Apr 21st, 1:00 AM - 2:30 AM

Long May She Reign: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender Expectations in Disney’s Tangled and Disney/Pixar’s Brave

Caitlin J. Saladino
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Repository Citation
Saladino, Caitlin J., "Long May She Reign: A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender Expectations in Disney’s Tangled and Disney/Pixar’s Brave" (2014). Graduate Research Symposium (GCUA), 4.
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/grad_symposium/2014/april_21/4

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research (GCUA) at Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Symposium (GCUA) by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
A Rhetorical Analysis of Gender Expectations in Disney’s *Tangled* and Disney/Pixar’s *Brave*

**Abstract**

This project addresses messages about gender expectations in Disney princess narratives. The two films included in my project are *Tangled* (2010) and *Brave* (2012), which feature the most recently released princesses to the marketed Disney Princess line (Rapunzel and Merida, respectively). Using genre as an organizing principle, I argue that Rapunzel and Merida are different from the past Disney princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, Ariel, Jasmine, etc.) because their narratives reflect new ideas about gender expectations in modern society. The central tension appearing in both films is the opposition between the image of woman as traditional, domestic, and dependent and woman as progressive, motivated, and independent. The ways in which Rapunzel and Merida address this tension reflects changing roles of women in society more generally. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel experiences consciousness-raising in her quest for self-discovery, and the film’s audience is invited to experience consciousness-raising about gender expectations. In *Brave*, Merida’s quest for control of her own destiny is in tension with the expectations of her mother; the tension is reflective of the unrealistic expectations of the can-do discourse in society, which influences young women to believe they can have a rewarding life as a home maker and achieve a fulfilling professional career if only they are willing to work hard enough. I feel that these messages appear most explicitly in the princess narratives and song lyrics in each film. These messages are considered moral messages because they suggest ways about how the world ought to be, and therefore may resonate with young children who view Rapunzel and Merida as role models. My thesis is a valuable addition to current communication studies literature because while princesses have been analyzed thematically in the past, a scholarly investigation of Disney’s newest princesses has yet to be published. Disney’s prominence in American culture suggests that this research can appeal to a large readership beyond the walls of academia.

**Extrinsic / Conceptual Background**

**Rhetoric** = the way that people use messages to create meaning

- *“Criticism must be polymorphous because rhetorical acts are polymorphous”* (1)
- Polysemous - multiple meanings
- Polyphormous - multiple forms

Disney Princess Marketing Line
- started in 2000
- fastest growing Disney brand
- largest franchise worldwide for girls age 2 - 6

**“Genre” as an Organizing Principle**

**1957-1959**
- Snow White, Cinderella, & Aurora
- passive, domestic, waiting for marriage as rescue

**1989-1998**
- Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, & Mulan
- active, adventurous, but marriage as hegemonic end

**2009- present**
- Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida
- determined, rebellious, disinterested in marriage

Through this historical account, I argue that Disney princesses speak and act in ways reflective of gender expectations of women in society during the time the films were released.

**Justifying the Study of Rapunzel and Merida:**

1. Examining gender AND race is outside the scope of this project.
2. The tension for both princesses originates in expectations set forth by their mothers.
3. Rapunzel and Merida are the two most recent princesses.

**Tangled**

**Synopsis:**

“Rapunzel spends most of her life in a tower with her chameleon friend, Pascal, imagining the world outside. When she meets Flynn Rider, the two of them go on an adventure so she can finally live her dream.”

**Consciousness-Raising**

- A rhetorical strategy of the affective, of the validity of personal experience, of the necessity for self-exposure and self-criticism, of the value of dialogue, and the goal of autonomous, individual decision making.
- Stay True:
  - Rapunzel’s Consciousness-Raising
  - Rapunzel’s Narrative as Consciousness-Raising for Film’s Audience

**Androgyny**

- Androgynous individuals are independent, industrious and courageous, and at the same time they are nurturing, tender, and expressive. They do not rely on gender as an organizing principle.

**Mother Imposes Control on Princess’ Ambition**

- Rapunzel.
- Merida.

**Mother’s Control Conflicts with Princess’ Ambition**

- Princess’ Ambition Reigns over Mother’s

**Conclusions & Future Directions**

**Moral Messages**

“Messages about how we ought to live, about morality”

1. Marriage is not a necessary evil.
2. Keying traditions is necessary in the quest for self-discovery.
3. Standing up for yourself is important.
4. A "real girl" should be polysemous.

Opinion editorial writer, Katie Patton states, “As adults, we know that what makes a princess, of the Disney or real-life variety, isn’t what she is wearing or how she looks; whether Prince Charming sweeps her off her feet or she carves her own independent path. What makes a princess is, who she is and what she stands for.”

- **Frozen (2013)**
- **Disney’s “I Am A Princess” Campaign**