

Feminist Figures or Damsels in Distress? The Media's Gendered Misrepresentation of Disney Princesses

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A gender bias seems to exist when discussing Disney princesses in entertainment media that could have significant consequences for girls who admire these heroines. Prior research and my own extensions have shown that modern princesses display almost equal amounts of masculine and feminine qualities; however, my research on film reviews shows an inaccurate representation of these qualities. These media perpetuate sexist ideals for women in society by including traditionally feminine vocabulary, degrading physical descriptions, and inaccuracies about the films, as well as syntax and critiques that trivialize the heroines' accomplishments and suggest the characters are not empowered enough. The reviews also encourage unhealthy competition between the princesses and devote significantly more words to these negative trends than to positive discussions. These patterns result in the depiction of the princesses as more stereotypically feminine and weak than is indicated by the films themselves, which hinders the creation of role models for girls.

Despite significant strides women have made toward combatting sexism in American society, news and entertainment media representations of women continue to be one of the many obstacles left before reaching equality. Numerous studies have identified gender bias in the ways media represent women (Fink and Kensicki; Niven and Zilber; Shacar; Wood). Media tend to favor representations of women who are “traditionally feminine” as well as not “too able, too powerful, or too confident,” over more complex representations (Wood 33). For example, research by Janet Fink and Linda Jean Kensicki shows that when media aimed at both men and women discuss female athletes, their focus is on sex appeal, fashion, and family rather than athletic accomplishment. Female scientists as well as female members of Congress also fall victim to this

trend. Interviews with male scientists often portray them as primarily professionals while interviews with female scientists tend to reference their professionalism while highlighting domesticity and family life (Shacar). Similarly, media descriptions of the female members of Congress focus on domestic issues even though the congresswomen portray themselves as having diverse interests (Niven and Zilber). In sum, biased, gendered representations of women are common in various forms of media.

Media misrepresentation of women in these ways can lead to significant social consequences, such as reinforcing antiquated gender roles and diminishing the perception of women's impact on society (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek; Fink and Kensicki; Graves; Niven and Zilber; Shacar; Wood). Since media are

likely one of the most powerful and pervasive influences on how society views men and women, their misrepresentation of gender has the potential to impact what is viewed as normal or appropriate for men and women in society (Wood 31-2). Media's influence on children is especially important to examine since "consistently portrayed gender role images may be interpreted as 'normal' by children and become connected with their concepts of socially acceptable behavior and morality" (England et al. 557). As such, the development of children's gender role perceptions is of great importance, as it impacts how children view themselves and society.

Disney movies remain some of the most influential sources of gender role images for children, given their popularity, and these films, especially their portrayal of princesses, have been heavily analyzed for their gendered content (England et al. 555). Overall, researchers do not agree on the progressiveness of Disney princesses; some suggest the princesses are passive and promote strict gender roles, while others see them as balanced role models embodying both feminine and masculine qualities (Bell, Haas, and Sells; De Rozario; England et al.; Rorich; Steedman; Warner; Watsko; Westland). Many traditional feminist texts have "condemned... familiar fairy stories for encoding and therefore encouraging passive female behavior" and "reinforcing... restrictive images of girlhood and womanhood" (Westland 237). These critiques suggest that fairytales imply women must be innocent, beautiful, and passive, and as such, many are hesitant to see Disney princess movies as positive for children (Steedman 141). However, other analysis of the first eight Disney princesses (Snow White through Mulan) has discovered that the princess often holds

power in her film and that any passivity is more in response to "the ambitions of the femme fatale" (De Rozario 42). For example, any fear or passivity shown by Snow White is directed toward the Evil Queen, another woman; similarly, the princesses Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Ariel all face female villains. Analysis has also found that the princesses are often the ones making choices that drive the plot and outcome of the movie (De Rozario 41). These findings as well as recent work by Dawn England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa Collier-Meek (2011) suggest that Disney princesses do not conform to the standard male dominance/female submissiveness pattern common in antiquated fairy tales. England et al. code the princes' and princess' actions and expressions of traits in their films as traditionally masculine or feminine to find that although the original three princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty) represent more traditional feminine ideals, the newer princesses are extremely close to portraying equal amounts of masculine and feminine characteristics. Why, then, does the perception that Disney princesses only represent sexist ideals for women persist when the newer heroines portray both feminine and masculine characteristics?

After studying media portrayals of the Disney princesses by examining film reviews from prominent publications for the Disney princess movies, I contend that entertainment media reinforce traditional gender roles for the princesses, much as news media do with female athletes, scientists, and politicians. I further contend that negative portrayals of Disney princesses in film reviews have the potential to impact the creation of positive role models for young girls by misrepresenting the characters that children often admire and emulate.

While Disney is often criticized for producing stereotypical female heroines who do not embody the concept of strong feminist role models, my own research on film reviews paired with existing scholarship on the movies demonstrates that, in fact, entertainment media through film reviews, rather than the movies themselves, might primarily create and contribute to this perception. By including traditionally feminine vocabulary, degrading physical descriptions, and inaccuracies about the films, film reviews emphasize stereotypically female attributes of the characters and ignore their more masculine strengths. Additionally, even when acknowledging the princesses' talents or empowered nature, film reviews include syntax and critiques that serve to trivialize any accomplishments and suggest the characters are not fully empowered. Furthermore, film reviews consistently compare the princesses to one another, contributing to the devaluing of the individual female characters and creating the implication that only one kind of woman can be an example of success.

Methods

To conduct my research, I first expanded on the work of England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek. They studied gender portrayals of both the princes and princesses in the first nine Disney princess movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog*) using a coded content analysis approach. To do so, they documented all instances of a prince or princess performing a stereotypically “male” trait (such as athleticism, bravery, or independence) as well as any time a prince or princess performed a “female” trait (such as

nurturing, showing emotion, or being submissive). In all, they coded fourteen expressions of traits as male characteristics and seventeen as female characteristics (see Table 1).

Masculine	Feminine
Physically strong	Affectionate
Assertive	Shows emotion
Athletic	Fearful
Curious	Troublesome
Unemotional	Tends to appearance
Gives advice	Helpful
Inspires fear	Nurturing
Brave	Submissive
Leader	Sensitive
Rescues	Collapse crying
Intellectual activity	Pretty
Explores	Asks for help
Independent	Physically weak
Handsome	Ashamed
	Victim
	Gets rescued
	Tentative

Table 1. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek's Coding of Masculine/Feminine Characteristics

While this study provides an excellent basis of comparison from which to critique film reviews, it was completed before the release of *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*. As such, I re-coded two films England et al. had already coded (*Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan*) to ensure my interpretation of the coding procedure was sufficiently similar. I then replicated their coding procedure for *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*. These results show my re-coding to be sufficiently similar to England et al.'s coding, and the overall percentages show the more recent princesses display almost equal amounts of masculine and feminine characteristics (see Table 2).

Princess	Masculine	Feminine
Snow White	8.67%	91.3%
Cinderella	18.3%	81.7%
Aurora	11.6%	88.4%
Ariel	38.5%	61.5%
Belle	47% / 51.2*	53% / 48.8*
Jasmine	39.4%	60.6%
Pocahontas	44.7%	55.3%
Mulan	42.3% / 49.5*	57.7% / 50.5*
Tiana	46.6%	53.4%
Merida	54.5%*	45.4%*
Rapunzel	50.7%*	49.2%*
Anna	47.8%*	52.2%*
Elsa	48.8%*	51.2%*

Table 2. Coding of Masculine/Feminine Characteristics by Princess.

*My coding results.

After completing the coding of the films, I collected film reviews that were published at the time of each movie's premiere. I sought three to five reviews per film from prestigious or popular publications, such as national newspapers, as these would be more likely to reach a wide audience and have a greater impact. Sources of reviews included *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. I also included reviews by Roger Ebert, often proclaimed as the nation's most influential film critic, posted to his website. In total, I studied 38 film reviews: four each for *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *Tangled*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Princess and the Frog*, and three each for *The Little Mermaid*, *Frozen*, and *Brave*. Only two acceptable reviews could be found for *Cinderella* and *Snow White* and one for *Sleeping Beauty*; however, analysis of these films was not critical to my study, as they are older films and analyzing current media

representations of female characters requires investigation of newer film reviews.

After finding the reviews, I analyzed their diction, syntax, and content and discovered six prominent patterns: 1) traditionally feminine vocabulary, 2) degrading physical descriptions, 3) inaccuracies about the films, 4) syntax and critiques that serve to trivialize accomplishments, 5) suggestions the characters are not fully empowered, and 6) comparisons between the princesses. I then reread the film reviews, noting every term used to describe the princesses and collecting all quotes found in the film reviews. I sorted the vocabulary terms used to describe the princesses into the categories of masculine and feminine based on England et al.'s coding procedure. However, I added to their coding a third category—neutral—to describe phrases and words that did not fit clearly into the masculine and feminine categories because they served as weakened versions of traditionally male terms. For example, the use of the phrase “using quick thinking” would be categorized as neutral, as it embodies an attempt to describe the male trait of intelligence yet represents a deliberate choice on the part of the reviewer to avoid using such strong language. I found this reluctance to use strong masculine words when describing the princesses to be significant and wanted it reflected in my analysis. I also performed a quantitative analysis by recording the total word count as well as the number of words used to describe the princesses in a positive manner (depicting them or acknowledging their accomplishments in a manner not indicative of the six negative trends) and number of words used to describe the princesses in a manner illustrating the six negative trends.

Findings & Discussion

Analysis of the diction, syntax, and content of film reviews for the Disney princess movies suggests it is entertainment news media, rather than Disney, which characterize the heroines primarily in terms of their traditionally feminine traits. Through my analysis of the film reviews, I noticed six recurring patterns that contribute to these inaccurate and problematic media portrayals of the Disney princesses—traditionally feminine vocabulary, degrading physical descriptions, inaccuracies about the films, syntax and critiques that serve to trivialize accomplishments, suggestions that the characters are not fully empowered, and comparisons between the princesses. These trends, as I demonstrate below, emphasize stereotypically negative female attributes of the characters and ignore their more stereotypical masculine strengths while belittling the characters in ways that suggest they are not fit to be role models for young girls. Overall, I coded 95 instances of feminine vocabulary, 32 instances of masculine vocabulary, and 54 instances of neutral vocabulary; 22 instances of degrading physical descriptions, 17 instances of film inaccuracies, 26 instances of problematic syntax, 23 critiques that the princesses are not fully empowered, and 8 instances of reviews creating competition between the princesses (see Table 3).

Discourse Pattern	Coded Instances
Vocabulary	95 female, 32 male, 54 neutral
Physical description	22
Inaccuracies	17
Syntax	26
Not fully empowered	23
Competition	8

Table 3. Results Summary

Vocabulary

One way film reviews construct inaccurate representations of the princesses is with the use of gendered vocabulary. Although England et al.'s and my own analysis of the films identify the contemporary princesses as exhibiting almost as many masculine qualities as feminine characteristics, the vocabulary used to describe the princesses in reviews focuses on what would be considered stereotypically feminine attributes—for example, “beautiful,” “flirty,” “sweet,” and “kind.” The diction used in the reviews is also often demeaning, such as “little princess,” “wee lass,” or “little nymph.” While some masculine terms are used, such as “independent,” “brave,” and “bold,” these are included much more sparingly and generally only appeared in one or two reviews per film. If the reviews accurately represent the princesses in the films, almost half of the vocabulary used to describe the heroines should have been masculine in nature; instead, 92 adjectives used are stereotypically feminine and only 32 are stereotypically masculine.

Additionally, there are 54 coded instances of reviewers choosing to include neutral terms that could be considered weakened versions of masculine language—for example, using “plucky” rather than “brave” when adjectives like “courageous,” “gutsy,” “heroic,” or “valiant” could have been chosen. In another example, “spunky” and “feisty” are used over “courageous,” “energetic,” or “fearless.” And in one final example, “intelligent” is often replaced with more modest phrases, such as reviews of *Mulan* that applaud her for “using quick thinking” and “using her wits” (Ebert, Gleiberman). Similarly, rather than clearly describing Belle’s intellect and love of reading, reviews mention that she is “a bookworm” or “lived

in the world of her favorite library books” (Gleiberman, Ebert). Thus, the reviews tend toward weaker language when describing any princesses’ strength that did not fit into sexist ideals for women. The fact that the reviewers seem to recognize masculine traits in the princesses but still portray them in a weaker light suggests that either reviewers are reluctant to acknowledge these characteristics, they purposefully choose to emphasize the feminine traits, or they are unable to recognize strong traits in women.

Analysis of word count reinforces this tendency toward negative characterizations—out of the 38 film reviews analyzed, only nine devote more words to positive descriptions of the characters than negative ones. The reviews include an average of 4.12 percent of words based on positive descriptions but an average of 11.72 percent of words for negative descriptions. Overall,

the reviews include much lengthier negative descriptions of the princesses or descriptions that are indicative of the six problematic trends mentioned earlier. Thus, the diction in the film reviews contributes to the misrepresentation of the princesses and exemplifies the tendency to depict the characters in a more stereotypically feminine and negative manner.

Physical Descriptions

The inclusion of demeaning physical descriptions of the princesses also serves to weaken their characters and perpetuate sexist ideals for women. About 20 percent of the reviews studied focus solely on the heroines’ appearances rather than their personalities and do so in a way that is more demeaning than complementary—for example, “sexy little honey bunch,” “Bambi with curves,” “a babe,” and “real housewife” (see Table 4).

Princess	Physical Descriptions
Ariel	“She’s a sexy little honey-bunch with a double-scallop-shell bra and a mane of red hair tossed in tumble-out-of-bed Southern California salon style. She has no gills, but, when she smiles, she shows an acre of Farrah Fawcett teeth.” (Wilmington)
Belle	“Provincial beauty Belle (Bambi with curves)” (Howe)
Pocahontas	“Pocahontas is a babe . She’s the first Disney animated heroine since Tinker Bell with great legs —maybe with any legs. She wears form-fitting, off-the-shoulder buckskin that would be as much at home in Beverly Hills as in 17th-century Jamestown. She’s got sloe eyes, a rosebud mouth, billowing black hair and terrific muscle tone.” (Maslin) “A strapping, high-cheekboned update of the usual Disney princess—she’s an aerobicized Native American superbabe , with long, muscular brown legs, regal shoulder blades, and silky black hair flowing down to her waist. With her vacuous Asian doll eyes, she looks ready to host <i>Pocahontas’ House of Style</i> .” (Gleiberman)
Merida	“A nice girl in a pretty green dress .” (Schwarzbaum)
Elsa	“Her flashy physical transformation from prim princess to ice queen does make her resemble a real housewife of some sort, however.” (Lemire)

Table 4. Examples of Physical Descriptions of the Princesses

These descriptions are often lengthy and constitute most of the depictions of the heroine. For example, Gleiberman's review describes Pocahontas as "a strapping, high-cheekboned update of the usual Disney princess—she's an aerobicized Native American superbabe, with long, muscular brown legs, regal shoulder blades, and silky black hair flowing down to her waist," but includes no attempts to characterize her personality. Not only does he focus exclusively on Pocahontas's physical appearance, but he does so in an extremely sexual way. This is evident in a second review for Pocahontas as well, which describes Pocahontas as "a babe" and "the first Disney animated heroine since Tinker Bell with great legs—maybe with any legs" (Maslin). The fact that several different reviews describe Pocahontas in this manner demonstrates a consistent problem with the sexualization of this Disney Princess. In another example, Elsa is described as looking like a "real housewife of some sort," which is degrading in a different sense—once again, the reviewer focuses on her physical appearance, but this time the implication is that she is not intelligent, the commonly held stereotype toward the "Real Housewives" (Lemire). Portrayals such as these undermine the princesses as role models or authority figures by implying that their physical appearances are more important than anything else. Moreover, the highly sexualized nature of many of these descriptions is even more degrading as it perpetuates the view of women as little more than sexual objects for men.

The nature of the descriptions is actually more sexist and degrading for the 1990's princesses than for the older princesses, showing a lack of progress. Whereas the reviews for *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* never say more than "beautiful," "doll-faced," or "voluptuous," the

newer reviews use phrases like "sexy little honey bunch" (Crowther; Nugent; Flinn; Wilmington). This trend is not represented in the reviews for Mulan or Tiana, most likely because Mulan spends the film dressed as a man and Tiana in the form of a frog. The lack of any physical descriptions of Mulan's male alter ego or Tiana's transformed state suggests reviewers do not find physical descriptions to be relevant to understanding the film, showing the prior descriptions to be not simply degrading but unnecessary as well.

Film Inaccuracies

In addition to focusing on their physical descriptions, film reviewers sometimes misrepresent the princesses by including inaccuracies or erroneous descriptions of the events in the movies. The inclusion of film inaccuracies is a consistent trend, with 17 coded instances of inaccuracies out of the 38 reviews studied (see Table 5).

Reviews often contain small errors or misjudgments about the plot that slightly distort the events in the film. While it could be possible that the film reviews simplify the plots or make such mistakes because they are attempting to avoid revealing too much about the films, the descriptions of male secondary characters (the genie in *Aladdin* or Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, for example) are accurate and detailed. When describing the princesses, however, inaccuracies are abundant, and in almost every case, the misrepresentation is one that makes the princess seem more stereotypically feminine. For example, two different reviews suggest Elsa and Anna "became estranged" due to the fact that a prince fell in love with Anna when their issues actually predated this event. This inaccuracy makes Elsa seem jealous and trivializes their relationship.

Princess	Innaccuraacies/Misrepresentations
Ariel	"Although there is a primal power to this story that most recent Disney cartoons lack—a sense of desperate striving, the pain of worlds out of reach, life-or-death determination—it still sometimes seems nothing vital is at stake here: just hunk dreamboat Prince Eric. " (Wilmington)
Jasmine	"Jasmine's main concern is deciding whom she will marry. " "Distraught, she flees from the palace." (Maslin)
Pocahontas	"The dramatic challenge in the movie... is that her father disapproves of the man she loves, because he belongs to a different race." (Ebert) "When her intended is shot dead by a young British soldier and Smith is taken prisoner, her immediate thought is, 'I'll never see John Smith again!' So much for any lingering regrets over the dead fiancé." (Ebert)
Anna & Elsa	"But a run-in with an amorous, visiting prince who sets his sights on Anna triggers Elsa's ire , and she inadvertently plunges the sunny, idyllic kingdom into perpetual winter." (Lemire) "The sisters become estranged when Anna falls in love at first sight with Hans (Santino Fontana)... and Elsa forbids them to marry." (Holden) "Until a winty tantrum gets her banished from the kingdom" (Gleiberman)

Table 5. Examples of Inaccuracies or Misrepresentations in Film Reviews

Gleiberman's review states Elsa is banished after a "winty tantrum," a flawed and negative interpretation of the actual events of the film; rather than being banished, Elsa chose to exile herself after mistakenly revealing her powers and endangering her kingdom.

These inaccuracies can be small errors, such as explaining, "Belle becomes [the Beast's] captive" (Gleiberman). Though it may seem insignificant, the phrasing of this review implies Belle passively submits to the Beast, when instead she actively and knowingly sacrifices herself for her father. Occasionally, however, the descriptions include ideas that are alarmingly inaccurate and completely misrepresent the character—for example, saying "Jasmine's main concern is deciding whom she will marry" when the film clearly shows Jasmine does not want to

be betrothed in such a manner, as early in the film she protests "I am not a prize to be won!" (Maslin). Similar to the way the reviews include stereotypically feminine vocabulary, this pattern distorts the characters and their films in ways that suggest the princesses are more stereotypically feminine (passive, shallow, etc.) than the films indicate.

Problematic Syntax

The reviews also use syntax that devalues any strengths or accomplishments made by the princesses in their films. Instead of solely including a positive message about the heroine, there are 26 coded instances of reviews juxtaposing commendations with criticism about the character or film, effectively undermining positive portrayals of the women (see Table 6).

In one striking example, rather than just

Princess	Problematic Syntax
Belle	"I want so much more than they've got planned," she sings with dippy yearning . The prince she wants, of course, is captured inside the Beast. When the monster captures Belle's father for wandering onto his property, an encounter is ensured." (Howe)
Pocahontas	"Since these lessons are taught by an Indian maiden with a waist-length mane of black hair, an hourglass figure and a Playmate face, John Smith's heart finds it easy to listen." (Ebert)
Mulan	"The movie breaks with the tradition in which the male hero rescues the heroine, but is still totally sold on the Western idea of romantic love. " (Ebert) "But the story's obvious feminist themes don't overload or swamp the picture." (Wilmington)
Tiana	"Hard work, though, also makes the adult Tiana something of a drudge and a bore. " (Dargis)
Merida	"Merida ends up with a quest too, but because she's female and to the throne born, she also comes with some tricky princess baggage, notably the queen." (Dargis)
Anna & Elsa	"It encourages young women to support and stay loyal to each other—a crucial message when mean girls seem so prevalent—as long as some hunky potential suitors and adorable, wise-cracking creatures also are around to complete them. " (Lemire)

Table 6. Examples of Problematic Syntax in the Film Reviews

saying Pocahontas teaches John Smith important moral lessons, one reviewer trivializes her character by suggesting that "since these lessons are taught by an Indian maiden with a waist-length mane of black hair, an hourglass figure and a Playmate face, John Smith's heart finds it easy to listen" (Ebert). By using this juxtaposition, this reviewer suggests that Pocahontas' impact on John is dependent on her sex appeal rather than her intellectual contributions. In another example, a reviewer describes Belle in the following manner: "I want so much more than they've got planned," she sings with dippy yearning. The prince she wants, of course, is captured inside the Beast" (Howe). This passage lessens the significance and positive message of Belle's line about wanting more than society has in store for her by suggesting that the dream she's yearning for

is a prince rather than "adventure in the great wide somewhere" as the movie explains. This inaccuracy makes Belle seem lovesick and frivolous rather than inquisitive and adventurous, a more accurate description of her character. In a final example, a review for *Mulan* states, "The message here is standard feminist empowerment: Defy the matchmaker, dress as a boy, and choose your own career. But 'Mulan' has it both ways, since inevitably Mulan's heart goes pitty-pat over Shang" (Ebert). By discussing Mulan in this manner, the reviewer acknowledges the theme of the movie is empowerment, but then implies the aforementioned theme is irrelevant considering she falls in love anyway, a problematic message that puts restrictions on women who wish to be empowered. This pattern of juxtaposing positive messages about the princesses with

negative critiques not only identifies an existing prejudice toward strong females but also contributes to the problematic portrayal of the princesses by undervaluing the characters' achievements and implying they are not fit to be role models.

Not Fully Empowered

Despite these consistent tendencies to portray strong heroines as weaker, more traditionally feminine characters, the reviews also regularly include criticisms suggesting the princesses are not empowered enough to qualify as role models—this pattern is recorded 23 times throughout analysis of the 38 reviews (see Table 7).

These critiques are usually misrepresentations of the film or suggest that a princess's promotion of feminist values is irrelevant if

she falls in love. This not only suggests that the princesses shouldn't be role models but also seems to imply a woman is less of a feminist if she falls in love. For example, one review mentions, "For all of Mulan's courage and independence in rebelling against the matchmakers, this is still enough of a fairy tale to need Mr. Right" (Maslin). This comment suggests that the fact that Mulan meets her "Mr. Right" somehow detracts from the "courage and independence" the reviewer previously acknowledges. Another review includes the passage, "Flustered and fearful, Elsa dashes away in a fit of self-imposed exile—which significantly weakens *Frozen*, since she's the film's most complicated and compelling figure" (Lemire). This description suggests that Elsa is less

Princess	"Not Fully Empowered" Critiques
Jasmine	"Uses words like "fabulous" and "amazing" to express unremarkable thoughts." (Maslin)
Pocahontas	"Only by aging the brave and precocious Pocahontas from 12 or 13 into the flirty, full-grown vixen she becomes here, and by making her so concerned with finding Mr. Right, does the film send any regrettable message. " (Maslin)
Mulan	"The message here is standard feminist empowerment: Defy the matchmaker, dress as a boy, and choose your own career. But "Mulan" has it both ways, since inevitably Mulan's heart goes pitty-pat over Shang. " (Ebert) "Sign me up for the next war!" exclaims the heroine's grandmother, in a show of what does not precisely qualify as progress for women. " (Maslin) "For all of Mulan's courage and independence in rebelling against the matchmakers, this is still enough of a fairy tale to need Mr. Right. " (Maslin)
Tiana	"What she does have, like most Disney heroines, is a prince charming, Naveen" (Dargis) "The prince, disappointingly if not surprisingly, becomes not only Tiana's salvation but also that of the movie" (Dargis)
Merida	"Merida doesn't dream that her prince will come; she doesn't have to because... the alternative is comically unthinkable. It's no great surprise that she wins the struggle to determine her fate. But hers is a contingent freedom won with smiles, acquiescence and a literal needle and thread with which she neatly sews up the story, repairing a world where girls and women know exactly where they stand. " (Dargis)
Anna & Elsa	"Flustered and fearful, Elsa dashes away in a fit of self-imposed exile—which significantly weakens "Frozen," since she's the film's most complicated and compelling figure. (Lemire)

Table 7. Examples of Critiques that Princesses are Not Fully Empowered

compelling since she experiences fear, a feminine trait under England et al.’s coding system—which in turn suggests that Elsa’s display of fear weakens her character and the film by implying women cannot be afraid and still portray feminist values, a problematic message that could lead young girls to believe displaying any feminine qualities detracts from their potential.

Compared to the other patterns of attempting to portray the characters in a more traditionally feminine light, this trend may seem contradictory. The other patterns seem to perpetuate stereotypical values for women, whereas critiques saying the princesses are not empowered enough would lead readers to assume the reviewers do not wish these stereotypical values to be perpetuated. Nonetheless, it is an example of another way to prevent the creation of positive role models for girls by implying none of the existing princesses are truly empowered.

Creating Competition

Finally, the reviews create a sort of competition for the princesses to be the smartest, bravest, or most empowered, a pattern found in eight of the 38 reviews studied. This trend

not only weakens the perception of all the princesses individually but also leads to the idea that only one princess can be a role model instead of offering young girls a variety of women to serve as good examples (see Table 8).

In one example, instead of complimenting Mulan on her intelligence, the review qualifies her intelligence by comparing it to others—“Far more than *Beauty and the Beast* or the stolidly virtuous *Pocahontas*, *Mulan* showcases a girl who gets to use her wits” (Gleiberman). This example highlights the fact that the reviews tend to use the inclusion of positive remarks about the princesses as opportunities to criticize the other princesses rather than praise the princess being discussed. In another example, Anna and Elsa are commended by saying “they are a little more psychologically complex than their Disney forerunners,” and the film *Brave* is admired because it “applauds the heroics of a female person for a change” (Holden, Schwarzbaum). Rather than outright praising the newer princesses, the reviews use these “compliments” as chances to belittle the previous princesses, a pattern detrimental to all princesses involved. Unfortunately,

Princess	Competition
Ariel	“The heroine, a mermaid named Ariel, is even capable of wit, which is more than could ever be said of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella. ” (Maslin)
Jasmine	“Princess Jasmine is the most full-bodied (in every sense) of the new Disney heroines.” (Burr)
Mulan	“Far more than <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> or the stolidly virtuous <i>Pocahontas</i> , <i>Mulan</i> showcases a girl who gets to use her wits.” (Gleiberman)
Merida	“Makes headlines first of all because the movie applauds the heroics of a female person for a change. ” (Schwarzbaum)
Anna & Elsa	“But they are a little more psychologically complex than their Disney forerunners.” (Holden)

Table 8: Examples of Creating Competition Between Princesses

rather than demonstrating positive qualities of the princesses, this pattern only serves to criticize the other princesses and likely encourages the opinion that no princess is qualified to be a role model.

Conclusions and Implications

Although Disney is often criticized for the stereotypically feminine nature of its princesses, my analysis along with England et al.'s demonstrates that entertainment media film reviews contributes to this misperception. Misrepresentation of these heroines is a continuation of the aforementioned pattern wherein media use gender bias when discussing women, as identified in studies on media representations of female athletes, scientists, and politicians (Fink and Kensicki; Niven and Zilber; Shacar; Wood). Just as "journalists commonly work with gendered frames to simplify... events when covering women and men in public life" (Niven and Zilber 155), it would seem that these gendered frames apply to film reviews and entertainment media's presentations of Disney princesses as well. The result of these gendered frames is an inaccurate portrayal of women that serves to "perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions" of women (Wood 31). These perceptions, it seems, can lead to internal biases when examining the films and even could be a contributing factor to the disagreements regarding whether princesses are feminist figures or damsels in distress. It is possible that these gendered media representations of the princesses contribute to researchers' perceptions and could explain why some remain adamant that the princesses are negative influences for girls even when faced with evidence to the contrary.

Whether or not Disney heroines should be idols for young girls will most likely remain

open to debate; however, researchers and the public cannot ignore gendered media misrepresentations of the princesses in film reviews, and should consider the ways in which this influences internal biases or prejudices against the princesses. It is especially important that media influence is recognized because their distortions of Disney princesses likely have an important impact on young girls and society. As Julia Wood explains, "Because media pervade our lives, the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women" (32). By taking characters that are often depicted as strong women and describing them as weak and only portraying stereotypical feminine qualities, these media distort the public's perception of these women, which possibly even "diminishes the pipeline of women's leadership" (Devitt 12). By subtly influencing society's views of Disney princesses in a way that implies they are stereotypically feminine, these media weaken the perception of the princess's strengths and commendable qualities and focus instead on traits such as beauty and domesticity. These patterns could potentially impact the creation of positive role models for young girls by misrepresenting the characters children admire.

As children are likely to look up to Disney characters for years to come, it is critical that media tendencies to inaccurately portray princesses be further studied. This research could be extended to analyze the portrayal of other female characters in Disney movies as well as media representations of female characters in other kinds of movies. Moreover, future research could examine children's perceptions of the Disney princesses at various age levels in order to determine whether or not adults are more likely to subscribe to

these inaccurate portrayals than children. princesses contributes to the ongoing
 Regardless of what future research may dis- research on gender in media and identifies
 cover, this analysis of entertainment news remaining disparities in gender equality.
 media misrepresentations of Disney

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