

**“The fact that animation operates primarily within the realm of fantasy and for a child audience, does not mean it is innocent of cultural politics”.**

**Discuss.**

“There is nothing in the least childlike about fairy tales” – Marina Warner<sup>1</sup>

Walt Disney was born in 1901 and started his animation career in the 1920s. His films have had a profound impact the world over, being immensely popular with children and ambiguous with critics. Bell states, “It would not be an exaggeration to assert that Disney was a radical film-maker who changed our way of viewing fairy tales, and that his revolutionary technical means capitalised on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo.”<sup>2</sup> Disney worked to promote American idealism, to provide a source of entertainment, to educate children, and ultimately to make money in the process. Disney stated that, “I think of a child’s mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.”<sup>3</sup> Disney thus realised that his films exercised considerable influence on the child’s viewing of the world, their hopes, dreams, thoughts and expectations. For this, and public expectation that he will educate children about good morals and the realities of life, Disney has been debated and criticised over and over again.

Some even go as far as to say that Disney himself has been canonised as the epitome of the ‘promise, value and achievement underpinning the American Dream’, and castigated as ‘ideologically unsound and politically incorrect; a racist

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994, Chatto & Windus Ltd, p. xiv

<sup>2</sup> Bell et al, 1995: 21, cited in Paul Wells, *Animation, Genre and Authorship*, 2002, Wallflower Press, p. 63

<sup>3</sup> Henry. A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared, Disney and the End of Innocence*. 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, p. 17

and a petty, artless businessman'<sup>4</sup>. Disney himself attempted to shake off the assumptions that his work should and would have a moral and educating standpoint. He claimed, "We have but one thought, and that is for good entertainment. We like to have a point to our stones, not an obvious moral but a worthwhile theme. Our most important aim is to develop definite personalities in our cartoon characters...we invest them with life by endowing them with human weaknesses which we exaggerate in a humour way. Rather than a caricature of individuals, our work is a caricature of life."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, regardless of what Disney intends to do, the company has already acknowledged the effect that his animated films will have on the impressionable young minds of the children that view them.

Disney takes the fairy tale and transforms it into every child's fantasy, placing little girls in the roles of a beautiful princess and little boys into their ideal role of the dashing hero prince. To quote from the Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales, the Disney version of the fairy-tale idiom tends to focus on, "the privilege of the innocence, the valorisation of sentiment...a jovial disdain for ugliness or deformity, and a luxuriant, infantilising celebration of the cute."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Disney, it is assumed, will provide entertainment that is universally 'good' for kids; "there is a largely unquestioned assumption that animated films stimulate imagination and fantasy, reproduce and aura of innocence and wholesome adventure, and in general, are good for kids...One of the more persuasive roles is the role they play as the new 'teaching machines'...these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and ideals as more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions and the family."<sup>7</sup> Film not only has dialogue but also uses visuals and music to add to its potential power. Disney's key audience was, and still remains, families with children, to gain the maximum audience possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Wells, *Animation, Genre and Authorship*, 2002, Wallflower Press, p. 77

<sup>5</sup> Walt Disney, cited in *Ibid*, p. 90

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *Animated Films, the Disney Effect and Classical Animation*, James Clarks, Virgin, 2004, p. 27

<sup>7</sup> Henry Giroux, cited in *Mouse Morality, The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, Annalee R. Ward, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 2

In order to capture the American audience's attention, it is necessary to view the films, especially the first film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, in the cultural context in which they were produced. Jack Zipes explains, "The fairy tale was to speak for happiness and utopia in the face of conditions that were devastating people's lives all over the globe. Perhaps this utopian message was why *Snow White and the Seven dwarves* was such a great success in 1937."<sup>8</sup> Europe was on the brink of another world war, and after the horrors of WWI, and the Great Depression of the 1920s, America was lacking in patriotic energy. Disney used this American slump to his advantage, using both the fairy tale and the American Dream to create an on-screen fantasy, a feel-good motion picture that depicted what it really meant to be American, with all its gender and racist stereotypes. The films tended to look back to historical myths and times of princes, dragons, black magic and sword fights. It enabled American viewers to forget their anxiety of the future and focus on the roots of their existence.

Gender inequality was still a major issue in America. Whilst the Suffragettes worked to gain a more level playing field with men in the political and occupational world, the traditional and cultural role for women placed them firmly in the home, with little ambition of being anything other than a wife and mother. These gender stereotypes were enhanced and exaggerated through the animated medium, since to animate is, "to give life and soul to a design, not through the copying but through the transformation of reality."<sup>9</sup> Since reality is transformed, the animators can heighten what they see as 'the realities' of life, creating, as Disney stated, a 'caricature' of the world as it is now, was at the time of the fairy tale, and ideally should be in the future. The ideology of women being subordinate to men is deep rooted in Western culture, leading Henry Giroux to claim that, "the construction of gender identity for girls and women represents one of the most controversial issues in Disney's animated films...female

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*, Routledge 1997, p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Zagreb School of Animators (former Yugoslavia) quoted in R. Holloway *Z for Zagreb* 1972

characters are constructed within narrowly defined gender roles.”<sup>10</sup> Both the story and its depiction on screen trap women within male fantasy. The fairy tales, written long before Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, were tailored to “incorporate Christian and patriarchal messages into the narratives to satisfy middle-class and aristocratic adults...not realising that often in seeking to protect children, we harm them most.”<sup>11</sup>

The subtle statements and messages about gender roles and stereotypes that pervade much of Disney’s work are evidently not only intentional but are the hallmark of the corporation’s work in itself. Children who watch women performing specific tasks, roles, and harbouring a specific aesthetic are undoubtedly going to assume that this is the ideal norm for women, and will grow up with this aim or ideal in mind. As Elizabeth Bell et al reminds us, “Cinema has a way of leaving the images of certain faces and bodies permanently inscribed on our memories...”<sup>12</sup> Bell goes on further to say that, “Anthropocentrism is certainly not a problem unique to Disney, nor is sexism...men are the universal centre,”<sup>13</sup> and it would seem that whilst gender stereotyping is not exclusive to Disney, it cannot be disputed that it most certainly is there within the Disney animated films. Women operate within the patriarchal vision, which, if fitting for the time period in which *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was made and released (1937) would certainly not be fitting towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet it would appear that little has changed between the first film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and the films that appeared in the 1990’s, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).

Employed for *Beauty and the Beast*, Linda Woolverton, the first female screenplay writer, accepted responsibility for her role, claiming, “When you take on a Disney animated feature, you know you’re going to be affecting entire

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Giroux, cited in *Mouse Morality, The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, Annalee R. Ward, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 98

<sup>11</sup> Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*, Routledge 1997, p. 5

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 108

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 128

generations of human minds.”<sup>14</sup> Despite this move to employ women in tasks ordinarily and unquestionably granted to males, the film itself shows that despite the space of over 50 years, females – especially the figures of fairy tales – are still operating within an andocentric cultural system. Henry Giroux asserts that “Disney culture, like all cultural formations, is riddled with contradiction”<sup>15</sup>, and Belle, the central female in *Beauty and the Beast*, is a classic Disney contradiction, being at once both a ‘Disney feminist’ and a male created figure. Annalee Ward explains, “Because of its image as a family-orientated corporation, audiences expect to trust the messages in its films. The films, however, in trying to please the largest audience possible, send inconsistent messages, mixing moral values in ways that offend various people.”<sup>16</sup> The contradiction is unavoidable, in trying to net as much money as possible and to send the messages the people inevitably want to hear.

The gender stereotypes at work in the Disney films are in conflict with the Disney ethos: to provide good wholesome entertainment and education. Yet, and quite rightly, Henry Giroux asserts, “one can’t quite help wondering what is wholesome about Disney’s overt racism towards Arabs displayed in *Aladdin*, or the retrograde gender roles at work in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.”<sup>17</sup> Many other assumptions aside from those of gender typecasting, such as race and age, are present in Disney’s work, yet these will only be touched on briefly, if at all, due to time constraints within this essay. Yet for the sexist and stereotypical models of females that are glaring in the company’s work, Disney must be held accountable; “like any educational institution, Disney’s view of the world needs to be discussed in terms of how it narrates children’s culture and how it can be held accountable for what it does as a significant cultural public

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<sup>14</sup> Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: the Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 113

<sup>15</sup> Henry Giroux, cited in *Mouse Morality, The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, Annalee R. Ward, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 5

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiii

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86

sphere – a space in which ideas, values, audiences, markets and opinions create different public and social formations”<sup>18</sup>.

Female representation, then, can be examined in both the roles she is expected to fulfil and the aesthetic appearance she is expected to maintain. All of the female characters in these films are ultimately subordinate to males and define their power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives. The roles that female characters are trapped in can be defined in terms of ‘Ecofeminism’ – the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, something which is, “intrinsically linked in the history of patriarchal civilisations...for they are both based on andocentric hierarchies and dichotomies, with women and nature objectified for the benefit of the male subject.”<sup>19</sup> The problem lies in the fact that it gives children the wrong impression about both females and the natural world in which we live. Misogyny will never disappear as long as the expectation that females and nature are there to serve males remains. The two roles that Disney females are cast in can be described as love, and domesticity.

Love, or romantic interest, is present within all of Disney’s films. Disney answers the questions of what it means to be human differently for women and men, for the place of romance in human existence is central to the definition of a female but only a part of a male’s life<sup>20</sup>, for romantic love is the fulfilment of a female’s life in the Disney worldview. Both females and males judge each other in the light of cultural expectations – defined and reflected by Disney – and the definition of a heroic male is much broader than that of a female. Romance is not the male’s sole reason for existing, but it is, or should be, the female’s. Snow White sings, “Some day my prince will come...and away to his castle we’ll go...and live happily forever, I know...” This is her wish, her desire, her road to self completion. It is hard to imagine that the prince is wishing the same thing, and yet his role is one of action – he searches ‘far and wide’ and on hearing of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 92

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 126

<sup>20</sup> See: Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: the Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 116

Snow White asleep in a glass coffin, comes to see her. He again is the giver, the actioner in the last scene – he kisses Snow White, whilst she passively accepts it, and him.

Fairy tales “offered gratifications that were...considered feminine: dreams of love...become part of the sane private world of females,”<sup>21</sup> Marina Warner claims. Yet who was it that considered these activities, of love and romance, as ‘feminine’? It is widely known that fairy tales were largely written by males, and thus it is *their* world view that permeates through the narrative. Fairy tales are the perfect ground for promoting patriarchal expectations. Young women are intended to be intent on finding love, a husband, and having children as their sole life plan. This was indeed the case at the time of writing for many of the fairy tales, yet Disney takes this view as its own and encourages this teaching. Snow White is seen as the antithesis of the Queen, her stepmother. Older women who have no man become independent, vain, jealous, and ultimately evil, posing a threat to the patriarchal world system. If women do not need males, and are unwilling to copulate (notice that the Queen is a stepmother, and makes the fatal mistake of having no children of her own, hence she must have no compassion, caring, or love in her heart, the film seems to be saying) then they gain an independence, a sense of their being in their own right, and ultimately discard the use of males in their lives. Disney intended to promote the idea that women and men can mutually benefit from women’s subordination, giving females protection and fulfilment, whilst keeping them firmly in their place.

Snow White falls in love excessively easily, before the two have even spoken, through a song that they sing together. The prince is evidently gratified by her beautiful appearance and sweet singing voice, as well as her desire to find a man, as she sings, “I’m wishing for the one I love, to find me...today”. This only encourages the idea that a male finds ambitious or happily single women unattractive, and vice versa for those women, such as Snow White, who seek love, and love alone.

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<sup>21</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994, Chatto & Windus Ltd, p. xiv

Belle, then, in *Beauty and the Beast*, would ostensibly appear to be an exception to this rule. Disney's renaissance in the 1980's was marked by the birth of a new breed of newly born women. The first two films in the second wave of the Disney canon, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, signal a change in the kinds of experiences of gender that Disney has felt it necessary to address following the transformations of women's roles in post-war America and Europe. Female heroines are now teenagers, who have desires to escape - domesticity in Ariel's case and 'the provincial life' in Belle's. Ariel and Belle are both young women who don't immediately adopt a maternal function in the narrative, and have a physical sexual identity which is lacking in Snow White. However, it is worth noting that the mother is still absent, further suggesting that the rulers of these heroines' lives and hearts are ultimately male, in the form of the father and lover figures.

However, Belle is maternal to her eccentric inventor father, who's 'madness' places him ambivalently as a paternal figure, "allowing him to be infantilised, both by the villagers and by Belle when she puts herself in his place as the Beast's prisoner in a classic piece of maternal self-sacrifice"<sup>22</sup> despite her father's objections. Belle seemingly wants adventure in the masculine world. She reads and is thus cast as intellectual, and for this she is deemed as an outcast. Belle and her father are American immigrants who come to a small provincial town in France and are viewed as 'odd' and 'strange', both for the technological advancements her father attempts to discover, and for Belle's lack of desire to marry Gaston.

Gaston, the 'baddie' in this film, the archetypal male of the 80's. Egocentric, boorish, brainless, and provincial (a Frenchman who has not realised that time has moved on in the West) is the great advocate of married life, whilst Belle is seemingly immune to its attractions. His idea of marital bliss holds little appeal: "Picture this, a rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire, my little wife massaging my feet, whilst the little ones play on the floor...we'll have six or seven...strapping young boys like me". To Belle this is laughable, and fobbing

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<sup>22</sup> E. Bynre & M. McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 1999, Pluto London, p. 68

Gaston off with the line, "I just don't deserve you" she becomes indignant about the expectation that she will marry: "Madame Gaston, can't just see it, Madame Gaston, his little wife – no sir, not me, I guarantee it, I want much more than this provincial life..."

"Disney," Byrne and McQuillan assert, "derives a lot of humour from its ridiculing of Gaston's cleft chin, his 'built like a barge' stature and his penchant for covering walls with hunting trophies. But Gaston's interest in decorating marks the actual difference between him and the Beast. Gaston's ontological interior design, marked by preoccupations with remains, faces the hauntological conditions in the Beast's house. Gaston's attempt to ontologise remains, to localise them and to ensure that they stay put (on his living room wall), contrasts with the rather lively décor in the Beast's castle, a kind of haunted house."<sup>23</sup>

Gaston is cast as a baddie for cultural reasons. The film aims to satisfy the feminist movement that had achieved unparalleled equality up until that point, and to respond to the culturally changing image of the ideal man. The man who holds stereotypical views of women is punished, by death in this film, (Gaston) and the one who adapts to his woman's needs in the attempt to win her love is rewarded sexually and, in the Beast's case, bodily, as he becomes human again. Gaston and the Beast are different in many ways – the Beast must learn to become a 'new man' by loving someone more than he loves himself, and winning her love in return. Gaston, however, does not care about anyone's feelings but his own. In short, he is like the Beast was whilst he was still human, selfish, cold, with no love in his heart for anyone but himself.

Belle's uniqueness derives from Disney's new stance that beautiful people are not necessarily 'good', as the enchantress tell the prince at the beginning, "Do not be deceived by appearances, for beauty lies within..." This appears to be the predominant moral teaching of the film. Aesthetic appearance does not attract Belle's love, despite her father's (or the towns) reproachment. "What about that Gaston? He's a handsome fellow," her father says, to which Belle replies, "He's handsome alright...and rude, and conceited..." To Belle, a loving, generous

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 68

personality is more important than good looks and genes, which stands her apart from the 'provincial' women who perplexedly ask, "What's wrong with her? He's *gorgeous!*" In this sense, she achieves a feminist status, being able to marry whom she chooses. Her father, whilst gently prompting, is not a typically controlling male, the way Gaston is – he does not force Belle to marry or begrudge her reading books, content and preoccupied with his inventions as he is. In this sense, Belle is a maternal figure for her father, both being mutually dependent on each other for company and to maintain the household.

In rejecting Gaston, Belle rejects hypermasculinity, and thus could be said to achieve 'Disney Feminist' status. She seems to fight against marriage as the sole destiny for females, by declaring that she "wants adventure in the great world, somewhere, I want it more than I can tell, and for once it might be grand, to have someone understand, I want so much more than they've got planned..." Marina Warner recognises that, "Tales in the Beauty and the Beast group number among the most eloquent testaments to women's struggles against arranged marriage and toward a definition of the place of sexuality in love."<sup>24</sup> Yet whilst Belle fights against marrying the person she does not want to marry, and seemingly shuns masculine control over her destiny, her dreams for the future are no different to Snow White's. Belle's favourite book dramatises the folk tale of a woman who finds her love. "Look, isn't it amazing, it's my favourite part because you'll see, she's wishing he's Prince Charming, but she won't discover that it's him 'til chapter three..." Belle may want adventure, but not the kind of adventure we are led to believe. When she tells the viewers that she "want[s] much more than this provincial life" the camera pans up to the mountains and wide scenery, encouraging the belief that she wants to travel and see the world, and is happily single. But, as the clock and the candlestick know, she is just a 'girl', not a woman. Belle yearns for a 'playmate', for on two occasions she claims, "There's no one I can really talk to," and "It might be grand, to have someone understand." Finding love remains Belle's ideal destiny, and Henry Giroux concurs; "although girls might be delighted by Ariel and Belle's teenage

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<sup>24</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994, Chatto & Windus Ltd, p. 318

rebelliousness, they are strongly positioned to believe, in the end, that desire, choice and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving a handsome man.”<sup>25</sup>

Linda Woolverton’s screenplay put forward a heroine of spirit who finds romance on her own terms. Beneath this prima facie storyline, the interpretation contained many subtexts, both knotty and challenging, about changing concepts of paternal notions in the quarrel about nature / nurture. Warner goes on to state that, “Above all, the film placed before the 1990’s audience Hollywood’s cunning domestication of feminism itself.”<sup>26</sup> She may adopt some of the contemporary feminist attitudes, including being more vocal, being physically strong, self-sufficient, but she only finds fulfilment in romantic love. Her dreams revolve around men, or more specifically, a man, and in her quest for love she finds excitement.

Yet Belle is, ultimately, not the main focus of the film. *Beauty and the Beast* is much more involved with the struggle between the sensibilities of Gaston and the reformed sexist, the Beast. “Next to the Beast, this Belle is a lacklustre creature. He held the animators’ full attention: the pneumatic character as male desire incarnate,”<sup>27</sup> Warner asserts. Belle, as already stated, is a mechanism for solving the Beast’s dilemma. Whatever subversive qualities Belle personifies in the film, they “seem to dissolve when focused on humbling male vanity. In the end, Belle simply becomes another woman whose life is valued for solving a man’s problems.”<sup>28</sup>

The audience is told of the Beast’s curse at the beginning of the film, not the end (like in the older versions of the fairy tale). This has the effect of making the story more about the Beast than about Belle. The audience know that he is a transformed human, and can thus sympathise with him, forgive him, and desire Belle to fall in love with him. Belle’s love and devotion to her father, central to

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<sup>25</sup> Henry. A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared, Disney and the End of Innocence*. 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, p. 99

<sup>26</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994, Chatto & Windus Ltd, p. 313

<sup>27</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994, Chatto & Windus Ltd, p. 315

<sup>28</sup> Henry. A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared, Disney and the End of Innocence*. 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, p. 102

older versions of the tale, is made secondary in Disney's version, although it is still present. Belle on two occasions goes to save her father - from being a prisoner in the Beast's castle, and from dying in the snow,- and also lifts the curse from the Beast by falling in love with him. The audience shares in the endearing and kind servants' dream for a possible return to humanity. Belle is their only hope, and she must fulfil the role that the patriarchal world has bestowed on her – by falling in love.

The female characters in Disney films remain fundamentally unchanged throughout. Snow White and Belle do not go looking for love - they are simply thrown into circumstances over which they have little control. Snow White did not antagonise the Queen, and Belle did not go looking for a Prince, but rather for her missing father. Only circumstances are altered at the end, whereas the male characters, especially the Beast, undergo huge changes in order to win the love of the female, or in the case of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, to find the female, as the prince who "searched far and wide". Change for females is bad, unless it is a change from being single to being married (circumstantial change). Change for females, especially change within the patriarchal culture, means an independent action, a personal decision, and this could incorporate a move to celibacy, which would render males unnecessary for female activity.

Yet the message that *Beauty and the Beast* sends out illuminates the fact that no-one can be free or happy until men are freed from traditional masculinity. Females must inevitably seek love, but the right sort of love with the right man. Choice has become available for women, but only choice within a specific destiny, which remains fundamentally the same – love. Elizabeth Bell et al notes that "happiness and wellbeing of society as a whole depends upon the condition of these men, whether that happiness can be defined as national security, social justice, or familial bliss. True to these earlier narratives of masculinity, the quality and continuity of everyone's life finally depends upon these white men."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 170

Men must change and adapt in order to keep increasingly independent women in their place. "It is clear that such ugly and repulsive men are not really to be shunned; they're to be nurtured until their 'true' goodness arises" – just as Mrs. Potts coaxes, "the master's not so bad when you get to know him." The theme song from *Beauty and the Beast* has Mrs. Potts singing about change, within the Beast, presumably. "Unexpectedly, just a little change, small to say the least, both a little scared, neither one prepared...finding you can change." The Beast gives Belle his stocked library, allowing her to read, but not to be independent of him. When he does grant Belle permission to leave it is in order to save her father's life, ensuring she simply passes from the hands of one male to the next. The andocentric world is still in place, then, in *Beauty and the Beast* as well as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, dominating the lives of women and dictating their ideal desires. To find romantic love is Snow White's and Belle's chief aim, yet only forms part of the aim for the males and Beast (who requires it as a mechanism to free him from both the shackles of hypermasculinity and to transform him back into a human being).

The second role that women are cast in ideologically is that of domesticity. This is seen as a typically feminine role: cooking, cleaning, tidying, and maintaining household order, as Snow White does for the dwarves. Belle and Snow White, it seems, "become metaphors for traditional housewives in the making"<sup>30</sup>. Specifically, *Snow White and Beauty and the Beast* suggests an ironic answer to Bachelard's inquiry, "How can housework be made into a creative activity?"<sup>31</sup> – Creative and therefore appealing, one assumes. This educates children again about the ambitions of women, and the work that they are ideally suited for. Snow White seems thrilled to be able to do the cleaning and cooking for the dwarves, and sets to it before she has even met 'the children', thinking that's what the dwarves are. The dwarves are equally pleased for her to cook and make 'apple dumplings' and 'gooseberry pie', (indeed, they are not very

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<sup>30</sup> Henry. A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared, Disney and the End of Innocence*. 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, p. 99

<sup>31</sup> E. Bynre & M. McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 1999, Pluto London, p. 69

welcoming until she offers them this favour) and thus it becomes a mutually beneficial arrangement, the epitome of domestic bliss. Without the female, the dwarves lives would remain exactly how they were before: messy, dirty, unclean, probably feeding on food that was not very nutritious.

The females in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Beauty and the Beast* initiate this domestication of males. It seems to be a natural instinct. Snow White, as we have seen, enters and domesticates the dwarves' cottage and the dwarves themselves, telling them from the outset: "Go straight outside and wash, or you'll not get a bite to eat." Snow White is seen to be similar to nature, instructing the animals and gaining their favour. This enhances the 'naturalness' of Snow White's position as the domesticating housewife. The dwarves are won over by Snow White's 'damsel in distress' behaviour, and they are made to feel like the protecting heroes, offering Snow White the beds upstairs whilst they sleep uncomfortably downstairs amongst the furniture. They work against evil and adopt the role of the 'breadwinners', going out to work in the mine, whilst Snow White stays at home to maintain the house, and, if she were to have any, look after the children.

Belle enters the castle, another male-dominated area, and teaches the Beast proper etiquette and style. As she teaches him to eat, it would seem the two are compromising by lifting up their bowls as the Beast finds it hard to use a spoon. However towards the end of the film the Beast is using a spoon carefully and delicately, despite it evidently not being the most effective way of eating. Belle exercises considerable domesticating influence over the Beast, also teaching him to dance, to feed the birds and enjoy the snow and thus be one with nature, as females are expected to be. She nurses his arm when it is wounded, and finally, and most importantly, teaches him self-restraint: "You should learn to control your temper." This final lesson indicates the feminine calming, tempering and soothing the masculine, and suggests that the female shows how a male can love, and be loved in return, through being more amiable. Belle ultimately,

Elizabeth Bell suggests, will “acculturate the Beast, saving him from his tragic fate through domestication.”<sup>32</sup>

Women are thus cast in the role of the nurturer, adopting a motherly stance, as Belle does with both her father and the Beast (it perhaps replaces a sexual attraction between Belle and the Beast, whilst he remains a Beast, at least). Snow White does this too, even more overtly, reflecting the cultural expectations that women should remain in the home whilst the males should go to work, and to war (like the dwarves do with the Queen). The Beast is also the provider for Belle, giving her books, clothes, foods, servants and a princely castle. The Beast is domesticated in many similar ways to the dwarves, especially Grumpy: they both learn how to love, and how to control their temper. Elizabeth Bell laments that, “The exclusive reliance on the male-normative viewpoint throughout the film not only restricts heroism to males and limits ‘good’ females to domesticity, but also subordinates non-human nature to human agency, whether good or evil. In viewing Snow White, young boys may be assured that when all is right with the world, women and nature remain ready to serve them, no matter how messy they may be, since women are a domesticating and civilising presence.”<sup>33</sup> It is noticeable that the castle is in darkness until Belle appears, when light is brought into the castle. The Beast opens the library curtains, the ballroom is lit up, and we see the castle during the day, covered in white snow.

The females are partially sexualised to maintain the princes’ love interest – this especially applies to Snow White, as the prince in this film has no motive (unlike the Beast) for making Snow White fall in love with him. This balance between the child and the adult, as these girls hit adolescence, is precarious. Snow White, with her high voice and childlike appearance, is not, it would seem, to the taste of a contemporary audience which now prefers more sexual, more knowing heroines. The aesthetic of these females thus provides the final point in the debate about gender stereotypes. Elizabeth Bell explains that, “The

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 133

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128

animation of race and ethnicity were unproblematic in the early Disney shop. Animated heroines were individuated in fair-skinned, fair-eyed, anglo-saxon features of Eurocentric loveliness, both conforming to and perfecting Hollywood's beauty boundaries."<sup>34</sup>

John Halas and Joy Batchelor, British animators, insist that, "If it is live-action film's job to present physical reality, animated film is concerned with metaphysical reality – not how things look, but what they mean."<sup>35</sup> With this statement I would disagree, believing that how things look contribute to what they mean – for instance, the way in which the female heroines are drawn or 'look' in animation contributes to what they mean – and in this case it indicates the way in which females should ideally look, and what men find attractive in women, according to a patriarchal culture.

The heroines, then, are always beautiful. Goodness is linked to exterior beauty, which is ironic, since the enchantress in *Beauty and the Beast* warns the Beast that 'Beauty lies within'. Evil is not beautiful, and it is suggested in *Snow White* that not being (the most) beautiful affects temperament, as it does for the Queen. It is interesting that *Snow White* began as a blonde, reflecting the American ideals for beauty. "She is a classic American character at home with the natural world and well attuned to it, ably communicating with the animals. Grim Natwick, an animator on the film, commented that, "They didn't want her to look like a princess really. They wanted her to look like a cute little girl who could be a princess..."<sup>36</sup> The seven dwarves, it seems, could be a little more 'cartoony' but *Snow White* must be "absolutely realistic in her gestures and stances."<sup>37</sup> The contradiction lies in that a 'cute little girl' who is intended to be 'absolutely realistic' can not possibly be old enough to fall in love, have a sexuality, or get married. Perhaps it is a male ideal that females are ready from a young virginal age to accept a male, and that their childhood is spent in preparing them for this eventuality.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 110

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in T. Hoffer's *Animation: A Reference Guide*, 1981

<sup>36</sup> Cited in *Animated Films, the Disney Effect and Classical Animation*, James Clarks, Virgin, 2004, p. 29

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 27

Both Belle and Snow White are thin, and are, according to Giroux, “modelled after a slightly anorexic Barbie doll.”<sup>38</sup> Snow White has “large expressive eyes, a pouty mouth and broadly drawn features.”<sup>39</sup> Her abnormally high voice promotes her sweetness and innocence, and both she and Belle have oversized heads that diminish their already too-thin bodies even further. Their eyes are big and Bambi-like, emphasising their childlike, innocent faces, and further enforcing their naivety. Both are dainty, with tiny feet. Hair is interesting and usually makes up a large part of a female’s attractiveness. In many of the Disney films the heroines have big, bouncy, long hair, such as Briar Rose in *Sleeping Beauty* (commonly described as the most beautiful of Disney’s characters, and the fact that she is blonde – the hair colour defined by most Westerners as most attractive – only adds to the idea that there is an ideal image that females must conform to in order to be beautiful, attractive, and more likely to get a man) Ariel’s orange mop in *The Little Mermaid*, the heroine Pocahontas, and Jasmine in *Aladdin*. In fact, Snow White and Belle’s hair is generally not as luxurious as some other Disney heroines, perhaps because *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was the first of the feature films, and her hair was the fashion at the time, and Belle, as a Disney feminist in *Beauty and the Beast*, refuses to pander to all masculine ideals – until, noticeably, she begins to have feelings for the Beast. Her femininity is then awakened, and she dons beautiful dresses and leaves her hair long, allowing the Beast to play with it on the balcony after their ballroom dance.

The female characters were modelled on dancers. Disney wanted animated figures to “move like real figures and be informed by a plausible motivation.”<sup>40</sup> The unnatural movements of dancers, however, do not adhere to the normal movement of everyday females. The classical dance of ballerinas becomes a marker of class. “Royal lineage and bearing are personified in the erect, ceremonial carriage of ballet and manifested not only in the dance

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<sup>38</sup> Henry. A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared, Disney and the End of Innocence*. 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, p. 98

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 109

<sup>40</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 1998, p. 43

sequences, but in the heroines graceful solitude and poised interactions with others.”<sup>41</sup> Their movements are graceful and unnecessarily (and unusually) dainty, flexible, and intriguingly flirtatious. The Disney apparatus buys into and then sells to twofold fantasy of little girls who want to grow up to be princesses AND ballerinas. Disney attempts to maintain the balance between young innocence and romantic interest. The females are halfway between being girls and women, having the chests and curves of women, but the tiny stomachs of girls.

It should be noted that the male bodies in Disney’s films are not as unreasonable, or unattainable, as those for females. True, male arousal is based more upon visual stimulation, but the films only emphasise the cultural expectation that it is easier for men to please women, than it is for women to please men, and that a woman must adhere to strict rules about feminine roles and appearance in order to get her man. In this way, it keeps females securely in their culturally subordinate place in the male dichotomy. Men are ideally expected to have relatively broad shoulders, muscular body, legs and chest, and chiselled facial features – something that is heightened and ridiculed in *Beauty and the Beast* in the form of Gaston, who is “roughly the size of a barge”, vain and conceited. Notice that this response to the 1980’s Hollywood macho-male is mocked, but the Beast, as a prince, still carries the proportions of the classic Disney hero – facially beautiful, broad chested and shapely – if only less obviously, and less of a caricature, than Gaston.

The many ideals concerning gender – especially what it means to be feminine – that are explored in Disney motion pictures have the effect of teaching young children their first few lessons about the social world. If the intention of the Disney corporation is to educate children to the best of their ability, then why, we might ask, are these gender ideals in full force in these movies? It is not an absolutely realistic world view now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although granted it might have been more appropriate at the time of these films. Snow White, in 1937, had

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 110

a different audience to the viewers now. Yet it continues to be successful, despite reflecting “a set of assumptions about femininity, about motherhood, that no longer hold for the world we live in.”<sup>42</sup> Surely it is possible that the same might be said about *Beauty and the Beast*. The films suggest patriarchal ideals to young children – especially young girls – about the way females should act and look. Whilst the world is still andocentric, it is becoming increasingly less so, and thus Disney films should be making a move to accommodate for and embrace equality between the genders. Assumptions that are made about feminine desires, about their ambitions of love, and love alone, no longer hold true, nor did they in 1991, when *Beauty and the Beast* was released.

Annalee Ward asserts that, “When popular culture reinforces the centrality of romance and the importance of looks, breaking out of this mould becomes extremely difficult.”<sup>43</sup> For females, this leads to the thinking that not conforming to the ideals and expectations of the world will lead to failure and unhappiness, both in love and ultimate destiny. “Girls develop a preference for same-sex models and are more likely to imitate stereotyped behaviour displayed by those models,” Keisha Hoerrner claims<sup>44</sup>. To be human, according to Disney, is defined by gender. The female encapsulates the quest and desire for romantic love, and good looks. The male however, is entitled to pursue his dreams, be an active member of society, and define himself apart from romance. The single message communicated is that “what is good for Disney is good for the rest of the world.”<sup>45</sup>

Having assessed the potentially unhealthy effect that the gender stereotypes place on females, it becomes impossible to uphold this statement. As Disney grows into a multi-billion dollar corporation in the business world, its household name will remain in the domestic world, influencing – nay, dictating – to children about their ideals, their desires, dreams, and the expectations of the world they live in. Disney must adapt to the changing times in order to cater to a

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<sup>42</sup> Janet Ames, cited in Elizabeth Bell et al, *From Mouse to Mermaid – politics of film, gender and culture*. 1995, Indiana University Press, p. 134

<sup>43</sup> Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: the Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, 2002, University of Texas Press, p. 120

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*, Routledge 1997, p. 90

demanding audience, which requires Disney to both uphold the nostalgic fantasy of the American Dream, whilst at the same time reflecting the realities that are present in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet it seems that even though gender equality exists today, there will always be male expectations and ideals for the female character, available and accessible for children, and adults, and promoted by Disney as well as other entertaining companies, not only today but in generations to come.