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

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Repository Citation

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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 in 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 innovative, assertive, 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 also 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 queen. Merida’s experience 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 mother. I find 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 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.

Extrinsic / Conceptual Background

Rhetoric is the way that people use messages to create meaning.

- Criticism must be polymorphous because rhetorical acts are polysemous.
- Polysemous - multiple meanings
- Polymorphous - 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
- Walt Disney Company
- women excluded from creative roles

1989-1998
- Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, & Mulan
- active, adventurous, but marriage at hegemonic end
- Walt Disney Company
- women included in creative roles, but no lead roles

2009-present
- Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida
- determined, rebellious, uninterested in marriage
- Walt Disney Company
- women occupy leadership roles in film production
- female directors and producers

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.

Conclusions & Future Directions

Moral Messages
- "messages about how we ought to live, about morality"

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

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