality and are typical evil temptresses. Bell states that production notes describe the beauty of the Wicked Queen (see Fig.4) in *Snow White* as

“sinister, mature, plenty of curves”(Finch 1975, p.66; qtd in Bell 1995, p.116).





Figure 4: The Wicked Queen (*Snow White*)







Bell goes on to say that these Disney villains portray middle age as a time of bitterness, jealousy, vengefulness and vanity; the vanity is symbolised by their adornment of jewellery and cosmetics and by the Queen's magic mirror in *Snow White*. The femme fatales of Film Noir were always punished at the end of these movies for their deeds and as Bell states, Disney do the same with their evil women. Middle age, according to Disney is a dangerous time in the female cycle and these women pose a threat not only to the likes of Snow White, Cinderella and Princess Aurora but also to the whole of society. They cause upheaval in nature, thunder and lightening, rockslides, ocean storms and cliff precipices. For instance, in *Snow White* after the Wicked Queen, disguised as the witch, poisons Snow White with the apple, and in *Sleeping Beauty* when Prince Philip confronts Maleficent (see Fig.6), the sky turns a disturbingly dark colour and vicious storms occur. These women represent the destructive female, the female who possesses power and intelligence. She is a threat to males because, as these Disney films show, she will use her power to do evil rather than good. The conventional, ideal woman at the time these three films were created was the nurturing, caring, passive woman; it wasn't normal for females to possess such power as the Disney *femme fatales*, hence the upheaval in nature. However, what Bell didn't take into consideration was the fact that these three early Disney films are adapted from fairytales where the villains, whether male or female, were always punished for their evil actions in the end anyway; it is all part of the moralistic aspect of these stories, where good always overcomes evil.

Bell goes on to say that the femme fatales are the only female characters rendered in close ups. They are the only ones who face the camera directly, creating a more threatening atmosphere as they meet the spectator's gaze.

'The face and background fade to black and the eyes are painted as gold, glowing orbs, narrowing tightly on the intended victim/heroine'(Bell 1995, p.116).

There is a scene in *Cinderella* that is a prime example of this aspect. When Lady Trumaine (see Fig.5) realises that Cinderella was the mysterious girl dancing with the Prince at the ball the night before, she is overcome with anger and jealousy. This is strongly suggested in her eyes as they stare after the unsuspecting Cinderella as she waltzes up the cellar stairs; her eyes are reduced to narrow slits like the eyes of a







Figure 5: Lady Trumaine, Cinderella's Stepmother (centre) with the ugly step sisters.



Figure 6: Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*)





spiteful cat, full of evil and venom. Bell states that Disney's evil women were based on predatory animals; she quotes Marc Davis, chief animator of Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*:

"She was designed like a giant vampire bat to create a feeling of menace"(Solomon 1989; qtd in Bell 1995, p.117).

For the character of the Wicked Queen in Snow White, Bell states that Disney decreed that for her character, that she be

"a mixture of Lady Macbeth and the Big Bad Wolf"(Finch 1975, p.66; qtd in Bell 1995, p.116).

This predatory quality in Disney's villains heightens their dangerous and consumptive powers over their innocent victims.

Disney have reflected Hollywood cinematic traditions in their representations of women in these three early films; the totally good female and the totally evil female. These two extremes cater for the male viewer in the audience, but leave no place for the female viewer. The female viewer must accept identification with a female heroine, the passive victim, or identify with the aggressive villain. She has no loophole in these films to identify with an in-between and more realistic female.

The sexual powers and authority the Disney femme fatales, as Bell refers to them as, possess, is emphasised even more when compared to the Disney king. Prince Charming's father in *Cinderella* and both Prince Phillip's father and Princess Aurora's father in *Sleeping Beauty* are all very similar in appearance. Bell states that all three are:

"short, stout, balding and blustering"(Bell 1995, p.117).

In middle age, Disney have portrayed these men as physically and symbolically impotent in contrast to the evil women's sexual potency and powers. The traditional Disney king has changed from these early films to the more recent animations

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particularly Ariel's father in *The Little Mermaid* and Pocahontas's father, both of which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

A traditional feature in Disney's animations and one that features in their productions still is the third category of women that Bell outlines, that of the Disney Grandmother. This character appears as the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* (see Fig. 7) and as the three good fairies, Flora, Fauna and Merriweather in *Sleeping Beauty* (see Fig. 8 & 9). Bell describes them as personifications of feminine sacrifice and nurturing. They are depicted as pear-shaped, bubbly old women, who don't wear jewellery or cosmetics; they don't have any lips and they all have either grey, silver or white hair that is usually covered. They contrast starkly with Disney's middle aged women. They protect the young 'heroines' and help their wishes come true, usually by magic. The fairy godmother appears to *Cinderella* in her time of need and helps her get to the ball. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Flora, Fauna and Merriweather look after Princess Aurora and rear her as Briar Rose, a peasant girl in the forest to protect her from Malificent. They live to protect the Princess which is very obvious in the scene where they are trying so hard to make a decent birthday cake and dress for her. They sacrifice their magical powers for sixteen years just to protect Aurora. They are on call, no matter what, and never think of their own needs or wants. The upheavals the 'femme fatales' cause is stabilised by these post menopausal grandmothers whose bodies are non-threatening, unavailable and harmless.

They also provide comic relief in these early Disney films because they're such 'fuddy-duddy's'. The fairy godmother forgets where she puts her magic wand in *Cinderella*, and the good fairies fumble through Princess Aurora's birthday cake and dress in *Sleeping Beauty*. Solomon describes the three good fairies as "dear if slightly befuddled, spinster aunts" (1989, p.198; qtd. in Bell 1995, p. 119). In animating Flora, Fauna and Merriweather, he noticed that,

"when old ladies move, they bounce like mechanical toys. They paddle, paddle, paddle on their way. They stand straight and their arm movements are jerky. Their hands fly out from the body. The reason for this is that they're afraid they will fall" (Thomas 1991, p.105: qtd in Bell 1995, p.119).

He found the models for the three good fairies while







Figure 7: The Fairy Godmother (*Cinderella*)





“at the supermarket observing rotund old ladies, usually at the dog-food counter”(Thomas 1991,p.105: qtd in Bell 1995, p.119).

The fact that these good Disney women have never produced children nor are they biological mothers or grandmothers to the heroines, makes their sacrifices even more selfless and pure. Their character depictions suggest that they missed out on motherhood because their ‘Prince Charming’ didn’t come in their day. They’re now making up for it by being maternal figures for the heroines, guiding and helping them along the road to their dreams.

The nurturing grandmother figure also features in the form of Prince Eric’s housekeeper in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), as Mrs. Pots in Disney’s 1991 feature length animation, *Beauty and the Beast*, and as Grandma Willow in *Pocahontas*. The three main female characters in these films don’t have a mother, so it seems Disney put the grandmother figure in instead. A grandmother also features in *Mulan*, however *Mulan* is different from the others in that both her parents feature in the film as well as her grandmother, this I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.





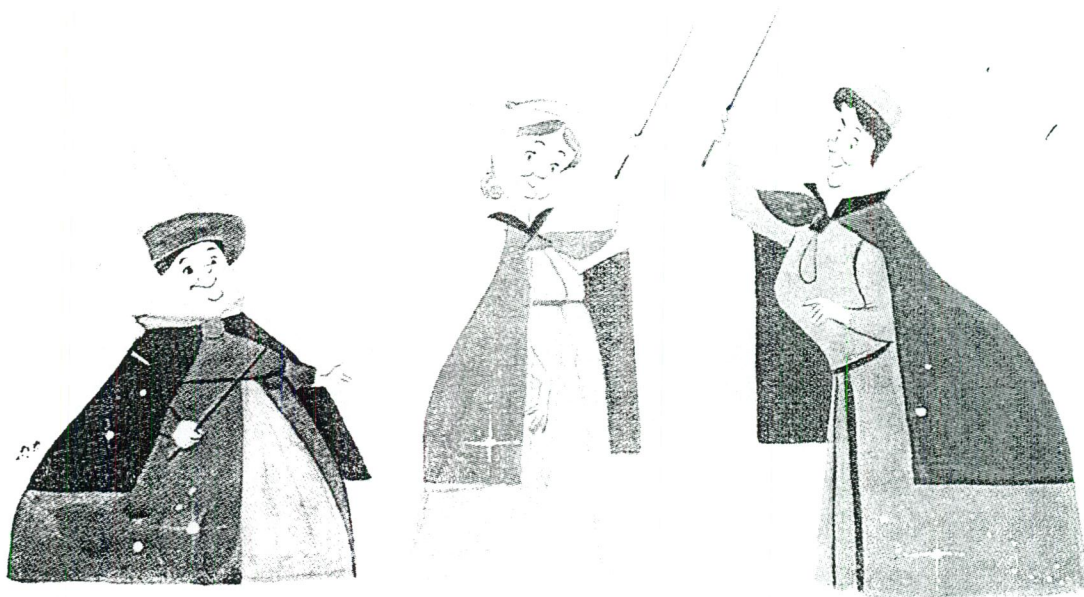


Figure 8: Flora, Fauna and Merriweather, the three Good Fairies (*Sleeping Beauty*)

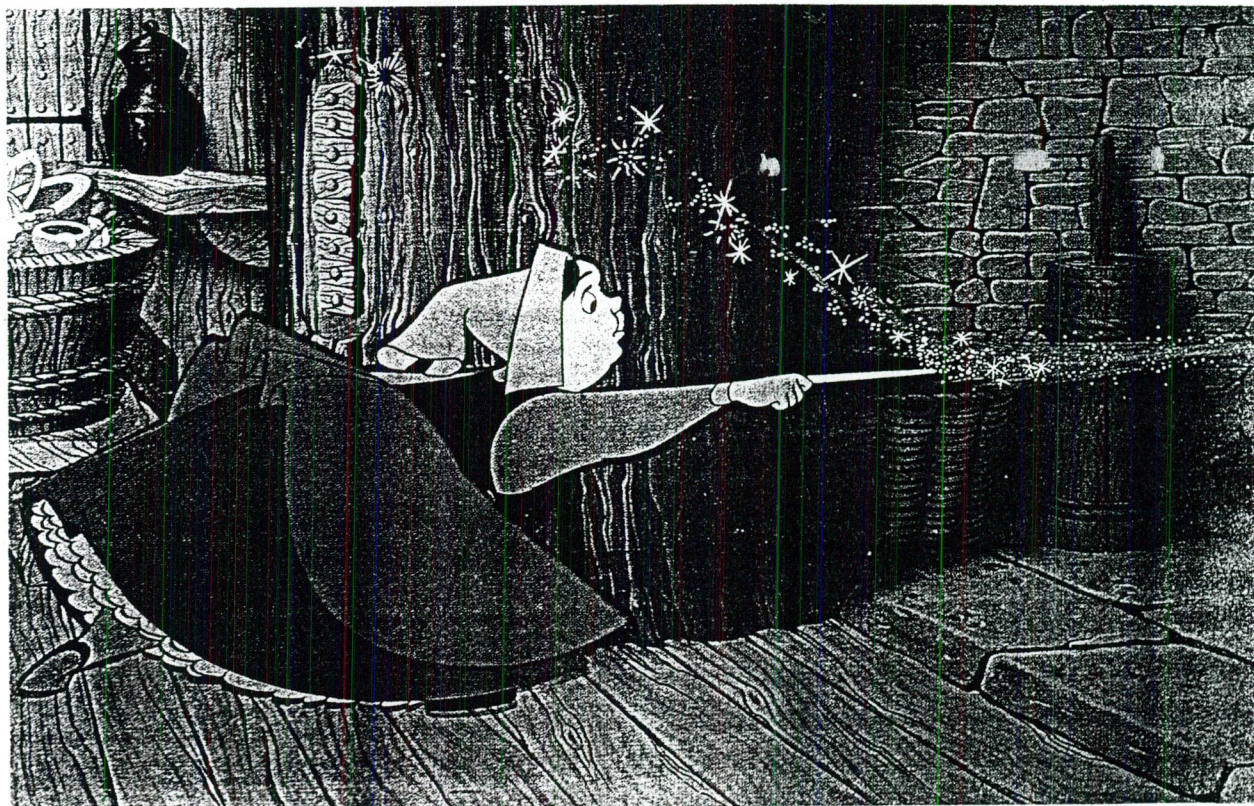


Figure 9: Merriweather (*Sleeping Beauty*)





## Chapter 2: the Recent Disney Films

The Disney animators today are struggling to break from the old traditions of Disney story-telling of the past and are trying to move with the times as regards ethnic and class issues, as well as gender issues. In this chapter I will discuss three of Disney's modern animated feature length films, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), in terms of how they have portrayed their female characters. I will look at how they have tried to reflect women today in contrast to how they have represented women in the past, to see if they have really broken with tradition. I will take each of these three films and analyse them individually, starting with the earliest of the three, *The Little Mermaid*.

### The Little Mermaid

In terms of music, style of animation and script, *The Little Mermaid* is undoubtedly a progression for Disney; however, the influence of early Disney mentality is still there. In fact, the 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty* influenced the design of many of Disney's recent creations, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Swan Princess*, as well as *The Little Mermaid*. This film, like *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, is also adapted from a fairytale, this time by Hans Christian Anderson. Disney have altered the original tale like they did with the other three films, which again interferes with the moral of the story; (which I will discuss in Chapter 3). Like the early films, *The Little Mermaid* also contains the same marriage plot with the ultimate union of the main character and her Prince. Another common feature this film has with its predecessors is the evil female villain, this time in the form of the Sea Witch, Ursula.

Ariel, who is the main character, is undoubtedly a change from the traditional Disney heroine in both appearance (see Fig. 10) and especially in character, particularly at the beginning of the film. She has much more personality and character than her predecessors even in her gestures and movements. She doesn't have the rigidity and the formality of Snow White, Cinderella or Princess Aurora. The construction of Ariel







Figure 10: Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*)



Figure 11: Ursula, the Sea Witch (*The Little Mermaid*)



was also drawn from the body of a dancer, but not from a ballet dancer like the others (Bell 1995, p.114). Ariel, like the others, is a reflection on society's ideas of what constitutes feminine beauty. Bell thinks she is

“reminiscent of Farrah Fawcett, the wholesomely little pin-up girl of the 70s”(Bell 1995, p.114).

Ariel is portrayed as quite a flirtatious character. In the first frame of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is seen peering over the mast of a shipwreck, her breasts covered by the horizontal mast. This heightens the audience's curiosity as to whether she is wearing any clothes or not. Then later in the film, when Ariel finds herself with legs and no clothes, she dresses and poses in an old rag while a wolf whistle can be heard in the background music. Pauline Kael describes Ariel as a

“teenage tootsie in a flirty seashell bra”(qtd in Bell 1995, p.114).

She is depicted as a giggling, teasing sort of character but at least she is portrayed as a girl with personality and not as a bland and passive as her predecessors.

Her adolescent curiosity and rebelliousness are immediately apparent at the opening of the film. She is late for her singing debut, a coming-of-age ritual ordained by her father, King Triton who is ruler of the undersea world. Instead she is seen roaming about the underwaters collecting forbidden human objects from sunken ships. She is fascinated by the human world, but her father forbids any contact with the human world whatsoever. Her curiosity and her rebelliousness towards her father are particularly obvious in her song, “Part of Your World”. The song evokes her desire to run, walk and dance just like a human; she wants mobility. She is hungry for knowledge and she expresses this through her song as she caresses a book that she cannot read. She comes across as being a very independent and ambitious young girl who feels that the human world will offer her better opportunities and more freedom. She sings, “Bright young women, sick of swimmin’, ready to stand.” She is standing up to her father and unlike the characters of Snow White, Cinderella or Princess Aurora, she is the one who moves the plot along, who uses her initiative to achieve her goals. She is the protagonist, the ‘action’ woman.





Ariel sets the tone by singing about all the objects she has found on the shipwrecks, but by themselves they don't mean anything to her, unless she actually gets the chance to use them in context. When she then goes on to sing, "I want more", she means she wants a way of life where all these objects make sense to her. It is a similar situation to adolescents learning in school; none of what they learn makes sense until they are out in the real world and putting their knowledge to use. That is what *The Little Mermaid* is all about; a young girl's coming-of-age and her entry into, or access to the adult world.

According to Laura Sells in her essay entitled 'Where Do The Mermaids Stand?' there are two worlds in *The Little Mermaid*; the one on land which is symbolic of the adult world or "white male system", and the world under the sea which represents the world outside that system. Those who are a part of the white male system are oblivious to anything outside this system, while those outside the system are fully aware of the dominant culture as well as their own marginalised culture (Sells 1995, p.177, 178). The point Sells makes is quite valid in relation to this film. The sea world in *The Little Mermaid* is a less-developed, marginalised culture despite its sophisticated décor, and is invisible to the human world on land i.e. the white male system. Sebastian the crab is stereotypical of this underdeveloped world with his West Indian accent. He even has the facial features of a person of colour, and he and all the other undersea creatures are portrayed as spending their days singing and dancing to calypso music. He claims in his song 'Under the Sea',

"we got no troubles...up there dey slave away...it's hotter down under de water".

He is singing this to Ariel to try and convince her that the underwater world is a much better place to be. According to Sebastian, it is a place where no work needs to be done. He cannot understand the need for progress and development.

"He confirms the silly notion of happy darkies whose desires are simple, natural and easily met"(Livingston 1989, p.18).





Ariel leaves before the end of Sebastian's song; she is determined to rise above her less-developed world. She is portrayed as having a great hunger and desire for more than just playing music and basic living. She wants progress, development in both her surroundings and in herself. According to Livingston, Ariel is a

"Promethean figure, whose desire for knowledge, carnal or otherwise, projects her beyond the 'less-developed' undersea world to which her natural mermaidly body is perfectly suited"(Livingston 1989, p.17).

Disney still haven't entirely broken away from the class issue as shown here, and which was strongly suggested in their previous films. In Ariel's song 'Part Of Your World', the human world in which Prince Eric belongs is reinforced as the superior world through the song's language and imagery. She yearns to be "up there"; Sells describes her as an "upwardly mobile" mermaid (Sells 1995, p.179).

From the time Ariel rescues Prince Eric from drowning, her character changes. Her ambitions and goals for knowledge and independence and progress fizzle out and she is almost immediately changed into another starry-eyed Disney heroine with little ambition beyond getting her Prince. When she continues to sing 'Part of your World' after meeting Prince Eric, the whole meaning of the song is changed. She refers to 'your' world as *his* world now and not the human world in general anymore. Disney's portrayal of Ariel gives a great first impression as she is depicted as a feisty, determined young woman, full of life, but then she is transformed into just another lovesick teenager. However, an important characteristic in Ariel, which sets her apart from the other Disney heroines, is the fact that she uses her initiative to act upon her desires. Instead of waiting around for Prince Eric to come and find her, she makes sure that she goes about finding *him*. This means entering the human world or white male system which is not easy and it turns out to be very costly for Ariel. She seeks help from the Evil Sea Witch, Ursula, and ends up physically mutilating her own body by exchanging her mermaid fins for a pair of human legs. She only acquires these legs after she gives up her voice to Ursula. Because Ariel is entering the white male system, she cannot enter it with the use of her voice,



“Like so many women who enter the workforce or any other ‘male sphere’, Ariel wrestles with the double-binding cultural expectations of choosing between either voice or access, but never both”(Sells 1991, p.179).

Very often in today’s world, it happens that a successful career woman who is assertive in the workplace, is branded a “bitch”, whereas her male colleagues who are assertive are well respected. It is a double standard. Disney are suggesting that it is unnatural for a woman to be a part of the male world; Ariel has to mutilate her own body, has to go beyond what is natural to her, to gain access to it.

Her entry into the male habitat is made more acceptable because of the loss of her voice. She will be ‘seen and not heard’ in the male world. Her marriage to the Prince also makes her entry more acceptable because she is fitting into her gender-defined role as a woman, since marriage suggests motherhood. Indeed, even the artefacts she collects from shipwrecks are largely domestic items such as eating utensils, furniture and so on, and this has led to much criticism because Disney portray Ariel as “little more than a happy housewife in the making” (White 1993, p.188).

“Her goal becomes the start of a new family that marriage symbolises”(Livingston 1989, p.20).

Ursula, the sea witch (see Fig. 11), is a threat to the white male system because she is aggressive and possesses power. This Disney evil woman was created as an octopus, which is very effective in her exaggerated gestures and enveloping movements. Physically, she differs from previous Disney ‘femme fatales’ in that, despite the fact that she is strong and robust, she is grossly overweight in contrast to her evil predecessors who are drawn as curvy women in the prime of their womanhood. The early Disney King, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, is drawn to be much more inferior to the middle-aged women both physically and mentally. The roles are reversed in *The Little Mermaid*; King Triton {see Fig. 12 (A)} is constructed so that he is visibly strong with his muscled torso and booming voice. He is portrayed as being far superior in middle-age to Ursula with her excessive use of lipstick and jewellery to cover up the tell-tale signs of old age. Disney seem to be trying to reflect the modern middle aged woman through Ursula, the sort who undergo cosmetic surgery to try to slow down the ageing process.







Figure 12 (A). King Triton, Ariel's father (*The Little Mermaid*)



Figure 12 (B). Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas' father



Figure 12 (C). Grandma Willow (*Pocahontas*)





A real 'first' for Disney is the featuring of a drag queen i.e. Ursula, in their animations. According to the directing animator, Ruben Acquire, Ursula was modelled on the drag queen Divine, while Pat Carroll did the voice and ethos behind her character (Sells 1995, p.183). The character of Ursula destabilises gender because she is a cross-dresser. According to Sells, she teaches Ariel all about gender performance and female sexuality. She convinces Ariel that her voice will be useless in the human world and that all she needs to get the Prince to fall in love with her is body language. In her song to Ariel, she tells her to:

"...never underestimate the importance of body language".

Her performance during this song resembles that of a camp drag show, with Ursula beginning the performance with hair mousse and lipstick. She "wiggles and shimmies in an exaggerated style" as she teaches Ariel that gender is performance (Sells 1995, p.182).

Ariel absorbs all this in and learns well; for instance, when she meets Eric on the shore after gaining her human legs, she winks at her undersea friends, as if she is role-playing or acting.

Ariel is using her sexuality now to gain her Prince because she lacks the use of her voice; her feminine sexuality, as Ursula taught her, is her power now. Ursula symbolises female power. She is aggressive, monstrous, everything a conventionalised woman should not be. We learn early on in the film that King Triton, Ariel's father, banished her from his realm. Ursula stands up to him just like Ariel does but in a different way. If Ursula were a woman in the workplace, she would be regarded as "an aggressive bitch". She is punished for standing up to male dominance. Both Ariel and Ursula have to leave Triton's kingdom;

"it seems that females have to leave the castle if they're going to stand up to the king as an equal"(Livingston 1990, p.20).



Ariel stands up to and defies her father rather bravely at the start of the film in order to strive towards her dreams, but towards the end of the film, there is a notable difference in her. She is a much more subdued person; all her spunk and fire dies when Ursula dies it seems.

“The film implies that the sense of freedom necessary for exploration and accomplishment must finally be curbed if one is to become a woman” (White 1993, p.183).

In the end, it is her father who decides whether she can enter the ‘white male system’ and she basically has to ask *him* for permission to marry Eric. Disney is suggesting that,

“marriage is the way to answer all the questions raised by the ‘bright young women’, who are ‘sick of swimmin’ and ready to stand up to their fathers”(Livingston 1990, p.20).

By ‘standing up to their fathers’, they don’t mean by being independent and self-reliant, but by getting married. In the end, Ariel is literally passed from one man to another, from Triton to Eric.

A positive message that is conveyed in this film, and a feature that differentiates Ariel from previous Disney heroines, is that her physical beauty is not enough to win Eric’s heart. She cannot speak, therefore she cannot articulate her inner-self. She is all surfaces and no depth. Eric goes to kiss her, but only after Sebastian the crab has put together a chorus of little animals to sing about how we think with our bodies when we fall in love (Livingston 1990, p.19). Ursula tries to teach Ariel that all she needs for Prince Eric to fall in love with her is to put on a performance and use plenty of body language. Even Sebastian tells her what way she should ‘act’ to get Eric’s attention:

“We got to make a plan to get that boy to kiss you. You got to look your best. You got to bat your eyes...like this. You got to pucker your lips...like this.”

However, this doesn’t work for Ariel and she learns that the inner person is more important than outer surfaces. Eric ends up almost wed to Vanessa (really Ursula in disguise), who *does* possess a voice, Ariel’s voice, which she wears in a shell around





her neck. Scuttle, the bird, swoops down and shatters the shell just in time before the marriage ceremony ends, which frees Ariel's voice. The film comes to an end with Ariel in Prince Eric's arms, a continuation of the traditional Disney happy ending of wedding bells. The original fairytale ends completely differently, the importance of which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

This film, being the first of the new batch of animated features for Disney since Walt's death in 1966, sends out rather mixed messages. In some ways the character of Ariel is a positive role model for young girls, in that she is portrayed at the beginning of the film as an independent and ambitious girl. However, Ariel's ambitious characteristic fizzles out as the film goes on and Disney revert back to portraying her like her predecessors who only want a Prince in their lives. Another confusing message this film sends out is that the inner person is more important than outward appearances, yet Ariel doesn't grow or develop in character satisfactorily enough in the film to be ready for married life. Fairytales are all about character development, yet in the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*, this particular character is not developed properly and she still gets her Prince in the end.

## **Pocahontas**

“ The stereotype...is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated”  
(Bhabha, 1983 p.18).

When Disney's *Pocahontas* was released in 1995, critics described it as being too “politically correct”. It contains themes that are considered ‘trendy’ (and worthy) in today's society such as conservation, environmentalism and even interracial relationships. However, Disney's portrayal of the Native American community particularly its women, trades on very old stereotypes and because it is so “politically correct”, it comes across as quite patronising to the Native American community.

The racial issue was never problematic for Disney in its early animations; the Disney heroines were always north European in looks with their fair skin and delicate features. Since *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, Disney have had unprecedented success





with films such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994) among others. However, Disney have also been severely criticised on several occasions for their portrayal of various ethnic groups. When *Aladdin* was released in 1992, there were complaints from the Arab American groups about certain imagery and lyrics in the animation (Kim 24, Sharkey 22; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.90). African American critics also drew attention to the fact that the three hooligan hyenas in *The Lion King* (1994) were thinly disguised black and Hispanic characters who seemed to be living in a jungle equivalent of an inner-city ghetto (Sharkey 22; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.90).

With *Pocahontas*, Disney decided to tread more carefully and sensitively in its portrayal of the Native American community by hiring a group of Native American consultants to contribute to the film's creation. They also cast Native American performers to do the voice-overs for the main Indian American roles, including the former American Indian Movement activist turned actor, Russell Means, who would play Chief Powhatan. The Disney corporation obviously had good intentions but because the studio was only willing to partially incorporate its consultants' advice, the film reflects a white man's fantasy of the ideal Native American woman in the form of Pocahontas. On the other hand, Disney maintain that,

“in every aspect of the storytelling, the film-makers tried to treat Pocahontas with the respect she deserved and present a balanced and informed view of the Native American culture”(Pocahontas 34;qtd in Edgerton. Jackson 1996, p.90).

Throughout this section, I will discuss how Disney have portrayed Pocahontas as a representative of Native American women and why they have failed in getting away from old stereotypes.

*Pocahontas* is quite similar to *The Little Mermaid* in terms of its heroines, and also, like King Triton, Disney have portrayed Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas' father, as a strong, well-built middle-aged man with a very muscular physique [see Fig.12 (B)]. However, unlike *The Little Mermaid* and previous Disney animations, *Pocahontas* is based on a true story and not a fairytale. It is the first time Disney have adapted a film from history, albeit a historic story clouded in myth. Pocahontas was a ten to twelve



tear old girl and met John Smith, a mercenary in his thirties during the pivotal time of first contact with English colonists. There are different variations on the story but what is true is that she met Smith in 1608, was probably responsible for trading between the settlers and her people, was kidnapped and raped by the English but later married a tobacco planter named John Rolfe. She had a son in 1615 and sailed to England the following year. She impressed a lot of people there, including the king and queen and attempted to return home but became ill on the voyage and had to return back to England where she died of smallpox at the age of twenty two (Kilpatrick 1995, p.36). This dark and tragic story is not what Disney films are usually made of, which is why Disney's *Pocahontas* is almost a different story entirely.

Disney's depiction of Pocahontas is as a very voluptuous young woman who rather resembles an Indian Barbie doll (see Fig.13). (In fact, during the film's promotion, Mattel produced a Barbie-like Pocahontas doll (Broeske 8; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.92).

Glen Keane, the film's supervising animator drew on four successive women for inspiration; he researched the original paintings of the real Pocahontas but wasn't impressed; he also drew on the Native American consultant Shirley 'Little Dove' Custalow McGowan; the twenty-one year old Filipino model Dyna Taylor, and finally, white supermodel Christy Turlington (Cochran 24; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.95). The animators started out basing her on Native American faces but ended up with the more Anglicised look of Turlington. They also gave her an extremely curvaceous figure with huge breasts, a tiny waist and sexy hips and legs. Keane says,

"Some people might see her as sexy, but she's not Jessica Rabbit. I think she looks rather athletic" (Kilpatrick 1995, p.37).

Leslie Felperin describes her as

"tall, muscular and graceful, can steer rapids as well as Meryl Streep in the *River Wild* and has a face so scrupulously uncaricatured she lacks cheekbones and any more than a pair of nostrils" (Felperin 1995, p.57).

Mel Gibson, who did the voice of John Smith, puts it more bluntly when he says,





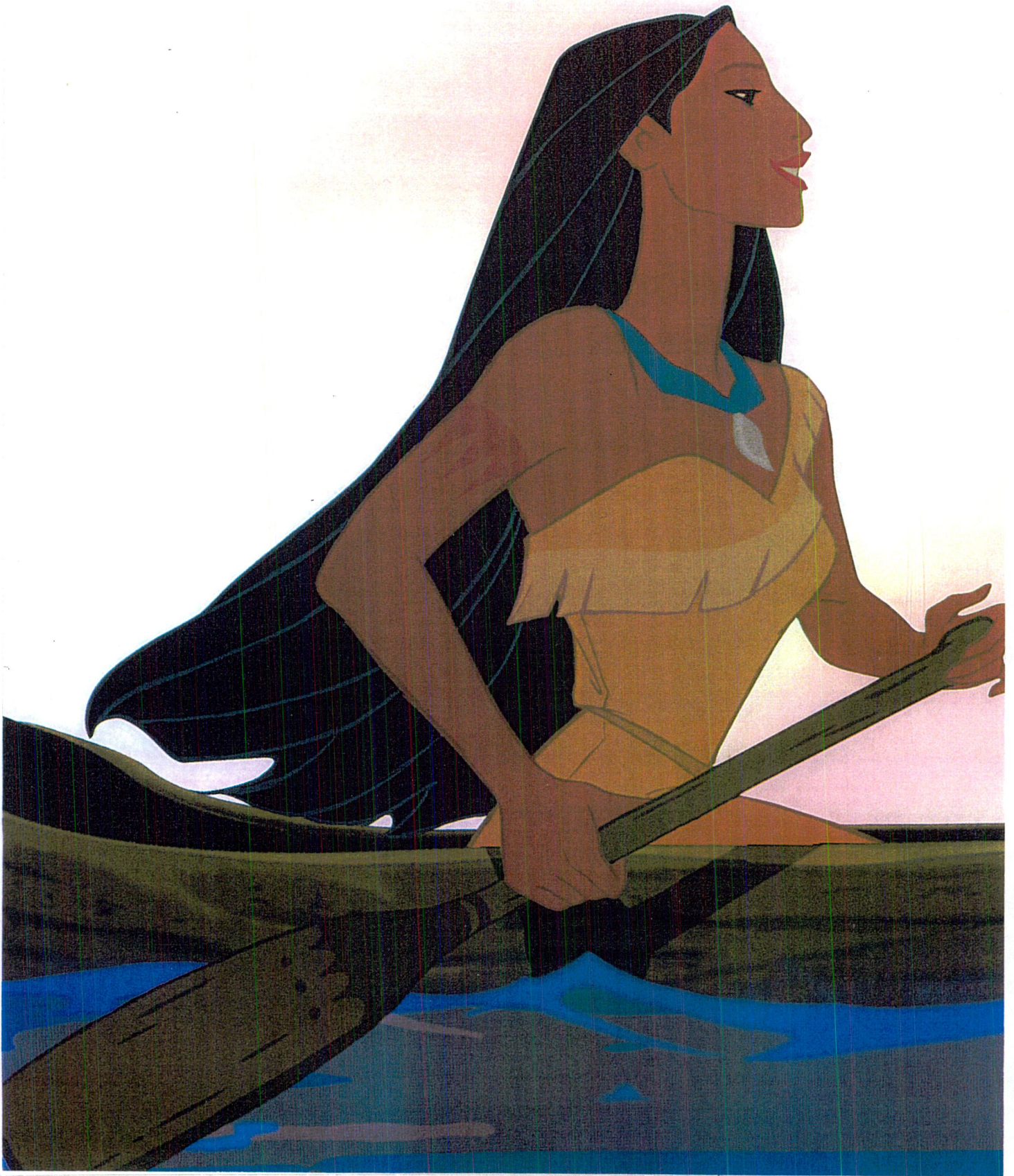


Figure 13: Pocahontas





“She’s a babe” (Kilpatrick 1995, p.37).

Essentially, Pocahontas is a white man’s creation of a white man’s fantasy. It is not surprising that all the key decision makers and supervising artists on the film were all white males. She is a prime example of woman as sexual object to be looked at by the gaze of a male audience, and in this case her male animators.

Pocahontas’ physical appearance is a reinforcement of an old stereotype of ethnic women who physically mature a lot sooner than white females of the same age. Pocahontas in reality was no more than twelve years of age, however, Disney have portrayed her as a mature woman; a girl of twelve years couldn’t possibly have those dimensions. Shirley “Little Dove” Custalow McGowan, one of the Native American consultants for the film, on seeing the early rushes, said,

“My heart sorrowed within me...Ten year old Pocahontas has become twenty year old Pocahontas” (Kilpatrick 1995, p.37).

Another very old stereotype that lies in the undertones of this film is the sexuality of the Native American girl. Pocahontas falls for the first white man she sees i.e. John Smith. She makes herself available to him in the film in her figure-hugging, off-the-shoulder dress.

“It has been argued that the representation betokens a woman ripe for rape” (Sarder 1996, p.18).

She is portrayed as the typically sexually charged woman of colour that has appeared in Hollywood movies of the past century. These movies, mostly Westerns, depict the Native American women as exotic, silky-haired Indian women who sacrifice themselves and their tribes for their white loves. Pocahontas’ love at first sight for John Smith represents the sort of crush, starry-eyed adolescents have on pop-idols or film stars such as Mel Gibson coincidentally.

The stereotype of the Indian woman goes much further back than Hollywood films. ‘Coloured’ women have always been libidinous according to Western ideals,



“from Amerigo Vespucci’s accounts to Margaret Mead’s now discredited reports of sexual licence among Samoan girls” (Sarder 1996, p.19).

The stereotype of the Native American girl as the wild woman is also brought about subtly in this film. Pocahontas’ graceful movements resemble that of a cat or a tiger. She has an animal-like quality about her, making her appear wild and in tune with nature. This is another tradition that Disney have represented; the idea of the natives as barbarians, untamed and uncivilised or “savages” according to Western conventions.

“those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts” (Bhabha 1983, p.25).

Disney keep an old tradition alive in this film with their depiction of the Grandmother figure. In this film, she is Grandma Willow the talking tree [see Fig.12 (C)] who throughout the film provides Pocahontas with advice and words of wisdom.

Pocahontas bears a lot of resemblance in character to Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. Like Ariel, Pocahontas is portrayed initially as a spunky heroine, however, like Ariel, this feistiness goes and she is transformed yet again into the traditional Disney heroine whose purpose is to further the interests of love. Pocahontas is also the driving force of the movie. Like Ariel, Pocahontas is the protagonist; she makes things happen and is not passive, which is a positive thing. She has the same rebellious streak in her that Ariel has, in that she stands up to her father by refusing to marry Kocoum. She comes across as being an individual, a person in her own right. Like Ariel, she wants more than her world has to offer; she wants progress, new experiences. She is ambitious and wants something more fulfilling than what marriage to Kocoum has to offer. In her song ‘Just Around the River Bend’, she sings of how the answer to her dreams is waiting just around the river bend. Pocahontas then finds her answer in John Smith, another man. It seems that, like Ariel, Pocahontas’ dreams and ambitions turn into a sole dream of gaining the love of a man. In the history of cinema, the reason for the presence of the female character was more often than not to be the love interest for





the male character and the very rare time that she would contribute to the plot, it would only be for her male love. As Budd Boetticher has put it:

“What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance”(qtd in Mulvey 1975, p.309).

Both the characters of Ariel and Pocahontas are reflections of this traditional feature in cinematic history; essentially they feature as protagonists only because of the male characters in their surroundings whom they are in love with.

Pocahontas idolises John Smith before he is even aware of her, but a positive aspect is that unlike previous Disney heroines, she presents herself to him. She shows confidence and initiative in making herself known to him. However, despite this being a step forward for the Disney heroine, it is two steps backwards in breaking the tradition of the portrayal of the Native American woman because she is seen as rampant with sexual desires.

“Instead of the passive, tractable, native awaiting the coloniser, the native is yearning to make herself sexually available to her destiny, the coloniser” (Sarder 1996, p.18).

She shows wisdom and knowledge when she sings to John Smith about living naturally in tune with the earth, however these qualities in her are overshadowed by the fact that she flirtatiously sings to him in an off-the-shoulder mini dress. She sings ‘Colours of the Wind’ to him in response to his remark that her people are “savages”, and her words could be so much more powerful if the sequence didn’t look so much like an adolescent seduction game. Disney have again reduced their heroine to having no ambition beyond getting her man. The animators seem to have an obsession with romantic fantasy when they turn a tragic, historic series of events into a fluffy fairytale fantasy. Peter Schneider, one of the key executives in re-establishing the Walt Disney company as the premier animation studio in Hollywood, had been considering an animated version of *Romeo and Juliet* for several years. With *Pocahontas*, he got his *Romeo and Juliet* plot by telling a story about





“two separate clashing worlds trying to understand each other (Pocahontas 36, qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.91).

However, the traditional Disney happy ending in this film hides the horrible truth concerning the slaughter of so many Native Americans at the hands of these colonists. It is as if they are trying to rewrite history in order somehow to make amends for what is known as the American Holocaust. As with the Disney adaptations of fairytales, Disney's *Pocahontas* will be regarded by most as the definitive version of history. Another significant way in which Disney's version is dangerous is because in reality Pocahontas saved Smith's life out of sheer courage and bravery. According to Disney, her only motive for saving his life is because she was in love with him. This Disney heroine is essentially no different to her predecessors because she acts purely because of the man in her life and not for her own self-fulfilment.

Irene Bedard, who provided the voice of Pocahontas, found herself at odds with several Native American women writers when she remarked,

“When I was growing up, I wanted so much to be Barbie. Now some little girl might want to be Pocahontas. That's a step in the right direction” (Vincent ES; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.96).

Firstly, the whole concept of Barbie is totally negative. The only reason Bedard and other young girls like her wanted to be Barbie is because they wanted to be attractive to the opposite sex and to other little girls. Being like Barbie, physically beautiful with lots of materialistic things, means being more socially acceptable to the majority of young girls unfortunately. Surely then the Barbie ideal shouldn't be reinforced like Disney have done even if they thought that they were being politically correct by making her a 'coloured' Barbie character. Pocahontas, the *real* Pocahontas, should be regarded on a much higher and respectable level than as just a Barbie doll. This real life person who led such a tragic life after doing something so admirable, should be looked upon as much more than a physically attractive woman as Disney have portrayed her. Martina Whelshula and Faith Spotted Eagle countered Bedard's sentiment by stating that Disney's Pocahontas is,



“part of the Barbie culture. A culture that relies on sexism, capitalism and lookism...where a woman is elevated only by her appearance...where a heroine lives only for approval from men” (qtd; in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.96).

## MULAN

“*Mulan* is either the last of the old or the first of the new’ (Carty 1998, p.3).

Until *Mulan*, the Disney animators clearly couldn’t portray modern women in an accurate light. *Pocahontas* was a major disappointment and set-back for the corporation in 1995 when it was severely criticised for its portrayal of Native American women as well as other controversial issues. A totally different approach was taken in the making of *Mulan*, the first notable change being the fact that it is the first Disney feature that was produced at their studio in Florida. Another more significant change is that the producer of *Mulan* is a woman, Pam Coats. [The Disney studio began to change tactics in the production of *Beauty and the Beast*, which was the first Disney tale/screenplay written by a woman (Bell 1992, p.114)]. Another ‘first’ for Disney with this film is that the romance or marriage plot takes second place, whereas before it was always the main theme in any Disney animation where the female is the main character. Family honour is the main theme of *Mulan* while there is only a suggestion of marriage towards the end of the film. It is also the first Disney movie to feature an Asian woman as its heroine, which is rare in Hollywood films as well as animated films.

Disney adapted the screenplay for *Mulan* from an ancient Chinese legend that dates back centuries before the birth of Christ. It is about a young Chinese woman named Mulan who dresses up as a boy to fight for China and ends up a hero.

Disney based the construction of Mulan (see Fig.14) on the style of traditional Chinese paintings and artwork, and while most of the background is computer generated, Mulan and all the other characters of the film are beautifully hand-drawn. Unlike Pocahontas, Mulan doesn’t have the proportions of a *Playboy* model; instead she is petite and just as feminine without having to be busty and voluptuous. She is a girl on the brink of womanhood, and is portrayed as being quite vulnerable and







**Figure 14:** Mulan





unconfident at the beginning of the film. This is evoked when she sings of how she wants to “see something worthwhile” when she looks in the mirror. As the film is set over 2000 years ago, the society of that time and its attitudes naturally have to be depicted. Marriage and motherhood were the only options for Chinese women in those times. Mulan is at the age where she is seen as being ready for marriage, but she has to go to the area’s top matchmaker to learn the skills she needs to marry well. In the sequence in which she is being prepared to meet the matchmaker, her mother and grandmother are seen covering Mulan in Geisha make-up and dressing her in beautiful clothes. Like Cinderella, Mulan has to be well packaged and marketable for the reward of marriage. However, unlike Cinderella, Mulan rejects this whole concept, albeit unconsciously. She fails to impress the matchmaker because she is so clumsy and she ends up going home to her family in disgrace. She is clearly not ready for married life. Her dejection and lack of self esteem come across when she sings,

“When will my reflection show who I am inside?”

She is trying to define herself against cultural stereotypes. She wants to find her true self and her own path in life, but her society tells her she is unworthy if she is not marriageable. She is under pressure to be someone she isn’t from the society in which she lives. Mulan doesn’t bring honour to her family by marrying a wealthy, handsome man; she brings honour to her family in a completely different way; her own way. Bravery and courage become the main theme of this film, not the marriage theme for a change.

When the Emperor, facing an attack from the Huns, conscripts one man from every family, Mulan’s ageing father loyally accepts his duty. However, Mulan knows that her crippled father will definitely die if he fights, so being an only child, she decides to do something about it. She slices off her long hair, steals her father’s armour and marching orders, and enlists in the army as a young man called Ping. She takes a daring risk in doing this but she wants to salvage her family’s honour above anything else. Like Ariel and Pocahontas, Mulan stands up to her father but unlike them, her motives are not for the love of a “handsome hunk”, but for her father’s well being.



She doesn't do it to be macho or to prove something to her male counterparts either but for her own personal and commendable reasons.

Despite the fact that Mulan is disguised as a boy, learns to act like a boy and learns to fight in combat like a boy, she doesn't reject her womanhood or her femininity. Disney haven't portrayed her as stereotypical "butch" girl or as a threatening force to society like they portray Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, simply because she's tough. When she first sees Li Shang, the handsome drill instructor, she naturally has to hide her feelings for him, yet she doesn't suppress or reject these normal female impulses either. She also doesn't let her feelings for him take over from her original motives for being there in the first place; she doesn't pine for him like the love-sick Disney heroines that have gone before her like Snow White and Ariel. Mulan's first priorities are protecting and saving her family and her country. Romance takes second place.

Mulan also breaks the stereotype of females being the "weaker sex". She can fight just as well as her fellow soldiers but she shows that females can be the stronger sex when it comes down to a battle of wits. She uses her female instinct and intelligence to outwit the Huns by creating the avalanche, thus protecting herself, her fellow soldiers and her country.

Mulan also ends up saving Shang's life (see Fig.15); she is not the "damsel in distress" character that needs rescuing by a male. She can look after and fend for herself. At the end of the film, it is Shang who has to accept Mulan on her terms or not at all. She is very much her own person, a very independent, feisty, heroic individual who, as the film suggests, would be successful and happy in life with or without Shang; as she has proved, she has no need to depend on him or any man.

It is actually the male characters in this film that are portrayed as "the weaker sex". First of all, Mulan's father is depicted as an ailing man who because of his physical frailties cannot possibly go to war. The men Mulan trains in the army with are depicted as men at their worst. They are, as Madeline Molis describes them,

"a motley crew of misfits" (Molis 1998).







Figure 15: Mulan saves Shang's life



Figure 16: Mulan disguises as a boy and fights for her country





In the song, 'A Girl Worth Fighting For', they fantasise about a woman who can cook and serve, while Mulan responds by saying,

“What about a woman with thoughts of her own?”

However, like Mulan they grow stronger in character as the film develops. Shang is portrayed as strong, powerful and decisive; all the qualities of a good leader, yet he also shows the tender, romantic side of his character. Disney are trying to portray a contemporary, new age, sensitive man in Shang, who ends up being the one who has to be rescued by Mulan.

This film could be criticised for the fact that the heroine *has* to dress up as a man to be successful and to bring honour to her family if not doing so by getting married. However, she is not the only one in the film that has to cross-dress to succeed. Her fellow soldiers disguise themselves as concubines or drag queens to save their country also. *Mulan* destabilises gender roles with characters of both sexes cross-dressing to protect their country, thus shattering old gender stereotypes. Also, because the film is set in ancient times, it wouldn't be convincing if Mulan didn't have to disguise herself as a boy to protect China. It is a film based on an ancient legend but Disney have incorporated contemporary values to it.

Another criticism that could be made about this animation is the fact that Mulan herself rejects the Emperor's offer to serve on the council, an opportunity to become China's first career woman. Instead she decides to return home to her family which is all very well, but when Shang shows up, there is a suggestion that Mulan will end up marrying him and becoming a dutiful housewife and mother. After all her bravery, which proves that she can easily survive in a male dominated world, she chooses to live the life that is expected of a Chinese woman of that era. She paves the way for other young women by doing what she does and then it seems that she throws it away to become what wasn't for her in the first place and what is traditionally expected of her. Disney could have gone that little bit further, bold and daring as it may seem, by portraying Mulan as a successful career woman on the council and wife and mother.



That way, Disney would really be reflecting contemporary society and modern independent women. This film suggests that women shouldn't have the choice to have a fulfilling career *and* be wife and mother; it suggests that women should go back to their only supposedly 'rightful' role in life; as housewife and mother. After all Mulan shows what she is capable of, the ending suggests that she will just end up being Shang's shadow in the background. Although the romantic plot is not the main plot, as I have mentioned before, Disney still haven't been able to move entirely away from it. However, the positive aspect is that the film doesn't end in a traditional Disney fairytale finale with wedding bells etc; there is only a subtle hint that there will be marriage. Also the fact that Mulan makes the decision herself and no other character does it for her is a positive thing. She is a very admirable character who risks her life and her freedom to protect her loved ones. Disney develop the character of Mulan extremely well from the beginning to the end. She grows and matures from being a very unconfident young girl into a self assured woman who, as the film suggests, will always do what is right for her, be it marriage or something else. Her father likens her to the late blossom,

"When it grows it will be the most beautiful of all".

*Mulan* is both the last of the old *and* the first of the new kind of Disney animated movie. It is the last of the old because it still contains slight problematic gender issues such as Mulan not opting for the career-choice and the fact that the love-story element is still there. However, it is also the first of the new because as a character Mulan is a radical breakthrough for the Disney heroine; her motives are inspired not by romantic love but by her father's plight, and she seems to be the first female character that deserves the title 'heroine'. Jenn Shreve states that Disney have at last moved with the times and that they are,

"finally realising there's a world in which women want more than a prince, and that people, even animated people, are made up of more brushstrokes than those that can be nailed down to one colour, gender, or particular way of life" (Shreve, 1998).





### Chapter 3: Disney's Adaptations of Fairytales

The three early Disney feature length animations which I have discussed in Chapter 1, *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* are all adapted from fairytales. *The Little Mermaid*, one of their more recent films is also adapted from a fairytale. Fairytales in general are dark, morbid tales containing adult and mostly destructive themes, not the kind of thing Disney animations are made of. To cater for younger audiences, Disney changed certain aspects, indeed important aspects of these stories to suit the big screen. Fairytales were written as moralistic tales, telling of the triumph of good over evil. They were written at a time before childhood as an institution was recognised. Before the eighteenth century, the perception of a child was that he/she was born with original sin. Since Industrial Revolution times however, efforts have been made to protect childhood as adults now see it as a time of complete innocence. Because society over the past century and a half has built such a protective fence around childhood, corporations like Disney feel it necessary to alter products such as fairytales to make their films seen more acceptable for children and their parents. Gearing their films towards the younger audience means bringing in more money from the selling of merchandise like toys and other promotional objects. However, according to Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, these ancient fairytales are important because they help children cope with harsh reality; they help children to recognise pain or violence and to find a release from it. That is the reason why fairytales have always been so popular because children can relate to them and the characters in them. Because Disney have changed details and left out certain events in these tales, the whole moral aim of these tales is interfered with. The characters of these tales are altered so that as a result, Disney's main female characters are depicted as quite different to those of the original tales. In chapter 1, I criticise the early Disney film versions of fairytales, but in this chapter I wish to clarify that it is not the actual original tales that I am objecting to, but the adaptations of them to the screen. If Freud's theories on the power of the unconscious mind of the child are correct, and Bettelheim's theories on the importance of fairytales are correct, then where do Disney's adaptations of these tales stand and what kind of messages





are they sending out to children? Throughout this chapter I will compare the original fairytales to Disney's versions of them to try and answer this question.

In the original tale, *Snow White* by the Brothers Grimm, the character of Snow White is not described as being wholesomely good and sweet as she is depicted in the Disney version. She is by no means perfect, but a normal adolescent girl. She only spends about two days at the dwarfs' home in the Disney version, whereas in the original tale she spends several years hiding from the Wicked Queen. It is during this time that she grows and matures and works through her problems. In most fairytales like Snow White, according to Bettelheim,

"the hero has to search, travel, and suffer through years of a lonely existence before he is ready to find, rescue and join one other person in a relationship which gives permanent meaning to both their lives" (Bettelheim 1976, p.201).

Snow White needs this period of development, which she doesn't have in the Disney version of the tale.

Snow White also shows that she can be just as vain and preoccupied with her appearance as the evil queen is in the Grimm's tale. She is tempted three times by the Queen in disguise as opposed to only once in the Disney version. First she is tempted with laces, then a comb and lastly the apple. They all represent the temptations that adolescents are faced with while growing up and the apple that puts her to sleep represents the loss of innocence and the end of childhood. Disney's Snow White never goes through these temptations and difficulties, which are important in the maturing process.

"Without having experienced and mastered these dangers which come with growing up, Snow White would never be united with her prince" (Bettelheim 1976, p.211).

In the original tale, while Snow White is lying in the glass coffin, three birds visit her over a long period of time. Firstly an owl which symbolises wisdom, secondly a raven, which symbolises mature consciousness, visits her and lastly, a dove, which represents love, visits her. This deathlike sleep is her final period of preparing for maturity as she gains these three virtues from the birds. They do not feature in the Disney version,



which is very significant because Snow White doesn't develop fully as a person; just because she has reached physical maturity, that doesn't mean that she is intellectually and emotionally ready for adulthood, as represented by marriage.

In the original tale, the prince carries Snow White off in the glass coffin, which causes her to cough up the poisonous apple and come to life, ready for marriage. This doesn't happen in Disney's version, which is significant, because the coughing up of the apple symbolises her departure from immaturity and childhood and her arrival into adulthood.

"Many fairytale heroes at a crucial point in their development fall into a deep sleep...each reawakening or rebirth symbolises the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding" (Belleheim 1976, p.214).

The Grimm's version of *Snow White* concentrates on her character development and each detail unconsciously represents the finding of her inner self. Disney omitted some very important details, which means that their Snow White doesn't develop fully as a character. She is all surfaces and no depth. She has external beauty and according to Disney, that is all she needs to survive in a male dominated world.

In the Grimm's version of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the hero again undergoes a deathlike sleep, which represents a period of inner growth and maturation. The moral of their tale is all about sexual maturation and how one has to be ready to have the sexual relations that marriage represents. The pricking of her finger symbolises menstruation and the sleep that it induces, represents adolescent departure from the outside world and the anxieties of adolescence. The kiss of the prince awakens her to womanhood and the world becomes alive to her again. It is her sexual awakening. Until then she is not ready; in the story, many suitors try to get to her but a wall of thorns protects her. After a hundred years, the wall of thorns suddenly turns into a wall of flowers, which opens to let the prince in. She has reached physical and emotional maturity and is now ready for love, sex and marriage.

The Disney version of events is quite different. Aurora meets and falls in love with the prince before she pricks her finger; she is portrayed as being ready for love already





The evil fairy tries to capture the prince to prevent him from rescuing her; she is the only obstacle in the way between them. There is no wall of thorns to represent her lack of maturity, there are no other suitors and she doesn't sleep for a hundred years, which represents her phase of inner growth and development. Again, the objective of the tale is interfered with and confused messages are being sent out through the Disney version.

With *Cinderella*, there are two versions of the tale, Perrault's version and the Brothers Grimm version. Perrault's Cinderella takes no action in getting to the ball; it is the fairy godmother who tells her to go and this is the version that Disney decided to portray on the screen. In the Grimm's version, Cinderella is very much her own person and the main theme again is maturation and character development.

In the Grimms version, Cinderella's father features and the story tells of how one day he goes to the fair and asks his two stepdaughters and Cinderella what presents they would like. Cinderella asks him to bring her back a twig, while her stepsisters ask for material things like clothes and jewellery. When he brings the branch home, Cinderella goes to her mother's grave and plants it there. She cries so much that her tears water the branch and it grows into a beautiful tree. She goes there three times a day and cries and prays and each time a white bird with magic powers lights on the tree. Cinderella creates something positive, the tree, out of something negative, her grief over the loss of her mother. In Perrault's version and therefore the Disney version, the tree is replaced by a fairy godmother, who appears suddenly and unexpectedly out of nowhere which robs the story of some of its deepest meaning.

In the Grimm's tale, Cinderella begs to go to the ball but her stepmother will only allow her to go if she empties a dish of lentils into the ashes and picks them out within two hours. She gains a magic helper in the white bird and succeeds in her task. However, her stepmother repeats the demand and this time she requires Cinderella to empty two dishes of lentils into the ashes and pick them out within one hour. With the aid of the birds, Cinderella succeeds and tells them to pick out the good lentils and do away with the bad ones by eating them. This is symbolic of Cinderella's sorting out good and evil. She turns the impossible task demanded of her by her stepmother into a





moral task of good versus bad and eliminates the bad. She then goes to her mother's grave and asks the tree to scatter gold and silver on her.

"This suggests that hard work and difficult tasks must be performed well before Cinderella is worthy of a happy ending" (Bettleheim 1976, p.260).

Cinderella leaves the ball of her own accord in the Grimms' version and not because she has to as happens in the Disney version. She hides from the pursuing prince each night and on the third night, loses the slipper.

"Cinderella's evading of the prince tells that she wants to be chosen for the person she really is and not for her splendid appearance" (Bettleheim 1976, p.264).

Also it is the prince who seeks out Cinderella with the slipper whereas in Perrault's and the Disney versions, it is a gentleman working for the prince who is sent out to look for her. In these versions, the prince never sees Cinderella in her rags whereas in the Grimm's version, he is undismayed when he sees her in her dirty work clothes because he recognises her inherent qualities, not just her external appearance. Cinderella doesn't want to be chosen on the basis of her appearance created by magic; she wants the prince to accept her for who she really is. By the prince handing her the slipper to put her foot into, he symbolically expresses that he accepts her the way she is, dirty and degraded.

There are a lot of moral messages brought about in the Grimms' *Cinderella*; that surface appearances tell nothing about a person, that if one is true to oneself, one wins over those who pretend to be what they are not and that good will be rewarded and evil punished, also that one must be able to work hard and distinguish between good and evil and to develop as a person. Because Disney opted to depict Perrault's version of the tale, these important messages are not evoked and ideals that a woman should be passive and well packaged for marriage are brought about instead.

*The Little Mermaid* is the last fairytale that Disney adapted into a feature length animation. Hans Christian Anderson wrote the original story in 1837. The tale is



regarded as being a reflection on Anderson's lack of social acceptance in the aristocratic circles that offered him patronage.

"It is a personal narrative of the pleasures and dangers of passing" (Sells 1991 p.177).

It is also about a young girl's coming of age and of her pleasures and dangers of passing into the adult world. The Disney version is quite different to Anderson's original story. In the original tale there is no traditional happy fairytale ending, in fact it ends quite tragically. The mermaid dies because she fails to win the prince's love. The sea witch allows the mermaid to become human, but she can never return to her mermaid state and if the prince marries another person, the mermaid's heart will break and she will die. When she dies, the daughters of the air grant her the ability to earn an immortal soul through three hundred years of service. Like the Grimms' tales, Anderson's story is all about character development and the passage from childhood to adulthood. Whereas the Disney version is basically all about how the mermaid can get her man and keep him. Trites states,

"Anderson offers women several paths towards self-realisation, so the message to children is much more far-sighted than Disney's limited message that only through marriage can a woman be complete" (Trites 1990/91, p.150; qtd in Sells 1992, p.180).

When the mermaid receives her human legs for the first time, in Anderson's version she feels incredible pain as if a sword goes through her body and every step she takes feels as if she is walking on sharp knives. The pain is so intense that her feet bleed. She is experiencing growing pains as she passes from being a young girl into a woman. The blood represents that of menstruation, which is symbolic of adulthood for females. This period of growth and maturation is not easy and Anderson doesn't portray it as being easy. Disney, on the other hand, omit the pain factor, making Ariel's passage relatively trouble free; she still gets her prince in the end but not by her own doing but because 'Daddy' says she can. She hasn't grown or developed fully as a person.

The mermaid in Anderson's version wants to grow up too fast. She sacrifices her natural fins for legs and sacrifices seeing her family again so that she can pass into the





human world i.e. the adult world. She's impatient and mutilates her own body to become apart of it. She does what is unnatural to her and her surroundings so that in the end she has to compensate. When the prince marries the girl whom he thinks saved his life, the sisters of the mermaid come to the surface and offer her a knife. They tell her that the sea witch has offered to return her to the sea only if she kills the prince. Here, the mermaid has to decide between good and evil even if it means that it could be fatal for her. She is now in the adult world and so she has to make an adult decision. Eventually she decides not to take the prince's life for her own selfish means and instead she throws herself into the sea. The daughters of the air then offer her an immortal soul if she does three hundred years of service. She enters the adult world before she develops fully as a person; with her human legs she is physically equipped for the adult world but the only way she acquires her legs is by unnaturally mutilating her own body. She is then taken away from the adult world until she is emotionally and psychologically ready for adulthood. The moral of Anderson's story is that the passage from childhood into adulthood is never easy, so don't try to enter it too soon because it can be destructive if one is not ready for it. Ariel, in Disney's version, passes into the adult world with ease, not because she is mature enough for it or because she is independent and can look after herself, but quite the opposite; because she is dependent on her physical beauty to win the prince, and because she is dependent on her father to allow her to be with him.

"Gone is the pain of acquiring legs, the implicit female bonding between the mermaid and the bride, the story of the acquisition of the soul" (White 1993, p.1880).

The reason why it is so important to emphasise the differences between the Disney versions and the original tales is because it has come to the stage where the Disney fairytales are the ones that the majority of people recognise as the definitive versions. *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* were all created at a time when their depictions of females were widely accepted, but the fact that these films are re released for every new generation of children is cause for concern. Also the fact that they are portrayed on screen makes them more powerful and influential. They still haven't lost their magical touch and are still beautifully animated, however, their themes are dated, old-fashioned and extremely patronising to contemporary women





who want more in life than a prince to whisk them away. Fairytales themselves contain themes that are dated because of the fact that they date back centuries ago, but at least their female characters show initiative and they develop into strong characters. Also, not all fairytales have the theme of 'boy rescues girl'. According to Bettelheim,

"...there are probably equal numbers (of fairytales) where the courage and determination of females rescue males and vice-versa" (Bettelheim 1976, p.227).

Disney only chose the ones where the male rescues the female, the 'damsel in distress' syndrome.

It seems that in trying to make their animations more suitable for children by omitting the darker edges of these fairytales, Disney are in fact sending out even worse messages to children by their portrayal of what a woman should be. Who knows what a child is thinking when watching things like this?

"...every child is metabolising his/her experiences in very different and unpredictable ways" (The End of Childhood, BBC 1994).

What I am sure about is that girls relate to the female character in a book or film while boys automatically relate to the male character. I disagree with Bettelheim when he says that,

"...children know that, whatever the sex of the hero, the story pertains to their own problems" (Bettelheim 1976, p.226).

For instance when Pocahontas was released, it was considered a girl's film among boys:

"Boys don't want to go to a girl picture" (Shapiro and Chang 57; qtd in Edgerton, Jackson 1996, p.92).

Therefore, in watching these Disney fairytales, girls could pick up the wrong signals of what society expects of them because these Disney heroines are considered to be good role models for young girls.



## Conclusion

In discussing these six Disney animated features, a common pattern or structure can be found running through almost all with the exception of *Mulan*. All of the others contain a theme of a wish that is always fulfilled at the end; the thing that all the main female characters in these films wish for basically comes down to romance and marriage. The transformations of western folktales into animated films, *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, created the Disney Empire.

“With the logo ‘Walt Disney Pictures,’ (Walt) Disney wrote his name and ownership on the folk stories of women, creating indelible images of the feminine”(Bell 1995, p.108).

The Disney corporation did the same with *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*. With *The Little Mermaid* they again adapted it from a fairy tale and made it their own. With *Pocahontas*, they took history and rewrote it to make it their own regardless of how the Native American community would feel towards it, all for the sake of the romance plot and the happy ending.

The three early films are undoubtedly reflections of the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s in their portrayal of the main female characters as passive beauty queens, and their portrayal of female wickedness in the form of the ‘femme fatale’. Between the late fifties and the late eighties lies a gap of thirty years in which so much changed and developed in society particularly the role of women. When one compares *The Sleeping Beauty* (1959) to *The Little Mermaid* (1989), there is undoubtedly a huge difference between the two in terms of style of animation, music and script. Looking at the way the character of Ariel is depicted at the start of the film, one would say that Disney have definitely moved with the times in their portrayal of women. However the end of *The Little Mermaid* completely destroys any hope of a progression in Disney women as she is married off to her handsome prince exactly like her predecessors. With *Pocahontas*, I think that the Disney animators genuinely set out with the aim of depicting a Native American woman in a fair way, but then got totally carried away again with the romance plot. The influence of Hollywood cinema also played a major





role in this film because Disney animators simply couldn't break away from the stereotype of the ethnic woman as a voluptuous, sexually charged female who idolizes the white male colonist. Up until then Disney just couldn't portray modern women accurately. *Mulan* is undoubtedly a breakthrough for Disney as regards their female character but it took the company a long time to finally realize that marriage isn't the only option for women. With the character of Mulan, Disney have finally come up with a good role model for young girls; she is determined, brave and doesn't rely on the male character for fulfillment. She proves to herself that she can do anything once she puts her mind to it and finds self-fulfillment and reassurance along the way. The main criticism that has to be made of course is the fact that she has to dress up as a male to do this, however, her character otherwise is at the very least a step in the right direction for Disney.

The previous Disney female 'heroines' are negative role models for young girls, so should children, both boys as well as girls be watching these films? The early ones in particular are extremely dated and look patronizing to contemporary women but these films are re released every seven years or so to cater for every new generation of children. If one deprives a child of what is part of their surroundings, and Disney are a major part of children's surroundings by now, then that child won't be exposed to all the options. He/she will never be able to make up his/her own mind in later years as to what path they want to take, career versus marriage, both or something entirely different altogether. They will be subjected to the Disney Empire no matter how protected they might seem anyway because late twentieth century children essentially see life through television. Gender differences will always be there, it is natural for boys and girls to be different besides the obvious physical differences, but only to a certain extent. Gender is undoubtedly encouraged and defined over and over again through different media like toys, teenage magazines, through the electronic media in general and Disney also have a lot to do with defining gender roles. Young girls are conditioned to regard marriage as the ultimate achievement in life because they are approved of by the opposite sex and the Disney films that I have outlined in this discussion reinforce this ideology.





“And here is the danger: even though girls know that happiness in marriage is at best a fifty-fifty proposition, the intoxication of approval and recognition is so heady and so addictive that they will often pursue what they suspect to be a losing battle at the expense of other opportunities for education and employment” (White 1993, p.191).

What the young child, particularly the young girl has to be aware of, is that despite the ideals and messages these films send out, there are other options for women besides only marriage in our society and that sitting around waiting for a handsome prince to whisk her away, is not going to solve life's problems. As Laura Mulvey has stated about the portrayal of women in cinema:

“...it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy.”(Mulvey 1975, p.305).

To conclude, Disney studios are finally beginning to depict women in an accurate way and they very nearly got it right with *Mulan*. Their previous films, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*, patronizing to women as they are, should not be discarded as failures by any means. These films should be used as an example to children of how things used to be in the past and how far women have come in the struggle for equality in this century alone, both in the outside world as well as how they are portrayed in films, even cartoons. People have to look back to look forward and Disney are at last looking to the future and breaking from their past as regards social, ethnic, class and gender issues.



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