TRENDS IN GENDER AND SEXUALITY

IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S

FAIRY TALES

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Matthew Casey Rochester

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Thesis Supervisor:

_____

Caroline Jones, Ph.D.
Department of English

Approved:

_____

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

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ABSTRACT

This project examines trends in power dynamics in contemporary retellings of children's fairy tales in regard to gender and sexuality. It opens with a brief history of the fairy tale genre and the foundation of the Western fairy tale canon. I will primarily analyze The Walt Disney Company's recent films, *Brave, Frozen, The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* as well as Emma Donoghue's short fiction collection, *Kissing the Witch* and several tales from the feminist anthology *Don't Bet on the Prince*, compiled by Jack Zipes. Though there will be intersections, and brief discussions, of race and social class, the focus will be shifting gender norms in fairy tale retellings.

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales pervade Western culture, and have done so since before most of them were written down, passing through societies as oral folklore. Though many authors have written original fairy tales, the bulk of literary fairy tales are derived from early, pre-literary folklore, shared by all of humanity. Fairy tales pervade nearly every art form: short story, film, graphic novel, advertisement, television, music, and, of course novels and short stories. They are nigh unavoidable for the simple reason that they carry a deep resonance gained only by perseverance: they bear fingerprints from countless long extinct cultures. They reflect the human condition possibly more than any other form of storytelling.

Pioneers have sculpted the fairy tale throughout every generation and every country, but none quite as strongly have impacted contemporary American fairy tale renderings as Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Walt Disney, all of whom peppered their tales with strong conservative values. In Maria Tatar's *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales,* 12 of the 36 tales covered are by one of the first two writers. In another of her collections, *The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition,* either Perrault or the Brothers Grimm have a version of all eight of the tales. These writers have shaped the Western canon more than any others.

All of them, including Disney's cinematic contributions, have received strong criticism for the damaging hegemonies their tales depict for children, particularly by feminist scholars and writers. Dissatisfaction with traditional fairy tale narratives is

leading contemporary writers to re-construct new tales with more egalitarian messages, though it is hardly a new movement. Feminists are throwing away the cliché damsel in distress and writing fairy tales with active, strong female protagonists. People of color are appearing in surroundings that are not only Western, vaguely European settings, calling for fairer representation. Particularly, they are attempting to undo *orientalization*, or stereotypical Othering of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures. Marxist writers are giving "fairy tale endings" to characters regardless of class level or social position, not just those that climb the social ladder into royalty.

Modern writers are tackling issues that the most popular fairy tales have historically contributed to: racism, strict gender roles, classism, ageism, conformity, and an overall strict adherence to a Judeo-Christian ethic, whether stated or not. In the history of the literary fairy tale, the writers that have most profoundly imbued these hierarchical structures into fairy tales are Perrault, the Grimms and Walt Disney. There have been many others, such as Hans Christian Andersen, who wrote "The Little Mermaid", and Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, who wrote one of the more popular "Beauty and the Beast" variants.

My argument is that even mainstream fairy tale media reflects the years of challenges to the hegemonies in the earliest versions of literary fairy tales. Some seem to be intentional, such as the tales in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* and Disney's *Frozen.* Even mainstream fairy tales reflect this trend: the general dissatisfaction with the passive, submissive feminine role. Equally, audiences have intersected issues of gender with those of race, class, and social status, as these have been problematic in fairy tales as

well. For this project, I will focus on gender and sexuality, with intersections of other hegemonies when appropriate.

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WESTERN FAIRY TALE

CANON

<u>Charles Perrault (1628-1703)</u>

Though Italian writers such as Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile may have been the first fairy tale writers, and surely influenced later writers, Perrault is the one to popularize the literary fairy tale for children as a tool "to assure that young people would be properly groomed for their social functions" (Zipes, *Subversion* 14). Perrault was part of the foundation of children's literature, writing in eighteenth century France, "when standards were first being set for the development of modern children's literature" (Zipes, *Subversion* 14). Perrault writes in a time when fairy tales were first being created as a genre, and has left fingerprints that can still be seen today. As Zipes says, "There is a direct line from the Perrault fairy tale of court society to the Walt Disney cinematic fairy tale of the culture industry" (*Subversion* 17).

At the end of his tales, he attaches a brief "moral", telling children what they should learn from the tale, and instructing parents on how their children should behave. For example, the moral for *Little Red Riding Hood* is as follows:

From this story one learns that children,

Especially young girls,

Pretty, well bred, and genteel,

Are wrong to listen to just anyone,

And it's not at all strange,

If a wolf ends up eating them.

I say a wolf, but not all wolves

Are exactly the same.

Some are perfectly charming,

Not loud, brutal, or angry,

But tame, pleasant, and gentle,

Following young ladies

Right into their homes, into their chambers,

But watch out if you haven't learned that tame wolves

Are the most dangerous of all. (Perrault 13)

When he tells Little Red not to talk to the wolf, not to deviate from the path, he begins a tradition of negative associations with deviations, particularly from social norms. He sets up a tradition of absolute conformity to the cultural mainstream that, hundreds of years later, continue to contaminate children's understanding of how to relate to the world.

Among the most well-known of Perrault's tales from his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* are "Sleeping Beauty", "Little Red Riding Hood"," Cinderella", and "Puss in Boots*"*, several of which have been remade by Disney. Perrault divides his tales along gender-specific lines, with "Puss in Boots" being the only tale I've selected marketed directly to boys. In the tales for girls, it is clear that Perrault had a "distinctly limited view of women" (Zipes, *Subversion* 25). His tales have been criticized for weak, identical

stock female characters that "must be passive until the right man comes along to recognize her virtues and marry her" (Zipes, *Subversion* 25). The value of women is based almost exclusively on their beauty and ability to wait until a male acts. In short, Perrault set up a tradition of crafting passive female characters.

The stories that Perrault chooses to write typically depict femininity in a negative way. Submissiveness is the key value of the girls and women in his works, directly contrasting their active male counterparts. The message to boys is that women must be rescued, and that they need it. Simply choosing a woman who needs rescuing based on her beauty should be enough to earn her, as a trophy, or an object. This can be done through wit, wealth, high social class, or literally saving the girl. In these sorts of idealized fairy tales, there is no room for a female to reject a male.

Important to note is that many of the fairy tales were adapted from folk tales that were not inherently sexist. *Little Red Riding Hood* for example, is generally believed to have been a pagan folk tale "related to the needlework apprenticeship, which young peasant girls underwent and designated the arrival of puberty and initiation into society" (Zipes, *Subversion* 29). As the moral hints, Perrault's version is a thinly disguised warning to young girls against rape, and that they should not trust "nice" looking young men. It can equally be read as a warning to avoid their own more "bestial" desires, or to give in to their sexuality in a socially unacceptable way. In Perrault's time, that would be anything aside from a submissive sexual relationship with their husbands. Perrault "shaped [the tales] in a unique way to present his particular bourgeois view of social manners" (Zipes, *Subversion* 27). By modern Western social standards, this would be

considered victim blaming. Regardless of how practical his advice may have been at the time, society is moving past telling girls to watch over their shoulders for a rapist.

Regardless of how Perrault was or would have been read at the time, social norms have changed considerably. The underlying ideologies in Perrault's stories should be, and frequently are, interrogated before being rewritten by contemporary authors. Of course, this is not always the case.

<u>The Brothers Grimm (1785-1863), (1786-1859)</u>

Though Perrault's versions of the tales themselves are likely the most influential, the Grimms are certainly better known as authors of fairy tales. As Zipes puts it, they are "making their presence felt" (*Subversion* 45). However, their profession was not as authors of children's literature. They were, first and foremost, folklorists. Several of their editions were later edited for children, but a majority of their tales feature violent, bawdy themes that would not typically be associated with childhood among a Western audience.

A common conception is something in the vein of the Grimms' meandering through the countryside, talking to peasant mothers and grandmothers, and writing down the tales so that everyone in Germany could enjoy them. Romantic as this is, it is nothing more than a myth. The only accurate parts is that the tales were collected, but not from whom, or how they were handled afterward. Even among scholars, as Zipes points out, it "was generally assumed that [they] collected their oral folk tales...from peasants and day laborers", then altered them to suit their audiences (*Subversion* 47). The tales were collected primarily from the "petit bourgeois or educated middle-class people, who had already introduced bourgeois notions into their versions" (*Subversion* 47), not peasants. Then each tale was edited and re-edited multiple times to suit their goal of contributing to

a strong national identity in the rising middle class audience. The Grimm brothers wrote in a context with no hard line between fairy tales and folklore. Their first published work was more of a, "scholarly tome rather than a book for a broad audience" (Tatar, *Annotated* 341). It wasn't until ten years after their first edition that they published a compact version of their stories similar to Perrault's tales of mother goose.

Because there exist many different versions of folk tales and fairy tales even by the Grimms, many of the tales are similar. Among countless others, they have versions of *Little Red, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rapunzel*. The Grimm brothers, like Charles Perrault, have been accused of perpetuating sexist notions of women for repeatedly using the common passive, persecuted heroine cliché in their tales. For example, in their version of "Snow White*"*, the protagonist repeatedly takes offers from her disguised evil stepmother, dies, and is brought back to life by men, the last of whom is a prince who takes her as his bride, leading to her happily ever after. The cause of jealousy between stepmother and stepdaughter is beauty and its connection to the king's attention.

This is a common theme in older fairy tales: the most beautiful girl or woman inevitably wins over the older, uglier one. This is troubling not only to women, but within the tales it is troubling to anyone who is not white. In *Snow White*, even the name of the protagonist, connected to beauty, has racial connotations. Many of the other female protagonists are referred to as beautiful for having fair skin or light hair. Commenting on "Rapunzel", Tatar notes that in fairy tales, "golden hair is a marker of ethical goodness as well as aesthetic appeal" (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 110). This has continued to impact even Disney's latest two movies, *Brave* and *Frozen.*

Unlike Charles Perrault, the Grimm brothers did actually include non-white characters in their tales, but they reflect the racist sensibilities of their times. In *The White Bride and the Black Bride*, a black princess who wishes to be beautiful is transformed to appear "white and fair as day" (608). They associate white skin with beauty alongside descriptions of skin that is "black as coal and ugly" (608). The problems of race and sex are among the biggest which modern fairy writers are forced to deal with.

<u>Hiding Diverse Folkloric Roots</u>

As I hinted at early, many fairy tales with folkloric roots are not purely European tales, but were European versions of folk tales. Some contemporary writers are bypassing the Brothers Grimm and Perrault to find inspiration in older folkloric fairy tales, including those collected outside of Western Europe. To name a few of the older tales, Tatar's *The Classic Fairy Tales* lists a Chinese variant of the "Little Red" story, a Russian "Beauty and the Beast" and a Chinese "Cinderella". Deborah Thompson lists twelve different versions of the "Cinderella" tale, all African, African American, or Afro-Caribbean versions (75). She also points out a Eurocentric preference in the Cinderella tale of anthropologists and folklorists of the past, common of all fairy tales within the canon.

In both of these examples though, the European is still seen as the *default*. Thompson's article has "Cinderella" in the title, and the index of *The Classic Fairy Tales* is organized by the title of the most commonly recognized European name, with the actual story name coming afterward. Fairy tales or folklore of non-Western origin is the exception rather than the norm. Within Western society, names are Anglicized even when

of European origin. It is Perrault's Cinderella, (English by way of French) not the Grimm's (German) Aschenputtel, that is the most well known.

In an increasingly globalized culture where American films dominate, modern worldwide consumption of the fairy tale comes from the Eurocentric fairy tales produced in the United States. Zipes notes that the Czech Republic produced a "fair number of subversive fairy-tale films... from 1960 to 1989", as "critiques of the state". He goes on to state that, "though fairy-tale films continue to be produced, they are dependent on the commercial interests of US, Anglo-American, and international corporations" ("Neglected Fairy Tales" 332). In short, American films and interests have taken over the Czech film industry.

To give another example of how American fairy tales dominate, one of Disney's latest fairy tale movies, *Tangled,* made over $390 million in non-American markets, and not only in the Western world. Brazil, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and South Korea all contributed large amounts of income on the opening weekend. Additionally, the film took high percentages of certain foreign markets in Ecuador, Estonia, Ghana, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Peru, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates, all over 25% (Boxofficemojo). Eurocentric American fairy tale films, particularly those produced by Disney, are now exerting cultural hegemony on a global basis, not only within Western cultures.

<u>Early Challenges to Traditional Tales</u>

Throughout the majority of literary history, writers have made brilliant fairy tale innovations, and even tried to infuse folklore from non-western countries. Zipes notes that the modern perception of fairy tales have been contaminated by sexist notions of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, but this has not always gone unchallenged. Though

excuses could be made about their sentiments reflecting their time, this has little to do with modern interpretations of these fairy tales, particularly by Walt Disney Pictures. The idea of alternative, re-told fairy tales is nothing new, though these tales have been largely obscured by the vast majority of large fairy tale outlets, again Walt Disney Pictures, focusing almost exclusively on versions of tales told by the Brothers Grimm, Perrault, and Hans Christian Andersen.

Zipes also points out that, "By the 1860s, if not earlier, literary conservatism in children's book publishing was challenged by a new wave of innovative fairy tales" (*Subversion* 96). Writers such as L. Frank Baum, Oscar Wilde, and George MacDonald "used the fairy tale as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society" (*Subversion* 96). These authors "refused to comply with the standard notions of sexuality and sex roles and questioned the restrictions placed on the imagination of children" (*Subversion* 101). Alison Lurie's 1980 publication, *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales*, for example, focuses on retelling folklore into fairy tales with strong female protagonists. The direct line from Perrault to Disney is not so direct, as it kinks to avoid or ignore any fairy tale that could disrupt cultural norms.

<div align="center">Animation: Disney's Domain</div>

No name is as synonymous with the term "fairy tales" as that of Walt Disney. In "Breaking the Disney Spell," Zipes says, "If children or adults think of the great classical fairy tales today, be it *Snow White, Sleeping Beauty,* or *Cinderella*, they will think Walt Disney" (332). In the same way that the Grimms standardized the fairy tale at the beginnings of the printing press, so did Disney in the beginnings of animation. Disney,

with vibrant re-imaginings of classic fairy tales early in the establishment of the new type of media (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was the first full-length animated film), nearly indelible ideas about fairy tales, set in place by Perrault, were brought into the 21st century.

This was not a simple animation of Perrault's versions. Disney did actually change the versions that he worked with. He established a tradition of Americanizing the classic fairy tales, and pushing his own ideological message. More, Walt Disney was obsessively involved in ensuring control over his creations. He went so far as to "not give credit to the artists and technicians who worked on his films" for many years (Zipes, "Disney Spell" 342). Though the idea of artists maintaining complete control over their own artwork brings ethical questions in and of itself, it is particularly troubling when that work is not only a film adaptation of an older work, but stems from a long folk tradition which has been touched and influenced by various cultures for thousands of years. Disney sterilizes multiple traditional tales, not purely his own work, and canonizes them as his creation.

Likewise, he established a tradition of valuing animated films based on the quality of the animation, instead of the quality of the story, obvious in even the latest films in the Disney franchise. This makes it almost impossible for an independent animator, or even simply a lower-budget studio, to compete with Disney. What Disney intended to do in order to maintain control over his art, Walt Disney Pictures has continued for profit. Derivative works are censored as copyright infringement. To give an example, in 2003, The Walt Disney Company faced with the possibility of the original Mickey Mouse cartoons entering into public domain, "where anyone can use it without securing

permission and without paying royalties" (Christiansen). Congress extended copyright limitations by an "additional 20 years" (Christiansen). Walt Disney Pictures maintains the airtight lockdown on tales it controls, whether or not they were of Disney's conception.

Like Perrault, gender in Disney films has long been studied. For practical reasons, I will here be commenting only on films released before the year 2000, treating recent Disney films separately. For these earlier films, the gender binary remains impenetrable, and stereotypical. A trait among the males in the films is aggression: "In *Cinderella,* the king yells and throws things around the room while talking to his son about why it is taking him so long to marry. Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* uses threats and violence in his quest to win Belle's attention" (Towbin, et al. 28). Men are shown to be entirely unaware of their own feelings or emotions, including sexually, so much so that "boys and men seemed to lose their senses in the presence of a beautiful woman" (Towbin, et al. 29). This may contribute to rape culture, and create unhealthy sexual expectations.

Equally, they create unrealistic love at first sight fantasy encounters. "In *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty,* the princes fall in love with the women with very little more than glimpses of them" (Towbin, et al. 29). Disney does little more than re-enforce the socializing conditions of French court society set in place by Perrault, even when situations are drastically changed. For example, Disney humanized a host of characters to support Snow White. The dwarves existed in the Grimm's version that Disney based his off of, but Snow White wasn't required to fulfill the role of their housekeeper. He made them slovenly, reinforcing the idea of Snow White as a housekeeping figure. In the Grimm's version, their house was "so neat and clean that no one could say otherwise" (Grimm). Walt Disney Pictures, particularly in the first three of

these movies, *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty,* is not only leaving in place story telling devices that work to create unhealthy gender roles, they are reinforcing them with additions.

In many of these movies, the antagonist is an evil, ugly woman. *Show White* has the wicked witch: *The Little Mermaid* has Ursula and *Sleeping Beauty* has Maleficent. In many others, there are no strong women, aside from the good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*, or Cinderella's fairy godmother. None of these women are human. Fairy godmothers are strong, but they are empowered by magic, not agency. Early Disney films offered very few roles for female characters: angelic, child-like passive princesses, evil ugly witches or stepmothers and maternal, magical fairy godmothers who help the passive princesses.

Female characters offer polarity to the males, serving to widen the gender gap. There is an enormous amount of pressure placed on female beauty. As noted by Towbin et al,

> In *Sleeping,* the first gift given to the baby princess is beauty. In *Dwarfs,* the Queen's motivation to kill Snow White derives from the Queen's jealousy that Snow White is the fairest in the land. In *Mermaid,* Ariel wins the love of Prince Eric even after losing her voice….Six movies *(Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Mulan* and *Tarzan)* showed examples of valuing women both by their appearance and by their intellect and accomplishments. In four of those movies (*Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin,* and *Mulan),* there were more examples of women being valued for appearance than for intellect and accomplishments. (30)

The ultimate goal or happy ending for nearly all of the Disney princesses is marriage, usually to nobility. The main plots of *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* focus on Cinderella and Ariel's devotion to a prince and upward social change through marriage. Men ultimately rescue Aurora, Snow White, and Jasmine and marry them. This creates a connection between rescuing a woman of a lower socio-economic level and earning her as an object, again contributing to rape culture. In all of these films, only in the case of Jasmine is her male love interest of lower social strata.

Convincing arguments about feminism and agency can have been made about Mulan, but the film contributes heavily to the tradition of *Orientalism*. Towbin et al state that Mulan *"*has both exaggerated and accurate portrayals of the same culture. For example, Chi Fu is given exaggerated Chinese features, with a long mustache, slanted eyes, and bad teeth. However, the movie is set in China, and shows Chinese characters, dress, architecture, and names in a realistic way" (32). This assertion is extraordinarily simplistic, and the last statement is simply false. Simply looking at the time frame results in several inconsistencies that an American audience wouldn't see:

> [*Mulan*] prominently features landmarks such as the Forbidden
> City, which was not constructed until the fifteenth century during
> the Ming dynasty. On the other hand, at the time of the Northern
> Wei, the Xiongnu (Huns) had already been assimilated into
> Chinese culture. However, according to the style of dress
> (traditional Han clothing, also known as Hanfu), the film takes
> place sometime in the fifteenth century or before. The fireworks
> featured in the film indicate that the film is set during the Sui

dynasty. Though Mulan is set in north China, where the dominant

language is Mandarin, the Disney film uses 'Fa', the Cantonese

pronunciation of 'Hua', as her family name. The matchmaking

episode of the film, including the bride's make-up, bathing and

hairdressing, is intimately associated with China's marital culture.

In a word, the film is a mixture of Chinese culture with the ballad

as its plot basis. (Tian and Xiong 865)

Tian and Xiong give several pages of difference between the American release and the

Chinese/Taiwanese releases, showing that Disney was not ignorant of the changes that

they made, though much was done simply for clarity and comprehension for American

audiences, and they claim this part of the Disneyfication "facilitates cross-cultural

communication and enhancement," praising it (872).

The authors point out low success rates of the film in Chinese, or Chinese-

speaking areas of the world, suggesting that the film was not well received because of its

cultural insensitivity. Among the changes that they are not willing to accept is the reason

for Mulan going to war in place of her father. In the earlier versions of the film, "the

reason why Mulan joins the army in the ballad is first and foremost her filial piety, which

is the supreme virtue of children in traditional Chinese culture. But the film implies that

the reason is the love between father and daughter as well as Mulan's quest for the true

self" (872). Though this message, in an American movie, would be viewed positively, it

is still an appropriation of a foreign folktale by an American media conglomerate that

changes the underlying cultural messages to suit an American audience, and then reflects

those American values back to a Chinese audience.

Alongside stereotyping of the Chinese, the dehumanizing, negative depiction of the Huns stands out, and is obvious even to someone with no understanding of Chinese culture. Their skin colors are not within the range of possible human skin colors, but a dark gray. Women do not exist, or are not depicted. They retain features thought of as stereotypically Asian, as outlined by Towbin, et al. to a much higher degree than the Chinese characters. The Huns are turned into a race of war-hungry monsters, and demonized.

Disney supports a tradition of catering to an American sensibility, and an American audience. When appropriating non-European folklore for contemporary fairy tales, Disney does not check for cultural sensitivity. The earliest Disney films set a foundation for conservative enculturation that their contemporary counterparts have yet to entirely shake off, as I will later discuss.

CHAPTER II

Subversion In *Kissing The Witch* and Other Feminist Fairy Tales

Fantasy literature has an important, unique capacity: nothing is impossible, both scientifically and socially. Though some fairy tales, particularly those for adults, fall into the category of realism, most are fantasy. Anything can happen in a fantasy fairy tale. Damaging social constraints, such as racism, sexism, or other social hegemonies need not carry over. Though I am not attempting to prove that they never do, I aim to show that it is unnecessary by focusing on tales where authors seemingly go out of their way either to remove the hegemonies, or show characters working against them.

The two fairy tale collections I have chosen to analyze are Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* and Jack Zipe's anthology, *Don't Bet on the Prince,* both feminist collections of fairy tale short stories. I will also briefly mention a tale from Ethel Johnston Phelp's *Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World.*

Kissing the Witch is a collection of 13 interwoven fairy tales, retold from older versions, with active female protagonists displaying agency and rebelling against heteronormative gender roles. The collection is the product of feminist literary criticism in that, aside from questioning gender roles, several of the tales question the binary nature of the construct of gender. More so, they seem to demonstrate that gender is neither the primary characteristic of a person, nor even a particularly important one.

The first tale in Donoghue's collection is "The Tale of the Shoe". Donoghue makes the aim of the work clear at the end of this tale: Cinderella ends up with her fairy godmother. This is not a collection of traditional fairy tales. The protagonist begins in a conventional way, with Cinderella asking her fairy godmother to take her to the ball, "Isn't that what girls are meant to ask for?" (Donoghue 3). Though life with the prince would have been comfortable, she chooses her fairy godmother. Donoghue shows that this collection will not follow traditional plotlines.

She also shows that this is not in order to criticize the traditional heteronormative prince and princess pairing, but to offer alternatives: After repeatedly tries going to the ball, it is suggested that a prince proposes to Cinderella, "but no sound came out. There was no harm in this man" (Donoghue 7). Cinderella does not see harm in this pairing; she simply knows that it is not what will make her most happy. Donoghue gives a fairy tale character the agency to express a non-heteronormative pairing, something largely absent in traditional literary fairy tales.

This is one of many tales that feature a non-traditional happy ending, particularly with an unexpected romantic pairing. Both *Kissing the Witch* and *Don't Bet on the Prince* feature non-traditional pairings in the majority of the tales that have romantic features at all. Actually, of the stories in these two collections which feature romance, strikingly few offer up traditional pairings. Even "The Tale of the Voice", a retelling of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," features a non-traditional ending, though it crosses absolutely no boundaries of class, gender or race. The protagonist becomes infatuated with a prince, but he cheats on her. Her happy ending is simply that she "married a fisherman with green eyes who liked to hear [her] sing, but preferred to hear [her] talk" (Donoghue 204). They

come from the same social class, but this toys with the idealization of royalty prevalent in so many classic versions of fairy tales.

This idealization is also commented on in Tanith Lee's "Prince Amilec". The prince, after completing a series of tasks to wed an unwilling princess, decides to marry someone else. Though the intended bride is royal, she is described as someone with a "very nasty temper" (48). Though this is a small flaw, it is certainly not one which passive princess clichés possess. Not only is she not an idealized passive princess, she demonstrates agency. She sets up a series of ridiculous tasks for her suitors, assuming that they will be unable to complete them, in order to maintain unwed. This is similar to the revelation that the kidnapped prince in "Petronella" is just a houseguest who has overstayed his welcome (Williams 60). The prince in "Petronella" acts entitled. When he first meets Petronella, he almost immediately asks her to move out of his sunlight, as he is tanning (57).

All of these characters, aside from the prince in "Petronella" who remains alone, end up paired with someone unexpected as well. Both the Princess and Prince in "Prince Amilec" marry magical characters: the prince marries the witch that helped him complete the tasks, and the princess finds a prince in a neighboring kingdom who "makes princesses complete dreadful tasks before he'll even look at them" (54). This is an exact role reversal of the princess's previous spot. Now she is the active agent, pursuing a male love interest. However, she seeks the help of a wizard, parallel with the prince who sought to marry her. If her parallel story ends the same way as the prince, as would be assumed by most readers, she ends up with the wizard. "Petronella" features a nearly identical coupling: a princess ends up married to a wizard, who is interested in her

because she is "brave and kind and talented and beautiful as well" (60). It is notable, as this is a feminist story, that beautiful is listed at the end, and is not what first draws him to her.

Aside from the prince and princess tropes, the majority of these stories play with the concept of an evil witch. The witch in "Prince Amilec" is a beautiful, benevolent magical helper that expects nothing in return for her help. The wizard in "Petronella" does nothing malevolent in the story. Most blatantly, Russ states in "Russalka" that "the person you and I call an old witch was really a distinguished scientist" (90). Donoghue's collection handles the witch slightly differently. She is featured in both "The Tale of the Voice" and "The Tale of the Kiss". In the first, it is revealed that she lives alone in a cave, and that she has "a stoop, a stick, a wart on her nose, and a whisker on her chin" (189). This continues, showing that, on the surface at least, she is actually identical to previous fairy tale witches: ugly, old and alone.

However, she says that she is a barren woman in a society in which a barren woman would be unable to expect to participate in society. After she realizes this, she moves into the cave. Her isolation from the village is what began rumors that she was a witch, or that she had powers. In her isolation, she found "power that came not from my own thin body or my own taut mind, but was invested in me by a village" (213). Donoghue decides to change very little of the old witch cliché, but instead provides reflection and an alternate point of view: she is driven by circumstance, and patriarchal expectations that she cannot fit into. By providing the woman's past, Donoghue creates empathy and compassion for a traditional villain stereotype. She is trying to survive, not trying to hurt.

Actually these stories seem to show a general unwillingness to construct female villains at all, possibly due to a desire to avoid the wicked stepmother cliché of many prevalent fairy tales. Very few of these tales have a truly evil character. For example, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Brother" features a female protagonist on a quest to save her brother from a "woman in white furs" (Donoghue 106). Though the old people of the town said, "every boy comes home when he's good and hungry" (Donoghue 107), the girl follows her intuition in search of her brother. When she finds the woman, her "smile was gentler than [she] could have expected" (Donoghue 114). The woman invites the younger girl in, suggesting that the brother was not kidnapped, but willingly taken. When she sees her brother, "his mouth was full of cake; his grin caught by the light" (Donoghue 113). Instead of an older, aggressive woman, or villain, she is simply another person, and more benevolent than malevolent, as she provides a home and shelter for the brother and immediately welcomes the sister.

In much the same way, "The Tale of The Cottage" a re-telling of the Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel", does this: though neither of the parents want to desert their children in the woods, that is the end result. The mother is the most upset, and cries repeatedly throughout the tale. In many versions, the blame is placed with a wicked stepmother. Unlike the Grimms' version, the father is the one to insist on abandoning the children in the woods, telling their mother, "Don't fight fate" (Donoghue 136). This version brings attention to the pain of having to desert one's children because of an inability to feed them. It also places blame with the situation instead of the woman.

They come across a woman in the woods, a replacement for the witch in traditional versions. She allows them to stay with her so long as they work. Instead of a

wicked witch, she is only a woman. Though she allows Gretel to sleep with her for warmth, she insists that Hansel sleep separately. Hansel repeatedly harasses her, first trying to force his way into her bed then he, in Gretel's language, "call her name I never heard lift her skirt behind" (Donoghue 140). She traps him in a cage with the intention of killing him, but Gretel frees him. When he tells her that the snow has melted, and they can return home, she refuses, "home not home if mother not mother" (Donoghue 140). She demonstrates agency in choosing the woman who has been kind to her over the parents that were unable to care for her.

Again, Donoghue turns a villain into just another person. Gretel, sleeping with the woman, can be viewed to be in a romantic or sexual relationship with her, but this isn't important to the story, and not what Donoghue focuses on, again showing how irrelevant gender and sexual orientation are to the author. The most important part is that the two women are shown to exercise agency in doing what they believe is best for them.

Interestingly, the story is told from the unique perspective of Gretel. The language is markedly simple, and strikingly emotional, such as "Cold. Sound like crows. Good girl. Want home. Cry" (Donoghue 135). Her says that her father says she's "no earthly use not right in the head" (Donoghue 134). Here, the protagonist can be assumed to have some sort of mental impairment. This is one of several tales that feature a non-traditional narrator, or at least focuses on an unconventional protagonist. Donoghue's "The Tale of the Kiss" is another of these in that it is told from the point of view of the witch. Angela Carter's "The Donkey Prince" tells the tale from the eyes of a donkey (who used to be a boy, admittedly).

Carter's tale is interesting for a multitude of reasons. Aside from having an active female protagonist, it is also the only tale in the anthology to feature non-white characters, and one of the more complex stories of the anthology. It prominently features three protagonists that defy traditional fairy tales: an active young girl, an active person of color, who begins as a donkey, and a heteronormative, masculine white male who sacrifices for both of these characters, and is shown to be gentle. This is one of the few feminist tales in these two collections not to feature a female narrator. This shows that there is no requirement that feminist tales have a female narrator, simply egalitarian gender roles.

The narrator, Bruno the donkey, was adopted by the king and queen of a neighboring kingdom in order break a spell on his kingdom that causes all of the citizens to be donkeys. They love him, and teach him "geometry, trigonometry and Greek," because "that formed a prince's education in those days" (64). The king and queen "loved Prince Bruno quite as well as if he were their own flesh and blood" (64). This is an interracial affection that does not exist in the other tales. He's also an intelligent person of color, and has no gendered stereotypes, such as anger or inability to confront his emotions.

His conflict is regaining his mother's lost apple, at the top of a mountain, in order to save her life. He receives help from a peasant "working girl" named Daisy, who repeatedly helps progress the plot, while stating that "a working girl learns a trick or two" (65) and "A working girl learns to use her common sense" (66). The character is an empowered female from a lower socio-economic background, and Bruno's friend. However, they're not without conflict. The characters have inherent prejudices against

each other that are pointed out when Bruno realizes how dangerous the mission is and suggests that it would be best if Daisy "'turned back for home now. The Savage Mountain is no place for little girls.'" She replies, "'Nor for foolish donkeys either!'" and it is quickly resolved, because they "saw by one another's expressions that each had hurt the other's feelings equally, and both were equally sorry" (66). The scene ends with a hug. In this way, the story confronts stereotyping based both on race and gender. Or, perhaps species instead of race as Daisy still sees Bruno as a donkey.

The story features several more lessons on judging a book by a cover when Bruno and Daisy meet a "Wild Man", named Hlajki. The character is gentle and kind, through he appears to be gruff, and initially frightens the protagonists. Depicting a gentle, though still overtly masculine, character challenges gender roles as much as active female characters. The story is resolved when Bruno saves the Brown Men of the mountain with the help of Daisy and Hlajki. Hlajki overthrows the leader of the Wild Men, who is rough and cruel, and the rest of his people "became gentler by degrees" (71). All three kingdoms are shown to prosper through the cooperation of the three characters.

Importantly, Bruno, who returns to his human form, marries Daisy (who he did not rescue or earn). This marriage crosses both class boundaries, with a Prince marrying a poor-er girl, and racial ones, assuming that Bruno is "small of stature and brown of hue", like the rest of the people in the kingdom he is from (71). This fairy tale, more than any of the others, is intersectional: it features characters of diverse backgrounds working together to achieve a goal.

None of the tales in *Kissing the* Witch address race, either directly or indirectly. It does, however, very directly address gender as a social construct. One of the tales, "The

Tale of the Rose,", a "Beauty and the Beast" retelling brings up the idea of binary structures within the protagonist's thoughts: "I thought the beast must be everything I was not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet" (Donoghue 35). This binary structure is sexed: Beauty sees the beast as a man, therefore her polar opposite. Donoghue demolishes the binary structure with the revelation that the beast is actually a woman. Beauty discovers this exactly the same as many other variants: as she stumbles upon the body of the beast, seemingly dead.

Donoghue reflects an ideology that gender is not only non-binary, but also irrelevant in most matters. When Beauty saw that the beast was female, she also saw "that she was breathing, which seemed to matter more" (Donoghue 39). The ending mostly clearly states that gender is fluid, and non-binary: "some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts" (Donoghue 40). This is similar to quite a few of the tales in these two collections, particularly those by Donoghue. In "The Tale of the Brother", the brother and sister are confused for each other: "old people would call me by my brother's name, let me tie his skates on, and send me out to the river with the other boys" (Donoghue 104).

The next, "The Tale of the Apple" is a re-imagining of the Grimm's version of "Snow White." It retains the violent stepmother-stepdaughter relationship in many other versions of the tale, but "[the queen] did all she could to woo [her] friendship, and [she] began to soften" (Donoghue 46). Like other versions of the tale, the relationship between the two is the primary focus of the work, but Donoghue goes out of her way to show that this is not a rivalry for the attention of the King. It begins as a true friendship.

The male gaze plays as important a role in this version of the tale as many others, though Donoghue points it out and nullifies it. When the king asks, "which...is the fairest of them all" (Donoghue 47) to his daughter and wife, he makes the women nervous. They do not become rivals for his attention as in the older versions; they simply do not want to be compared to each other. They react with confusion, face each other and note that their "faces were not the same, and not comparable" (Donoghue 48). The king is objectifying and essentializing femininity by comparing the two women based solely on their beauty, and the two women react by ignoring it.

What causes their rivalry later in the tale is not the affection of the king, but the throne: power over the kingdom. After the king dies, the queen demands that Snow White acknowledge her as queen, and the girl refuses. When the queen threatens to have her "cast out," and to have the "huntsman take [her] into the forest, chop out her heart, and bring it back," Snow White only says, "Strong meat"(50). She speaks on her own accord, even when the queen has more power than she.

As in several other versions of the tale, Snow White makes a pre-emptive strike: she runs away. She displays agency by acting based on what she believes to be the wisest decision. She makes a life for herself outside of the kingdom, full of work, but "hard work was no hardship" (Donoghue 53), showing that even she, royalty, is capable of working to support herself. When she thinks about the queen, she decides they "were living much the same kind of life" (Donoghue, 53). This again disrupts the traditional fairy tale aspiration of royalty by showing the pleasure one can take in one's own work, as well as showing how strong a woman can be.

The queen, however, finds Snow White, as if by fate. Snow White says, "I knew my stepmother would find me. The thread between us stretched thin, wound round trees and snagged in thickets, but never broken" (Donoghue 54). Here, Donoghue could be expressing discontentment with the traditional storyline, and her inability to change it for fear of being unrecognizable. It is, after all, a re-telling, and maintains the majority of the plot points. It also brings attention to the idea that this is happening because of fate, and her bloodline, and not simply because of hatred on the part of the queen. Again, there is an unwillingness to create a simple antagonistic wicked stepmother cliché. The queen fights against a very real threat: her stepdaughter has a claim to the throne that could cancel out her own.

Instead of disguising herself, as in the Grimms' version, the queen enters Snow White's home because Snow White allows her. When they are at the table together, it "felt like old times" (Donoghue 55). The three poisons, instead of killing Snow White, endow her with three stereotypical traits that feminist scholars frequently criticize in female characters in fairy tales, particularly Snow White. The first two are stupidity and idleness. The third turns her into an object, specifically a corpse, a "treasure, stowed away for safekeeping" (Donoghue 57). In accordance with female agency, Snow White wakes herself up after the queen poisons her with an apple, instead of a prince waking her with a kiss.

Expectations of, and refusal to submit to female sacrifice reflect strongly in several of these tales. Desy's "The Princess Who Stood On Her Own Two Feet" shows a princess's struggle to find her own strength while being courted by an insecure prince who requires her to sacrifice several important personal traits in order for the prince to

see her as desirable. In the end, the princess decides to stop sacrificing for the prince, showing that she has realized that her desires are as valid as his.

The characters are imperfect. At one point, the queen tells the princess that "you're aware of the very complex negotiations you have quite ruined" (Desy 47). The princess cuts her off, however, and replies that, "It is not necessarily my duty to sacrifice everything...a princess says what she thinks. A princess stands on her own two feet" (47). The princess demonstrates agency as she stands up both to the prince and her parents. She understands that the prince is repressing her, and leaves him, showing that she places her own well being above both male desire for her and familial, or patriarchal, duty.

The male characters offer insight into the gendered stereotypes of the kingdom. The wizard that lives in the princess's castle, who writes down the tale, can be seen to represent the traditionally male scribe that historicized events. He makes multiple comments on the princess's appearance within the relatively small story, and is afraid of offending her vanity when he notices that she resembles her afghan hound. When the princess asks him to make her shorter, he states that he only knows how to make her thinner. In the end of the tale, he "make[s] a note - that sometimes one must sacrifice for love" (47). He is corrected by a cat, who tells him that, "sometimes one must refuse to sacrifice" (47). The wizard is interpellated into the gender norms of the kingdom, but not intentionally malicious. He reinforces the gender norms within the story, but is frequently corrected by other characters, such as the cat.

The prince is unlike the wizard: his sexism only worsens throughout the tale. Near the end of their relationship, his insecurity is so extreme that the princess can only stay with him if she is bedridden, because standing would make her taller. Also mute, forced

to communicate through writing, because her witty phrases are more humorous than his own. The prince exerts agency only in repressing the princess, and in the end loses her. The tale rings with a message of gender equality, and the author rewards the princess sticking up for herself alongside punishing the prince for trying to exert dominance.

Similarly, the young girl in "The Tale of the Voice" sacrifices repeatedly to please the man she wants to be with. When the witch asks her what should change in order to make the prince love her, she says everything (Donoghue 192). She sacrifices her voice and agrees to experience quite a lot of pain. Just like the princess in "The Princess Who Stood on Her Own Two Feet" however, she decides it is not worth it. The message, as the witch states, is that she should be changing for herself, and not for what "another will ask of you" (192).

"...And Then the Prince Knelt Down and Tried to Put the Glass Slipper on Cinderella's Foot" by Judith Viorst is very similar. The story relies on readers' familiarity with the "Cinderella" tale, and covers only when the prince is seeking Cinderella. The title is nearly as long as the four-line story. Cinderella realizes that the prince is "not nearly as attractive as he seemed" and decides to "pretend that the glass slipper feels too tight" (73). This story communicates a message that at every point in a relationship, someone is still capable of changing his or her mind, and this is not to be stigmatized. Choosing a female, particularly Cinderella, to make this point is a small but pointed nod celebrating and illustrating female agency in choosing romantic partners, and ending relationships.

The story that deals most directly with class is "Snow White," part of The Merseyside Fairy Story Collective. It is a complex, feminist re-telling of the Snow White

story that features a few marked changes, particularly where feminism intersects with Marxism. The plot of the story deals with the same Queen and Snow White, but also a struggle between the Queen and the dwarves. Here, the Queen and the dwarves reflect Marxist conceptions of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, respectively.

The Queen is a matriarch that rules over her kingdom and Snow White actively works against her. She receives aid from the dwarves, but acts more as a leader and rally point than merely a contributor. The Queen tries to convince Snow White, forced to work in her workshop, to become a princess, or her daughter, but Snow White never relents, choosing instead to plot her escape from the castle. She is invaluable to the dwarves, and like other versions discussed in this work, she displays agency in making her own decisions. She decides not to be royalty, even though it could offer her rewards, and would be the easier decision. This story again disrupts the idealization to royalty, but it goes far beyond this.

The story features an uprising, with the dwarves determining to "send no more diamonds to the Queen" (79). This is a Marxist tale, as it features producers rising up to claim the labor of their work for themselves. Snow White leads the revolution, and admits that the queen "'may kill some of us...but in the end you will lose for there are far more people than there are soldiers'" (79). This story features a rebellious version of Snow White, one who examines and questions systems of power that privilege a minority while impoverishing the majority.

Finally, we have "The Tale of the Rose", the "Beauty and the Beast" variant again. It brings attention to the idea of woman as a commodity, highlighting Beauty's father's accidental loss of his daughter by changing it into him directly selling her to the

beast. The beast, however, is cleansed of potential guilt by asking Beauty if she comes consenting, which she does. Beauty does not consider herself as an object sold by her father. This tale provides two viewpoints, one from her father's eyes, and one from hers. Though he sees her as an object, she does not. She chooses to go to the castle, excited at the challenge, "as if [she] was riding into battle" (Donoghue 31). The protagonist is active and chooses her fate.

Phelps, author of *The Maid of the North*, unlike Donoghue and Zipes, strives to provide fairy tales from a broad collection of cultural tapestries. Donoghue based the majority of her tales on existing versions of the Grimms' or Perrault's, but Phelps re-tells feminist fairy tales (and folklore) from "approximately seventeen different ethnic cultures" (xi). Among others, one of the most pointed is "Scheherazade Retold", a re-telling of the framing story from *The Arabian Nights*. In older versions, and this one, Scheherazade marries a sultan who continually executes the women he marries. She rescues herself by telling him stories of such quality that every night he agrees to allow her to live another night in order to finish her tales.

At the end of this version, however, Phelps lists several unsatisfying endings that previous narrators have given Scheherazade: that she "cast herself at the Sultan's feet, begging for her life for the sake of her soon-to-be-orphaned children" or that the "wicked Sultan fell in love and lived happily ever after" (170). Phelps rejects these endings, saying that, "readers who can accept that the clever, courageous Scheherazade ended her days in this fashion may choose either of the above endings" (170) and goes on to observe that "many readers may well be disappointed with these meek and improbable endings" (173). She ends the story ambiguously, stating that Scheherazade continued to

save the women of the city by telling tales to the Sultan, and "wrote down…a more polished version of her one thousand and one tales" (173). Scheherazade here is a hero, a brilliant and well-educated storyteller who saves the women in all of Samarkand, where she and the Sultan live.

Importantly, the tale is not a romanticized version of the Middle East. The cruel Sultan is evil because he believed that the Sultana had been unfaithful, and because he had "gone mad" (167). This Sultan is very similar to Donoghue's version of the king in "Donkeyskin". Just as none of the cruelty comes from the area of the world in "Donkeyskin", none of the Sultan's cruelty comes from the Sultan's race or religion in "Scheherazade Retold". In fact, Scheherazade is only as intelligent as she is because she gets an education. Women are not shown to be treated poorly within Samarkand, aside from the ones which the Sultan marries.

An important aspect of *The Maid of the North* is the organizational structure. The index lists the tales in an order that has nothing to do with cultural tradition, with the European weaved among the non-European, and none are directly labeled as European. There is no "norm" or standard here, so to speak. The European tales are broken down to describe the cultural tradition from which they directly spring, including English, Norwegian, German, and Celtic. Multiple indigenous populations are represented, including American Indian, Canadian Indian and Zuni from the American Southwest. She goes into specifics in one, saying it is a Punjab Tale from West Pakistan. It shows that Phelps has done her research in order to accurately portray non-European folklore with strong female protagonists.

Donoghue (and most of the authors who contributed to *Don't Bet on the Prince*) make the point that happy endings are varied, and diverse. Different gender identities and sexualities show agency throughout the book. Happy endings, which can be diverse, are the result of hard work and careful thought, regardless of who is seeking them. The tales in *Don't Bet on The Prince* show that agency is not only for men. Donoghue extends that to a diverse range of gender and sexual identities, and Phelps weaves a cultural tapestry to show that it's not limited to European cultures. Zipes' collection brings feminism to fairy tales, Donoghue extends it to queer identities, and Phelps extends it to people of color.

CHAPTER III.

CONTEMPORARY DISNEY FILM

To an extent, the work of writers such as those above have had an impact on mainstream fairy tales, even those produced by Disney. Their female protagonists have each had more agency than the last, and *Brave* and *Frozen* eventually do away with demonizing identities. All of these movies are deeply flawed in terms of accurate representation, or representation at all. However, I wish to show that the trends for even mainstream children's fairy tales continually turn toward more egalitarian, fair representation.

The Princess and the Frog (2009)

The Princess and the Frog is the first Disney Princess movie with an African American princess. This is a step forward, albeit a step already taken multiple times before Disney. For example, a 1997 made-for-TV version of *Cinderella (1997)* features a multi racial cast, with the roles of both Cinderella and Prince Charming cast as people of color. The premise of casting the lead of *The Princess and the Frog* as African American is not particularly groundbreaking, though it is a step forward in that it would have a wide theatrical release. In many ways, though, this movie was one of the most progressive Disney princess movies to date. It is the first Disney princess movie with realistic economics, and still the only one. The female protagonist is an active person of color, the prince is not a prince charming stereotype, and the setting is not an idealized version of a

European country. I have separated this movie from the last three due to wanting to focus on different things in this one than the others.

Not only is Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* the first black Disney princess, the first African American princess, and the first American Disney Princess at all. Pocahontas comes to mind, but the setting of the film was before and during the European conquest of North America, before the establishment of the United States. In that context, Pocahontas was not an American Disney princess. *Pocahontas* is also the only other Disney princess movie to introduce racial variety. Both *Mulan* and *Aladdin* exclusively feature Asian or Arab characters, respectively. *The Princess and the Frog* features African American characters, white American characters, and Naveen, of ambiguous race and from an imaginary kingdom.

This is not done perfectly, however. The depiction of voodoo in the film is alarming, particularly because it's a religion that is still practiced in many parts of the world, including New Orleans. Choosing the villain of the story, Doctor Facilier, to portray the voodoo "witch doctor" trope is a subtle contribution to Othering African Americans. There is another magic wielding character in the film, Mama Odie. Her magic is different than that of Facilier: it's not voodoo. It is never directly called voodoo. Facilier relies on spirits, a staple in voodoo, but Mama Odie more directly resembles European-style magic in her use of potions and alchemy.

In many ways, Doctor Facilier is a re-iteration of the Jafar character in Aladdin: In the same way that Jafar is meant to appear more "recognizably Arab with his dark complexion," (Mallan and McGillis 12) Doctor Facilier is meant to appear more

recognizably black than Tiana. More than that, Doctor Facilier and Jafar are both meant

to appear effeminate. About Jafar, Mallan and McGillis write,

> Jafar's stature is regal, and his height is exaggerated to the point
>
> that he towers imperiously over the other characters. Furthermore,
>
> his gothic-styled clothes, theatrical mannerisms, exaggerated facial
>
> features, arched eyebrows, neatly curled goatee beard, and precise
>
> lisping speech and bitchy asides are the hallmarks of a camp
>
> sensibility. (Mallan and McGillis 12)

Both in terms of visuals and character, there are numerous parallels, including everything

listed aside from the goatee (which Facilier makes up for with the moustache) and several

others: both Jafar and Facilier easily switch from the "simpering sycophant" to

"conniving usurper" (Mallan and McGillis 12). They both have magical powers that, in

Disney movies, are typically reserved for women: they're single, power-hungry, and

cowardly. Put simply, both of these characters are caricatures of male homosexual

stereotypes informed by both feminine features and a gay camp aesthetic.

As I mentioned, the economics in the film are the most realistic yet. Released just

one year after the 2008 economic collapse, a good amount of *The Princess and the Frog*

relies on visible economic systems at work. Tiana works multiple service jobs, and her

lack of funds prevents her from fulfilling her dream of opening a restaurant until the end

of the move. Even her prince has no money. Tiana is actually the first Disney princess

movie to have any type of job. This would certainly be something that, in a vacuum could

be a neutral or positive message, but as Tiana is also the only black Disney princess, there

are racial undertones that project a message to children that black people work menial

service jobs. That Disney has yet to have another princess be anything but a princess furthers this.

The film satirizes previous Disney princesses: "Disney cannily anticipates possible backlash against classic Princess culture by creating a hyperbolic alternate "princess" within this film: a greedy (but ultimately good-hearted) friend of Tiana who thinks of nothing but marrying a prince" (Sweeny 71). Tiana is meant to supplant the role of traditional Disney princess. Not only is she active, she is realistically active. Her goals involve saving money to buy her own restaurant, while earning experience working at other restaurants.

One of the most important moments in this film occurs when Tiana tries to pay for the down payment on her restaurant. She is outbid, and two older white men tell her that "a little woman of [her] background would've had her hands full" trying to run a restaurant, and that she should not try to do more than work service jobs. This film realistically deals not only with socioeconomics, but socioeconomic oppression. Of course, it is coded racism: they speak to the poverty, but ignore that it is racialized poverty. In the end, Tiana does obtain her restaurant through hard work (and magic help), and runs it well, showing that these men were wrong.

It contains other flaws. Some critics have commented on the movie not providing a black Disney Prince. Deanna Bass, writing for NPR, says it best when she says "black boys desperately need images of a dashing, courageous, smart black prince as much as black girls need images of a charming, courageous, smart black princess". She writes, "The existence of interracial relationships on the screen does not offend me. The nonexistence of healthy, positive, inspiring black relationships offends me". This is a

valid argument, though it is worth noting that the film actually does feature a healthy, positive black relationship: Tiana's parents. She is one of the few Disney princesses with both parents alive, and has a healthy relationship with them. Naveen's race and nationality are ambiguous, though he is certainly not white.

Aside from not being white, Naveen breaks the traditional Prince Charming role in numerous other ways. He is not rich, and cannot support himself. He acknowledges that he has lived a privileged life that causes him to be unable to do anything for himself. Though he is still, "bold, active and lucky" (Lieberman 188), he's also lazy. Though he begins the tale searching for wealth ("Marriage is associated with getting rich" [Lieberman 188]), he ends up marrying for love, and not love based on beauty. Again, though, it is worth pointing out that up to this point all of Disney's white princes fit most of the characteristics of the Prince Charming cliché. The only ones that do not are Aladdin and Naveen.

This film still places marriage on a pedestal. The plot is set up to convince Tiana to work less, and "[t]oward the end of the film, she sacrifices her dream to become the froggy wife of Prince Naveen. When she makes the choice, she has no way of knowing she will ever be human again" (Lingerfelt 135). She ends up owning her own restaurant and marrying Naveen, but it's never revealed where she obtains the money to pay for it. Audiences are left knowing that before the wedding, Tiana cannot afford the restaurant, and after she can. Again, "marriage is associated with getting rich" (Lieberman 188).

It is, however, important that Tiana and Naveen do not return to his kingdom. Instead, their "happily ever after" is to remain in New Orleans, with Tiana opening a restaurant like she's always wanted. This too contributes to the diminishing pressure

placed on royalty and enhanced social status. Tiana's goals of owning her own restaurant

are lofty, but considerably more realistic than saving herself with royal help. They also

show that she has much more agency than many previous princesses: she takes her life

into her own hands. She sets her own goals, creates a plan involving hard work, and sets

out to achieve them. Again though, Tiana is one of the few Disney Princesses that does

not aspire to an idealized royalty. Among the others are Mulan, Pocahontas and Jasmine,

though the last two were born princesses. Disney movies have very clear dichotomies:

white women *aspire* to marry princes, women of color do not.

In many ways, this is still old and new Disney. Compared to *Aladdin*, it's at least

a step in the right direction. The handling of race within *The Princess and the Frog* had

several stereotypical tropes in it, but Tiana is an impressive and realistic character. The

subtle Othering is still there, though considerably more toned-down than *Aladdin*. Disney

here takes one step forward and a step back. The movie was celebrated by audiences at its

release simply for depictions of a black Disney princesses, which I will also praise, but it

is hardly without it's problems.

<p align="center">*Tangled, Brave,* and *Frozen*</p>

After *The Princess and the Frog*, three Disney movies in particular lend

themselves to feminist analyses: *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*. All three films feature

strong female protagonists who construct their lives based on their own needs and

desires. Every Disney princess in these films shows agency, and strength. Where many

previous Disney princesses wait for a prince to save them, or are otherwise unable to save

themselves, this new generation is active, intelligent, and strong. That being said, each of

these films, even while eliminating or minimizing hegemonic gender roles, upholds other

hegemonic stereotypes. In particular, Disney returns to creating only Eurocentric fairy tales.

Compared to earlier Disney movies, these films feature fewer character clichés, particularly fewer gendered clichés, such as the evil old witch, or the passive princess, and they have all received praise for this. On a close reading, however, all three films still contain damaging elements of older fairy tales, and new ones by way of contemporary American film. In particular, the types of bodies that are depicted, especially female bodies, and the non-treatment of race within all three of the films is problematic. The three films, like *The Princess and the Frog*, have mixed messages: they are progressive for the Disney genre, but are still flawed.

Brave focuses on Merida's agency throughout the film, her right to determine if and whom she wants to marry. The princes offered to her are not shown to object to the marriage, and all compete in the contest willingly, belying a cultural assumption that men are supposed to try to win women, as objects or prizes. The three princes, and all of their fathers, are still patriarchal. Merida's father is one of the only male characters that show any emotion at all, aside from anger, which is a stereotypical, gendered trope.

Actually, many of the depictions of the male characters are problematic. Most are boorish and unintelligent oafs who are unable to grasp concepts that Merida and her mother are able to quickly understand. They are valued purely for their physical strength. Though the women in the movie, at least Merida and her mother, end up rebelling against the traditional gender roles of their kingdom, the majority of the men are stuck in patriarchal clichés. The only person forced to confront her own ingrained sexism is Merida's mother, and the only person who has to fight against patriarchal gender norms

is Merida, putting the burden of fighting against those norms firmly on the shoulders of the female characters.

None of these movies has an actual villain: in *Frozen*, Elsa is stylized in a way that reflects earlier Disney witches, such as in *Snow White and The Seven Dwarves* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Her makeup is heavier after her transformation; she wears heels, and more provocative clothing, with considerably more skin exposed. Her neckline plunges and her dress features a split up the side. As the ice queen, she is the most provocative looking Disney princess yet, though she changes her outfit back to the more conservative one when she leaves the ice tower. The main difference between Elsa and the traditional wicked witch trope is that she is beautiful, like every other Disney princess. More importantly, she is not intentionally evil. Creating a powerful female character is extremely progressive for Disney, especially when they avoid demonizing sexuality. Still, this belies a cultural relationship between female power and female sexuality.

On one hand, Elsa is her most powerful, and most content, in the scene where she sings the now wildly-popular "Let It Go", where she constructs her own ice palace to escape society that does not accept her. Another viewer could see Elsa as selfish, deserting her kingdom and responsibilities in order to achieve personal satisfaction. After her sister tells her that she has created an eternal winter in the kingdom, she refuses to return to try and help the kingdom. I would argue that in doing this, Elsa demonstrates agency and self-protection, not selfishness.

The similarities are not only visual: she is a powerful woman with no love interest, she has extraordinary magical powers and as I mentioned she causes a great deal of suffering. Unlike other female Disney villains, however, Elsa's character is fully

realized, and not malicious. Any damage she does is a result of her attempt to escape from a society that cannot accept her: her only motive is to protect herself. As the producer, Peter Del Vecho says, "There are times when Elsa does villainous things but because you understand where it comes from, from this desire to defend herself, you can always relate to her" (Parkin). She is a hybrid between the wicked witch and the Disney princess tropes: she has the strength, independence and power of the wicked witch without the cruelty or ugliness, and she has the vulnerability and beauty of a Disney princess without the passivity, weakness or simplicity. She is certainly a step forward in terms of visual representation of women in Disney's fairy tale movies, though it remains troubling that in order to be viewed as a protagonist, she must be beautiful.

Anna, the younger sister, begins the story as a typical Disney fairy tale princess. At least it is clear that she aspires to this sort of lifestyle. On the night of her sister's coronation, the first night that she is able to socialize with anyone outside of the castle grounds, she fantasizes about at least meeting someone to begin a romantic relationship with. As it turns out, she does, and she wants to marry him immediately. *Frozen* features a fair amount of social realism, but in no part more than Elsa's reaction when Anna asks for her blessing: disbelief, and a statement that, "you can't marry someone you just met". This can be read as a criticism of the earlier Disney movies that feature a princess quickly falling in love with, and marrying, a prince. Much in the way that *Kissing the Witch* aims to subvert gender roles in the literary fairy tale, *Frozen* functions in a similar way to subvert gendered expectations. This is a direct statement on previous movies, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella,* and several others in which the young princess does that exact thing.

Like *Brave*, female familial love resolves the main plot point. In *Frozen*, Ana is thawed by older sister's love, a play on the fairy tale trope of being woken up by true love. In *Brave*, it is Merida's love for her mother that helps to undo the spell and return her to human form. This addresses criticisms of fairy tales constantly focusing on marriage as the central plot point. As Lieberman argues, "marriage is literally the end of the story" (200). This change reflects a willingness to continue changing fairy tale plots to reflect more diversity in lifestyles, and agency in young protagonists.

The animators ran into difficulty animating the female faces in *Frozen*, and admitted this caused controversy (Cunningham). Though of course this should cause controversy, the chagrin should not be directed toward the animators, but the film industry. It is a reflection of inexperience animating female faces, which is a fault in the animated film industry and the very real gap between how many male and female characters are shown. It reflects a cultural mindset of a woman as a subaltern, and shows a cultural assumption of similarity among women, in contrast to the difference and individuality among male faces. It also shows that there have been fewer movies with multiple, distinct female movies. Animating *Frozen* was only difficult to do because there was a much smaller body of work to draw on when animating the female faces in the film.

Also in terms of animation, the body types shown in all three films are strictly gendered, and are all exaggerated to the point of impossibility. The majority of the female characters in the film, including all of the protagonists, reflect an impossibly thin beauty standard. Their waist-sizes, on an existing human, are literally unattainable. If a real woman were to strive to this body type, she would die long before obtaining it. Of course,

I am not objecting to showing thin women as beautiful, which would be no better than objecting to depictions of heavier women as beautiful; the problem lies in exclusively depicting impossibly thin women as the only beautiful women alongside a refusal to show any woman that is not considered beautiful. In the few places that one can see a heavier woman she is used as a comedic trope. The servant in *Brave*, for example, repeatedly ends up terrified after seeing Queen Elinor as a bear, or Merida's three younger brothers as bears.

Most of the more prominent male characters, such as Merida's father, and Anna's love interest Kristoff, along with several supporting characters, are both so heavily muscled as to be as unobtainable as the feminine ideal represented with in the female characters. Unlike the female characters, however, there is some diversity among the body types of the male characters that are meant to be attractive. Flynn, in *Tangled,* is a realistic body type. Many of the male characters in *Brave,* including Merida's heavily muscled father, are not necessarily depicted as attractive. Merida's mother, however, is just as thin as the other female characters. Everyone in these movies benefits from being attractive, but for the female characters, it is necessary in order to be either a protagonist or even just have very much screen time.

Though all of these films show shifting cultural norms toward more egalitarian gender norms, traditional gender norms are still strictly enforced in all but *Brave*. Gender fluidity in *Brave* and *Frozen* is minimal, but not absent (it is absent in *Tangled)*. There is a brief moment in *Frozen* that features a gay couple with children, but it is less than five seconds. Merida has several interests that upset her mother because of their gendered implications, such as her interest in archery, which she considers masculine, and her

disinterest in feminine tasks, such as embroidery or fashion. She is clumsy, uninterested in her appearance and has a social demeanor that is more in line with her father than her mother. Merida's mother constantly tries to reinforce traditional gender norms by forcing Merida to wear restricting outfits and asking her to stop spending so much time practicing her archery.

Brave also pokes the cliché of older women being wicked, vain and magical. The witch in *Brave* is not evil, though she is reminiscent of other older Disney witches, as well as the source of the main plot point: she creates the magic that turns Queen Elinor into a bear. However, this is also the catalyst to changing the relationship between Merida and her mother. Her character differs from the traditional unattractive older witch in several respects: she does not intend to cause any damage to the protagonists, and does not need vanquishing in the end of the film. She's also perfectly content with her appearance, or at least does not show any desire to change it. Unlike demonizing vanity in the older women of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Sleeping Beauty,* she has come to terms with the older role that she adopts later in her life. Her character has traits of a fairy godmother, such as trying to help the protagonist, and providing the comic relief for the film. It shows a loosening of the old crone/benevolent fairy godmother dichotomy that limited older women in fairy tales to the traditionally matriarchal fairy godmother role or the evil self-interested crone role.

Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, on the other hand, is an anachronism in contemporary fairy tales: she reflects a continued simultaneous demonization of female aging and vanity. Her ugliness comes along with her aging, which she can only prevent by capturing and abusing Rapunzel. For this character, her vanity is more important than

even the life of the princess of the kingdom she lives in. She is the only true villain in the

three movies. It speaks to Disney's awareness of the danger of demonizing older,

unattractive women that they seem to have done away with in *Brave* and *Frozen*.

The movie has positive attributes, however. In *Tangled*, a thief not a prince,

accompanies the princess. It is a relationship that crosses the boundaries of social class.

This contributes to the slackening idealization of royalty within fairy tales. He is certainly

no Prince Charming trope. He lies and steals repeatedly in the film. It is also one of the

few fairy tales in which the princess is the one who improves the social class of a male,

instead of the other way around. Most frequently, nobility in traditional fairy tales ends

up married to other nobility, but in rare occurrences that this does not happen, such as the

Cinderella tale, or Disney's *Mulan,* or *The Princess and the Frog*, royalty is usually

achieved by a young woman through a prince, cementing monarchial authority in the

domain of the male. In *Tangled,* however, Rapunzel raises Flynn's social status by

marrying him. This contributes both to the deteriorating romanticism of royalty and the

willingness to accept women as powerful agents within mainstream fairy tales.

Something troubling within all of these films is that not only do all of these

prominently feature exclusively white, able-bodied princesses but they also have

exclusively white, able-bodied characters. There are absolutely no characters in any of

the three films that is anything but fair-skinned and white. A convincing argument could

be constructed that these films are all set in white European countries, such as Scotland

for *Brave* and Denmark for *Frozen*, but if the argument is that it would be historically

inaccurate for people of color to exist in Europe in the romanticized past that these

movies attempt to recreate, it is entirely irrelevant. As I've outlined, Disney has

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mountains of fairy tales that it could choose from that are not Eurocentric. More, there are multiple scenes in *Frozen* that feature rooms full of people, and there is not even a person of color in the background.

In the case of *Tangled*, the setting is not as easily pinned-down as the other two. It continues the common fairy tale trope of placing the characters in a vaguely European fantasy location, unlike *Brave* and *Frozen*. As I previously mentioned, fantasy settings allow for complete societal restructure, and the inclusion of a person of color, especially in one of the many marketplace settings filled with characters in *Tangled*, would have been very simple.

Even the titles reflect a less gendered market. Older Disney princess movies feature the names of the protagonist either as, or included in, the title. They are preserving the title of fairy tales as well as marking it as appealing to a female audience; among others, *Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mulan* and *Pocahontas* can all be included in this category. I would argue that this reflects a realistic awareness in advertising that a movie with a gender-neutral title will reach a broader audience than one that is gendered in a feminine way, which again shows the equation of female with Otherness. Still, this shows that Disney is still trying to market fairy tales to all children, instead of just young girls.

Taken together, these four films reflect "a mixture of progressive and regressive traits" (Hollinger 75). Hollinger makes this argument about earlier Disney movies, released from 1989-1998, but the corporation has continued along this path. Their movies tread the line between progressive and regressive enough to be praised for their progressive traits, but not enough to be criticized for their regressive traits. Though

several storytelling aspects have changed, regressive undertones still lie within the works, especially the unrealistic beauty standard and the near segregation of race among the collection of their movies.

These three films reflect a shifting market base that increasingly sees, and objects to, controversy in media. It also reflects unfinished and ongoing cultural movements that have begun to whittle away larger hegemonic blocks, such as only depicting passive princesses, while continuing to only depict extraordinarily thin princesses. If the Disney princess movies are taken as a genre, *Tangled, Brave*, and *Frozen* are the most progressive thus far, and reflect a desire to provide more liberating gender roles for children. However, taken as separate works, they are confusingly mixed in their messages. All three are products of teams that work within a culture that interpellates individuals into antifeminist mindsets. Some gendered stereotypes, with so many hands on the finished product, are bound to seep into the films.

I do not believe that it would be a misstep to assume that the primary aim of these movies was to gain as much revenue as possible. However, as I mentioned, they reflect a marketplace that is continually learning about the damaging cultural norms and stereotypes in children's movies. Though there are anachronisms, such as Doctor Facilier, Mother Gothel, the impossibly thin body types and the happily ever after trope in *Tangled* that is tied up in reclaiming royalty, these movies change and arguably improve several fairy tale tropes to bring them up to contemporary ideological standards. All of the princesses in the four movies discussed are active, display agency, and are not primarily focused on obtaining marriage. These movies offer mixed messages to avoid

controversy, and this is a good way of looking at what messages children are being offered about gender in contemporary American society.

Conclusion

In sum, this project gives a very brief overview of the state of gender and sexuality in contemporary fairy tales. Given that these tales are finely ingrained in humanity, it is important to interrogate them for damaging hegemonies in order to insure that future retellings are able to avoid contributing to systemic oppression. Positioning Disney as a mainstream distributor, we can see how subversion through individual writers has gradually whittled away some of these retellings. Disney has begun to take notice of its market base.

It has also given us somewhere to look in the future: intersections. Mainstream fairy tales are picking up on feminism, and they're picking up on race. Unfortunately, Disney tends to regress, as we see in the overbearing whiteness of *Brave* and *Frozen*. New faces are beginning to populate fairy tales, but they begin in print, only later to be featured in film. Disney's foray into feminism has given it new film franchises with *Brave* and *Frozen.* I would argue that what we see in print would eventually filter down to mainstream movies, should it be profitable. As long as the trend among top-selling literary fairy tales verges on radical, Disney will trail behind.

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