Disney’s Progressive Mulan: Examining Frozen as a Feminist “Breakthrough” for Disney

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Frozen has been lauded as a feminist breakthrough for the Disney movies. However, there are movies that came before it that were much more progressive. Mulan, for example, defies many of the stereotypes that the old movies perpetuate, specifically gender stereotypes. In the discussion of Frozen as a breakthrough film, many generalizations about the old films have been presented. In this way, the films that preceded it are lumped together. Discussions of Frozen as feminist have included the assertion that Frozen is progressive because gender is not portrayed in a stereotypical manner. However, Mulan’s portrayal of gender also breaks from tradition. Additionally, many argue that Frozen is progressive because it pokes fun at the idea of marrying someone you just met and there is no wedding in the film. Although this holds true, Mulan does not marry someone she just met (or anyone at all, in fact). In these discussions of Frozen by popular reviewers and of the previous Disney movies by scholars, Mulan is overlooked as the progressive film that it is. Although Frozen is very progressive in some ways, it is not actually a feminist breakthrough for Disney since Mulan, which came many years before it, was actually more progressive in many ways.

Many scholars believe that Disney movies perpetuate gender stereotypes (Ayob, Ayres, England, Held, Liebermann). In Ayres’ book, The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom, Ayres explores the Disney franchise, attempting to uncover stereotypes and patterns in the movies. Ayres asserts that “disney perpetuates a nineteenth century notion of
domestic ideology: Women are to be submissive, self-denying, modest, childlike, innocent, industrious, maternal, and angelic” (39). In contrast, she argues that the men are aggressive and decisive, frequently taking the lead. Ayres is not the only scholar to hold this belief. Ayob delves into the positive and negative aspects of Disney films in her article “The Mixed Blessings of Disney’s Classic Fairy Tales.” She also believes that a reinforcement of stereotypical views of women remains one of the negative effects of the films: “Ever since Mickey mouse came onto the scene in the 1930s… Disney films continue to reinforce hegemony of gender ideology in America” (48). In other words, Ayob argues that Disney has always presented gender in a stereotypical way and continues to today. In the article “Gender role portrayal and the Disney Princess”, the authors explored the gender differences between female and male characters in the Disney films, and found that there are “strongly gendered messages present in the resolutions of the movies [that] help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity” (England et al. 565). These writers all argue that these anti-progressive messages serve to reinforce the patriarchal system wherein men have power and women are submissive, obedient, and exist to be looked at.

Another common generalization about the Disney movies before Frozen is that the female characters always look a certain way. Specifically, they are all preposterously slim and attractive: “Princesses are always slim and curvy, with soft, beautiful features” (Ayob 56). This sexualized portrayal of women provides an unattainable model for young girls to emulate. In Dismantling a Myth: A Critical Analysis of Disney’s Mulan in Relationship to Structures Common to Animated Films, the author explains the problem with films having this type of role model for girls: “Images seem to be polar opposites where the female is either the beautiful,
popular and mentally impaired cheerleader, or she is the brainy, not-so-cute editor of the school paper. Neither of these images is particularly empowering for young women because they place extreme limitations on what role women can embody” (Held 19). Held is referring to film in general, but the limitations found in Disney movies are even more stifling because the princesses are only the former (Ayres, Ayob). The unrealistic depiction of female characters in the Disney movies stems from the sexist conception that women’s worth derives from their physical appearance. With these princesses as a model for young girls, the implication is that “they must grow up to be like Snow White, who uses her beauty to attract a man so that she can serve him and serve her children” (Ayres 43).

These generalizations do have some merit. Recognizing that a lot of the older Disney movies are littered with stereotypes representative of old, antifeminist ideals allows critical reflection and understanding of existing power dynamics. In many cases, the heroine embodies the submissive, obedient, physically attractive cast. She is also helpless and in need of saving by a man, as Liebermann explains in “Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale,” in which she examines fairy tales in general, as well as Disney in particular. When examining Disney, she explains that the princesses always wait for princes to save them and are incapable of saving themselves (Liebermann 129). These assertions are indisputably true for some of the Disney films such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. However, by grouping Mulan with films like these, they have been condemned as antifeminist and backward, when in reality, that could not be farther than the truth. Although some films fit the mold, over-generalizations have lead progressive films like Mulan to be (denounced as stereotypical and overlooked as feminist as a result).
Mulan is perhaps the most progressive movie in the Disney series. Although the main character, Mulan, is not technically a princess, Disney adopted her into the franchise. The movie, created in 1998, focuses on the story of Fa Mulan, a brave young woman who saves China from the Hun army. The movie opens with the Hun’s invasion, and the emperor drafts one man from every family to protect China. Defying the patriarchal system, Mulan speaks out when her crippled father is summoned to join the fight because she worries for his safety. In order to protect him, she assumes the appearance of a man and joins the army, where she must prove herself as a soldier. Mulan states early on what she hopes to accomplish she wants to bring her family honor, find her place, and prove herself. She ends up doing so by saving the entirety of China by impersonating a soldier, defeating the Hun army, and saving the emperor himself.

Mulan’s portrayal of gender is anything but stereotypical, as many scholars have argued (Ayob, Ayres, Held, Liebermann). In fact, there are many instances where Mulan blurs gender lines and the fundamental differences between the genders is obscured and questioned. For example, often when discussions of men or manliness occur in the movie, the films juxtaposes ideals of traditional masculinity with the female protagonist Mulan. For example, during the scene where the emperor instructs his subordinates to draft and train more men, he explains that “a single grain of rice can tip the scale. One man can be the difference between victory and defeat.” Immediately afterwards, the film cuts to Mulan, who is holding a single grain of rice, suggesting that she embodies that one “man,” which equates “man” to woman. The same type of unification of the two traditionally distinct genders appears again during the training sequence for the soldiers. As Mulan and the others train, the song “I’ll Make A Man Out of You” plays, touting traditional ideals of masculinity. The song’s chorus:

Be a Man
We must be swift as a coursing river
Be a man
With all the force of a great tycoon
Be a man
With all of the strength of a raging fire” (20-25)

clearly associates masculinity with strength and physical prowess. However, Mulan is the first one to “be a man”. The troops are performing poorly and she herself is sent home, but refuses to heed the orders. Instead, she proves that she is a man by demonstrating physical capability and retrieving an arrow that none of the men had been able to reach. Following, all of the troops are shown improving and becoming good soldiers, with Mulan as their leader. Again, the difference between man and woman is obscured as Mulan, the woman, becomes the example of the ideal man.

Additionally, at both the beginning and the end of the movie, the metaphor of a late blooming flower, an object traditionally used to symbolize femininity, is applied to Mulan. First, Mulan’s father tries to comfort her as they sit under a flowering tree: “My, what beautiful blossoms we have this year. But look, this one's late,” he says, indicating the only closed blossom on the tree. “But I'll bet that when it blooms, it will be the most beautiful of all,” he finishes, tucking the flower behind Mulan’s ear. Later, after Mulan has saved the emperor, he tells Shang that “the flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all,” referring to Mulan. Finally, as Mulan’s father awaits her return while sitting under the tree from earlier, the last flower falls onto his lap (now in bloom). Immediately after it falls, Mulan enters. Comparing Mulan to a flower while also celebrating her as the ideal man further blurs the line between femininity and masculinity.
Mulan also does not fit the stereotypical cast of the Disney princess as submissive, obedient, and unintelligent, as many scholars have argued all Disney princesses do (Ayres, Liebermann, Held,). Mulan speaks out multiple times in the movie. For example, when her family’s name is called and her father walks forward to accept his call to war, Mulan steps in-between him and the royal official, saying that her father cannot go and has already fought for China. Then later, at the dinner table, the family eats in silence, no one acknowledging that her father will soon go to war until Mulan slams down her cup of tea, exclaiming “you shouldn't have to go! There are plenty of young men to fight for China!” Even as her father interjects, trying to subdue her, Mulan persists. Also, in the battle against the Hun army, Mulan disobeys direct orders from her general, Captain Shang. Mulan knows that she must shoot the last cannon at the mountain rather than the Hun’s leader, Shan Yu, and she takes it and runs even as Shang yells in the background for her to come back. The film clearly shows Mulan in the forefront of the scene, running away from Shang’s authority as a blurry figure in the background.

This scene also shows Mulan’s intelligence. When the rest of the soldiers see how greatly outnumbered they are against the Hun army, they resign themselves to dying in combat. Shang dictates that the last cannon should be aimed at Shan Yu. Mulan however looks at the reflection of the mountain in her sword and is struck with an idea. She brilliantly realizes that by shooting the cannon at the mountain, she can create an avalanche that will wipe out the entire army instead of just Shan Yu. This intelligence is shown early on in the movie as well. While Mulan prepares to meet with the Matchmaker, she walks by two old men playing checkers. After looking at the board for only a second or two, she makes a move for one of the men that wins the game. Additionally, at the end of the movie when Shan Yu has invaded the palace, Mulan is the one who comes up with the idea to dress as women in order to enter the palace. In her final battle
against Shan Yu, she is weaponless, but smart and resourceful as she utilizes her fan to twist Shan Yu’s sword out of his hand and bind him to the roof, which she has already rigged to explode.

The over generalizations about past Disney movies, which have been perpetuated by many scholars, have led to the false belief that Mulan is not progressive. Consequently, Frozen created a huge buzz as the first feminist Disney movie. Frozen (2013) is the story of Anna and Elsa, two sister princesses. Elsa has the seemingly unlimited power to freeze things, and is forced to conceal herself and her power by her parents after she harms Anna as a child. They become estranged and distant, despite Anna’s efforts. After their parents pass away, Elsa is crowned queen and at her coronation her powers are revealed to everyone. She flees to the mountains and accidentally freezes the entirety of her kingdom. Anna sets out in hopes of reconciling with her sister as well as reversing the magic.

Many reviews and blogs praise Frozen for being the first to defy traditional gender stereotypes (Halbur, Fairchild, Rosten). For example, Petra Halbur, a frequent reviewer of film and other media for the last two years, explains that “after years of princess movies wallowing in mediocrity… it was such a glorious relief to watch a movie that’s progressive” (1). Halbur efficiently casts every movie before Frozen as anti-progressive just as she heaps praise upon Frozen for being the first of its kind. She exhibits the same tendency to overgeneralize the old films as the scholars Ayres, Ayob, Libermann, England, and Held. However, one key issue that all of these reviewers miss is the way the female characters look in the movies. The character of Mulan is a cut above both the characters of Elsa and Anna because they are both ridiculously thin and attractive, just as scholars argue that anti-progressive princesses are (Ayob, Ayres, Held). Mulan, on the other hand, has a much more realistic shape:
Whereas Anna and Elsa are both skinny and traditionally attractive (see Figure 1), Mulan defies this trope. Mulan has thick, muscular legs and arms as the result of rigorous training (see Figure 2). Her waist is a reasonable size and she is not traditionally beautiful. When Mulan came out in 1998, it gave young girls an aesthetically new model to aspire to. Frozen just exhibits more of the old, as the female characters are stick thin and exceedingly attractive.

Halbur also argues that the complexity of Anna and Elsa’s character is what makes the film more progressive than the past films: “Elsa and Anna have distinctive personalities that take more than a single adjective to summarize” (1). Although true, this assertion dismisses all of the past princesses as one dimensional, which intelligent, brave, cunning, strong Mulan is not. Similarly, Writer Megan Fairchild, who reviews for The Speaking Eagle, argues that “Anna and Elsa are both a new brand of princess” due to their complex character roles (1). Although Frozen has extremely progressive elements, these reviewers assertion that it as the first of its kind falls short in the face of Mulan. Anna and Elsa are undoubtedly complex characters. Anna is brave and confident, but somewhat helpless and naive. When she rushes out to save her sister she shows great bravery and confidence in her ability, but she does not consider the practicality of entering a
blizzard without a coat or the fact that she has no idea how to survive or find her way. As a result, she needs the help of Kristoff to find Elsa. She is definitely flawed and not one-dimensional. Elsa’s complexity stems from her struggle to accept herself and her fear of her powers. The movie displays Elsa’s eventual acceptance and understanding of her powers, which shows character growth. Neither of these characters are one dimensional, but argued that they are the first to have multiple dimensions is false. Mulan has many different characteristics and flaws as well, including a lack of self confidence she must overcome in order to become a good soldier.

Reviewers also argue that Frozen is progressive because there is no wedding at the end of the movie or, similarly, that it is the first Disney tale to not revolve around romantic love (Fairchild, Hensatri, Rosten, Verzuh). Fairchild, claims that since “neither girls’ main goal in the film is to marry into safety,” it is progressive. Here, Fairchild assumes that all of the past films do end in marriage, consequently making Frozen a breakthrough for Disney. Similarly, Hensatri, a blog writer who frequently reviews movies, argues that the films mock the trope of “marrying someone you just met,” which supposedly takes place in all of the past films. Shelby Rosten, a writer for Feminspire, a website that prides itself in feminist reviews and articles, argues that Frozen is “the first Princess movie to not revolve entirely around a love interest or romantic love” (1). Jennifer Verzuh, writer for the “Empire State Tribune,” argues that Frozen is progressive simply because it does not feature a wedding. Although all of this is true of Frozen, it is also true of Mulan, which came out 15 years prior to Frozen. In Frozen, the central focus is on Anna and Elsa’s relationship as sisters and it does not end in a wedding. However, in Mulan, the central focus is on Mulan bringing honor to her family and finding her place in the world. Shang becomes a love interest at the conclusion of the film, but he is asked to stay for dinner, and was
not “resolved in Mulan’s inevitable marriage to the general,” (Fairchild 1). These writers aim to praise Frozen as a breakthrough, but they use arguments that hold true for Mulan as well.

In light of Mulan’s extremely progressive portrayals of gender, it is surprising that Frozen has been praised as a feminist breakthrough. Although “feminism” is hard to define, the scholar Bell Hooks attempts to in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. She concludes that there exists no one definition of feminism, but a commonality exists between them all. At its roots, feminisms stems from “the struggles to end oppression- to change existing power relations between men and women” (Hooks 29). Mulan strives to do just that as the main character rebels against the patriarchal system and proves that preassigned gender roles are false. Although Frozen does exhibit women in power and defies some gender norms, it does not challenge traditional power dynamics in the way that Mulan does. Mulan obscures the differences between male and female and presents a female main character who is not ridiculously skinny, attractive, and helpless. It features a female lead who oozes strength, intelligence, and determination. Frozen has progressive elements as well. Anna and Elsa defy gender stereotypes found in some of the previous movies, such as women as submissive and searching solely for love. However, Mulan does not exhibit these traits, either. Therefore, Frozen cannot be praised as the first of its kind since Mulan came out 15 years before it. Frozen ultimately fails as a feminist breakthrough film in the face of Mulan.
Works Cited


