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Disney's Postfeminist Follies: Disney's Postfeminist Portrayal of Women in the age of Fourth

Wave of Feminism

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Department Honors Thesis

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Introduction:

In 2022, Disney found itself in the middle of a political battle over identity when its CEO Bob Chpek spoke out against a bill that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed. The bill, dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” restricted the ways that teachers in the state’s public schools could discuss gender identity and sexuality with their students. The public confrontation between the Governor and the CEO sparked public debates in which DeSantis’ supporters derisively labeled Disney as “woke.” This historical and critical analysis uses Disney’s animated features with human, female leads that were released between 2013 and 2023 to demonstrate that the characters and central themes, not only do not warrant the criticisms levied by those like Governor DeSantis, but instead demonstrate an embrace of a post-feminist rhetoric that undercuts some of these films seemingly more progressive shifts.

Frozen (2013), *Moana* (2016), *Encanto* (2021), and *Turning Red* (2022) each feature human, female heroines who seek adventure and must overcome a personal or external obstacle unrelated to romance. Following the rise of Fourth Wave feminism in 2007, Disney began to cater to the demand for more nuanced female representations. Heroines began to occupy more fluid gender roles through shifting sets of masculine and feminine traits. A woman’s social role within these films actively changes from 2013 to 2023. The heroines became less domestic, less sexualized, and took on more active and powerful roles within their social circles. Disney broke the classic princess mold with *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013). Both films shifted away from traditional romance-centered happy endings, which marked Disney’s “Progression period.” Garabedian defines this as a time in which Disney began to challenge traditional female gender roles (Garabedian, 25). This period contrasts with classic Disney movies, like *Cinderella* (1950) or *Beauty and The Beast* (1992), where audiences see men and women carry out much more

traditional gender roles that clearly reinforce patriarchal norms. Classic princesses are often naive, sensitive, nurturing, helpful, fearful, attractive, and in need of rescuing. They embody a more traditional version of femininity. Meanwhile, the princes who rescue them tend to be athletic, handsome, intelligent, independent, brave, and leaders of other men. They exhibit traditionally masculine characteristics, but by early 2010s Disney characters began to shift.

Audiences began to see heroines more prone to taking on traditionally masculine attributes such as independence, perseverance, courage, athleticism, and intelligence. At the same time, male characters would often possess some feminine attributes as they became more sensitive and more reliant on their female counterparts. On the surface these shifts seem to suggest, and arguably do show, some significant evolution for Disney's female leads; however, when situated within the fuller context of the films, they become post-feminist characters. By omitting or decentralizing the heterosexual romance, Disney's plots open the door for more opportunities to portray women breaking stereotypes.

By releasing more progressive movies in the backdrop of significant social and political change, Disney seemingly aligns itself with these feminist ideologies. Disney's post-feminist rhetoric may appeal to feminist notions of gender equality but these stories simultaneously employ what Seybold calls an "androcentric narrative template" that seems to ignore gender difference (Seybold, 76). She says that embracing such a postfeminist template risks ignoring structural gender inequalities, which may pervert the feminist endeavor by misrepresenting it as misandry, a theoretical political oppression/victimization of men (Seybold, 74). While Disney clearly reflects the shift in how American culture defines what a woman is or should be, the female protagonists in these films still operate within predominantly patriarchal societies – much in the same way that women in the real world do. These constructed story worlds wrongly depict

gender inequality as an illusion by portraying misogyny as mere inequality instead of systemic oppression. Despite the shifts in character representation, the reality that Disney promotes seems to remain patriarchal, yet ironically also one in which gender equality has been achieved. A close analysis of these films and their characters reveals that any suggestion that Disney has become “woke” in recent years is premature at best.

The Qualities of a Heroine:

The original Disney Princess archetype encompasses an optimistic, elegant, kind, light-skinned, and often light-haired young woman. She is also meek, dependent on a male hero, and naive. Princesses that graced the screen during the first three feminist Waves rely heavily on the benevolence and bravery of the men and magical beings who rescue them or aid their journeys. Heroines created during the Fourth Wave are more assertive and more likely to attempt heroic acts. They also are less dependent on male heroes and supernatural helpers. Yet, these characters problematically portray a post-feminist world. Despite all their empowering sass and optimism, Disney perpetuates “female submission to male interests, expectations, power, and leadership” (Seybold, 73). They remain below men in the power hierarchy. Furthermore, the princesses’ continued reliance on male helpers illustrates Seybold’s contention that male characters remain essential to her personal fulfillment, general happiness, and most importantly success (Seybold, 73). By not allowing female protagonists to succeed without male intervention, Disney “preserves, idealizes, and values male dominance, rather than gender equality” (Seybold, 73). Disney places the fate of female protagonists in the hands of men, thus undercutting their independence.

These heroines seek something outside their homes and/or to change something within them. The films feature either a rejection of domesticity or some struggle with the heroine's connection to it. Heroines who venture outside the home and into a generally dangerous outside world tend to reject domesticity in favor of taking the proverbial hero's journey (Schiele et al., 665). When the protagonist is not seen cooking or cleaning or child-rearing, then she represents an implicit rejection of domestication. Such an implicit rejection becomes more explicit when a character actively leaves the home behind them, which are often paired with a similar rejection of the "damsel in distress" trope in which the female character is victimized and rendered in need of rescue by the usually male hero. As Hine observes, Disney heroines from this era tend to take on more significant narrative roles and are more likely to exhibit traits often associated with male characters of the past (Hine et al., 9).

For example, in *Frozen*, Anna saves Kristoff from a pack of wolves by throwing a flaming sleeping bag at the animals attacking him (00:42:40). She also prevents Kristoff from falling off a cliff by throwing him an ax attached to a rope (00:43:24). She quickly takes action to save not only herself, but also save Kristoff from the predators chasing them in the snowy woods. Similarly, Moana scales the side of a mountain alongside Maui and proves her athletic ability (00:55:30). Moana also exhibits bravery very early in her life when her grandmother tells a scary story that frightens all the children except Moana (00:03:49). Both heroines exhibit the athleticism and bravery necessary to be deemed a hero and those actions situate them outside of domesticity. In contrast, Mirabel and Mei are female characters who remain more connected to the domestic sphere. They express their independence and assertiveness differently. In *Encanto* and *Turning Red*, the heroines loudly confront family members. They do not display meekness or passivity. Instead, they are willing to engage and prepared to fight. They do possess traits that are

more stereotypically associated with masculinity, but their connection to the home also tethers them to their femininity, or at least the cultural expectations of women. By maintaining the connection between women's power and the domestic sphere, Disney portrays stereotypical representations of women and femininity. It upholds a conservative perspective on where women have power.

Though Disney attributes some feminine characteristics to its male characters, those qualities are often derided and/or used for comic relief, which again subverts any effort to equalize power by valuing difference. By using feminine traits derisively, Disney undermines the feminist position and reinforces its more patriarchal past. Disney offers "post-feminist interpretations of masculinity" that present men as "somewhat hapless, bumbling 'victims' or 'losers'" (Hine et al., 11). Postfeminist representations of men are problematic because they allow men to be feminine only for scorn and comedy. Thus, postfeminism only perpetuates patriarchy and the derision of the feminine. In *Frozen*, Kristoff's family describes him as "sensitive and sweet" (1:05:58). While sensitivity is romantic and admirable, combining Kristoff's sensitivity with his foolishness devalues his more feminine attributes. For example, Kristoff picks a fight with a store owner and very quickly loses as he is literally thrown out the shop. After his display of physical inferiority, Kristoff sings to his hungry reindeer until Anna shows up with the supplies that he needs. She throws the carrots at him, and he lets out an "oof!" as they land on his stomach (00:39:38). Disney valorizes Anna by bestowing her with masculine traits but demeans Kristoff by placing him in a traditionally feminine position and then mocking the character for occupying it. Similarly, Disney mocks Tio Bruno for his fearfulness and superstitious habits. He compulsively knocks on wood and holds his breath when something unpleasant is mentioned (00:56:07). By presenting male characters as fools through their

feminine traits, Disney reinforces hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity (Hine et al., 11). The men in these films do not encapsulate hegemonic masculinity like Classic Disney Princes do.

Frozen and *Encanto* reflect clear postfeminist rhetoric with men who take on some feminine qualities but are laughable and criticized for their femininity. Their foolishness and fearfulness become humorous as Kristoff and Tio Bruno transgress traditional gender stereotypes. At the same time, Disney bolsters its heroines with masculine traits but ultimately perpetuates masculine superiority and the continuation of patriarchal dominance. Disney values masculine traits more than feminine ones. Though Disney ascribes men and women non-traditional gender roles in *Frozen* and *Encanto*, it does not portray feminist notions of gender performance and does not warrant being deemed “woke.”

Adventure, Autonomy, and the Power Hierarchy:

Frozen uses a bond between sisters to demonstrate matriarchal power. The sisters have a great deal of autonomy compared to the Classic Disney Princesses. Part of the exposition is Elsa’s coronation and her ability to open or close the castle gates. She is a leader with the power to control access to Arendelle. Meanwhile, Anna goes after Elsa when she flees the castle after accidentally revealing her supernatural ability to create wintery conditions. There is no patriarchal figure to stop her from venturing into the frozen landscape wearing nothing but her summer dress and a cloak. Neither of the sisters are subject to an evil stepmother, corrupt queen, or the stroke of midnight. They seemingly control their destinies.

Yet, Elsa’s powers bind her to a life of seclusion. Despite this, she finds a great deal of “fulfillment ... in wielding [her] power” (Streiff and Dundes, 7). During her performance of “Let

it Go,” she undergoes costume changes and dances freely, which contrasts with her earlier performances when she sang about fear. Unlike her sister, Elsa also has no romantic entanglements, which suggests that “power and heterosexual romance are mutually exclusive” (Streiff and Dundes, 2). *Frozen* suggests that women must choose between love and power. Though both Anna and Elsa exhibit a great deal more autonomy than past princesses, the sisters remain subject to gendered messages about the relationship between love and power. In the song “Love is an Open Door,” Anna sings a duet with Hans about love feeling like a new opportunity. Contrastingly, Elsa wants to keep doors closed to the castle and closes the door to her ice castle at the end of “Let it Go” (00:34:42). Because a door can only be opened or closed, Disney uses it as a metaphor for love and suggests that love and power cannot coexist in women and their lives. Ultimately, both girls achieve their goals. Elsa stops the magical winter and reinstates summer while Arendelle accepts her and her powers. Anna brings her sister home and finds love along the way – though she found it in Kristoff instead of Hans. However to achieve their happy endings, Anna sacrifices herself in order to save Elsa from Hans’s sword as an act of true love. Anna’s sacrifice suggests that “true love is equivalent to self-sacrifice” and “promotes female subordination” as men have nothing to lose in an act of true love (Streiff and Dundes, 8). If Kristoff had instead made it to Anna and gifted her true love’s kiss, he would have gained her affection and saved her from freezing to death while Elsa died at Hans’s hands. Anna would have gained a partner but lost a sister. If Elsa had died, Disney would have implied that heterosexual romance is worth the loss of a beloved sister and that male companionship is more valuable than female companionship. By rejecting romance as *Frozen*’s resolution, Disney valorizes female relationships and conveys that women can and should have relationships amongst each other.

Anna illustrates the feminist notion that romance is not a woman's sole purpose and Disney displays more progressive ideas about women.

Though Anna and Elsa are pivotal Disney heroines in that their stories are primarily about family and adventure, Seybold suggests that "their positions as objects of male romantic desire remain central to defining their identities and self-confidence" (Seybold, 70). Anna's initial excitement for her sister's coronation focuses on the social celebrations that may result in her finding true love. She sings, "I can't wait to meet everyone! What if I meet The One?" (00:14:29). Anna then fantasizes about a potential meet-cute at her sister's coronation ball. She wants a man to deem her attractive and fall in love with her, and Anna finds love with Kristoff by the end of the movie. In contrast, no men in the movie deem Elsa desirable. When Hans reveals his plan to become King of Arendelle, he tells Anna that Elsa was "preferable" as queen but "no one was getting anywhere with her" as she rejects romance in favor of isolation (01:16:12). Thus, the people of Arendelle and its visitors think of Elsa as a frigid "monster" and her lack of male suitors and pursuers reflects that (00:28:21). Consequently, Disney reinforces "the desirability of traditional gender conformity" with Anna's resolution and Elsa's unrelenting fears and loneliness during the rising action and climax (England et al. 565). In these moments, the criticisms of Disney's progressive shift seem misplaced and largely unfounded.

Disney's shift away from romance-centered plots seems to begin with the release of *Moana* in 2016. *Moana* is not a feminist movie because the plot heavily relies on male cooperation and places agency not in the heroine, but in the male sidekick character, Maui. Instead of chasing marriage, the titular character aims to venture out to sea and save her island from decay. This adventure-based film depicts "female fulfillment solely in terms of friendship and personal goals" (Seybold, 77). While the lack of heterosexual romance closes some doors for

the reinforcement of gender norms and stereotypes, Moana is not immune to patriarchal forces. Disney relies heavily on postfeminist rhetoric to portray a supposedly empowered, feminist woman despite “enduring inequality” with her male counterparts (Seybold, 71).

When Moana finds Maui on a tiny, deserted island, he is unwilling to aid her in her quest to return the heart to Te Fiti. However, the success of the mission depends entirely on whether Maui will help Moana defeat the film’s antagonist. Maui “repeatedly behaves in a selfish, controlling way and is not held accountable for his actions” (Seybold, 71). Instead of lashing out, Moana takes his impertinence in stride and remains optimistic that Maui will relent. However, the one time she acts selfishly and “attempts to exert direct control over the partnership, she jeopardizes the film’s happy ending and bears full responsibility for this mistake” (Seybold, 71). Maui never bears responsibility for his mistakes while he hypocritically berates Moana for her one selfish action. Thus, Disney affirms a traditionally gendered power structure when the heroine succeeds only with the help and direction of her male counterpart in a partnership presented as one of equality (Seybold, 70). *Moana* affirms that Disney creates male-centered plots that reject female autonomy. It is a postfeminist story because it positions Moana as the heroine but gives her no real power while placing the adventure’s outcome in Maui’s hands. Thus, Disney illustrates its preference for conservative storylines.

Instead of offering progressive representations of its lead characters, Disney relies on postfeminist definitions of female empowerment to establish Moana as a heroine while continuing to prioritize male power and patriarchal assumptions. An empowered woman in the postfeminist sense is a woman who can navigate a male dominated world and succeed in it while still submitting to the men around her. Disney uses “three distinct plot stages which create this gendered power dynamic: (1) establishing male power, (2) establishing male need, and (3)

codifying female submission” (Seybold, 78). Disney establishes Maui’s power by making him the hinge of Moana’s success. Maui illustrates his emotional needs when he talks about his past. This is how he reveals the emotional support he desires from Moana. By sharing his childhood struggles with the heroine, Maui compels Moana to “respond to that information” and Disney ultimately reinforces “fixation on the male character, his power, and his needs” (Seybold, 79). In Moana and Maui’s relationship, she must unconditionally support his emotional needs so he leads them to success (Seybold, 80). This undercuts Moana’s position as a leader of her quest and reinforces the stereotype of women as nurturers. Audiences see Maui’s influence over the mission’s success when he angrily deserts Moana after she makes a selfish decision. She must reconcile with and submit to Maui’s directions in order to try again and succeed. Meanwhile, the same standard does not apply if the roles are reversed (Seybold, 81). Maui never apologizes to Moana for leaving her or stealing her boat. Thus, Disney perpetuates a traditionally gendered dynamic between the heroine and male sidekick. Because Maui holds more autonomy and influence over both Moana and the mission, Disney centralizes him within the plot. Framing Moana as a feminist heroine while decentralizing her from the quest’s success produces a postfeminist narrative. She only succeeds because she submits to the men around her.

In contrast to *Moana*, *Encanto* portrays a heroine who asks a male character for help, but her success does not hinge on his cooperation or action. Instead, Mirabel’s success depends on her reconciliation with her abuela. The plot is more female centered than *Moana*’s. In *Encanto*, the Madrigal family lives in a magical house named Casita and they all, except Mirabel, have a magical gift. The family matriarch, Abuela, excludes Mirabel and speaks to her more harshly because she lacks a gift – unlike her siblings and cousins. Because of the family conflict, the miracle candle gifted to Abuela and the Madrigals weakens and shows cracks in Castia’s

foundation, tiles, and walls (00:25:05). Mirabel finds her uncle Bruno and asks him to look into the future and see how she can salvage the miracle. He reluctantly agrees and tells her that it's ultimately up to her to save the miracle and reconcile with family members like Isabella and Abuela (01:05:45). This illustrates a smaller power imbalance between the male and female characters in the movie as Bruno merely helps his niece along her journey instead of directing it. Mirabel is the center of the mission – not Tio Bruno. Disney continues to centralize women in *Encanto* by establishing female need instead of male need. Mirabel learns about the struggles that Abuela faced that brought her the miracle. Abuela recounts the way she and her village fled the conquistadors and her husband sacrificed himself to save everyone in their town (01:18:16). Mirabel's newfound understanding for her family members brings them closer together and harmony returns to the Madrigals, resulting in the miracle candle reigniting. By doing this, Disney decentralizes men from the mission's success and produces a more progressive heroine.

Disney also uses Mirabel and her sisters to dispute the notion that female self-sacrifice equates love, as seen in *Frozen*. When trying to reconcile with Isabella over her ruined dinner proposal, Isabella says, "Everything was perfect. Abuela was happy. The family was happy" (1:07:30). She also reveals that she doesn't actually want to marry Mariano Guzman; she only agreed to marry him because it would please Abuela. In the short argument between Mirabel and Isabella, the characters reveal that the Madrigal's happiness depends entirely on Abuela's pleasure and happiness. Isabella would sacrifice her opportunity for a loving, fulfilling marriage for a loveless one that pleases Abuela. At the end of the movie, Abuela and Mirabel reconcile and Isabella's engagement to Mariano is dissolved. Thus, Disney illustrates that female self-sacrifice is an unsustainable expression of love for others. Self-sacrifice leads to resentment

and familial conflict as seen with the Madrigals. The acceptance, kindness, and empathy the Madrigals express at the end of the movie reunite the family.

Nonetheless, the responsibility of disrupting toxic family relationship practices falls on a woman rather than a man. Women are the keepers of family relationships while men remain on the sidelines of conflicts between family members. Disney perpetuates the notion of women being domestic creatures while men are not. In *Encanto*, the men do not need to reconcile with each other. When Bruno returns to his family, his sisters and mother accept him with open arms despite his fear that they will feel anger towards him (01:25:57). He does not need to apologize for having abruptly left the family. Though *Encanto* stereotypically portrays women as the keepers of familial relationships and solvers of familial problems, it establishes a significantly weaker gendered hierarchy compared to *Moana*. The heroine has a great deal of agency over her mission and the male characters have minimal influence over the outcome. There is no patriarch or egotistical male sidekick that wields power over the mission's success or requires the heroine's care for his emotions. The lack of male need and power in the Madrigal family portrays a more balanced gendered power dynamic.

Similarly, *Turning Red* features a matriarch and caters more to the female need for emotional support than the male need for it. Mei, the heroine, struggles with her desire to be more independent and her obligation to fulfill filial piety – a responsibility and subservience to one's parents. Mei's friends complain that she sacrifices all of her free time to her mother, Ming, and their family temple (00:04:56). In *Turning Red's* resolution, Disney rejects the glorification of true love equating self-sacrifice as seen in *Frozen* (Streiff and Dundes, 8). Ming rules that Mei cannot turn into a panda to protect her from public humiliation. Instead of abiding by Ming's rules, Mei uses her new ability to raise money for her and her friends to attend a concert. Her

father, Jin, stumbles upon a video of Mei as the panda with her friends and loves seeing how happy she is (01:03:40). Consequently, Mei's father encourages her to keep turning into a panda if that is what she wishes. As the passive, sensitive force in Mei's family, he takes on a more feminine role. Through Jin, Disney caters to female need and portrays an example of how femininity is subversive. He doesn't directly insert himself between Mei and her mother, but he gives Mei advice that contradicts Ming's wishes and usurps her power. Though subversive, femininity becomes a force of self-love and justice as Jin prompts Mei's happy resolution of independence through reconciliation with Ming. Mei gains a newfound understanding of Ming's fear of the panda. Though Mei still honors her family by the end of the movie, she gains independence. Loving and honoring Mei's mother is no longer determined by how she can serve her family and sacrifice her own desires.

As the movies progress chronologically, Disney moves towards more balanced, nuanced representations of autonomy and power between men and women. *Frozen* and *Moana* rely on gender stereotypes to perpetuate patriarchal notions about female power and displays of sympathy. In both films, Disney portrays women who need men to help them succeed and those men need the heroine for emotional support. Like the Classic Disney Princesses, the heroines must display stereotypically feminine empathy and emotionally cater to those around her. Thus, Disney condemns them to postfeminist arcs as they submit to male sidekicks' leadership and emotional needs. However, the narrative shifts with *Encanto* and *Turning Red*. In the former, the heroine asks Tio Bruno for help, but her success does not depend on his consistent aid. In *Turning Red*, Mei's father only prompts her to question her true desires regarding the panda. In both cases, Disney decentralizes men from the plot and places agency within women instead to create more progressive movies.

Color, Shape, Race, and Expanding the Beauty Standard:

A defining characteristic of Fourth Wave Feminism is its focus on intersectionality and belonging to more than one minority group. Women of color and gay women will have different experiences with discrimination than straight, white women because they belong to more than one minority group. White women were the traditional beauty standard for hundreds of years and only recently did the standard expand to include people of all races. A vast majority of Disney's Classic Princesses are white. However, three out of the five heroines are women of color. Moana, Mirabel, and Mei are all non-white protagonists and lie outside the traditional beauty standard for women. Mirabel and Moana have darker skin and curly hair while Mei has East Asian features. Though more and more of Disney's female protagonists are people of color without Eurocentric features, they retain Disney's signature stylization of women. Except for Mei, because she is a child, all the heroines (Anna, Elsa, Moana, and Mirabel) have exaggerated facial features and body shapes that work to sexualize the women. Though Disney largely ascribes to traditional body standards for its heroines, all characters have stylistic designs that reveal something about their personalities or what they represent. Their shapes and colors indicate masculine and feminine qualities just as much as a character's personality does. Analyzing the leading ladies in chronological order reveals that though Disney retains its classic stylistic choices for earlier female character design, the company strays away from the slender, long-haired, sexualized depiction of women in favor of a rounder heroine.

In *Frozen*, Anna and Elsa look a great deal like the Classic Disney Princesses such as Snow White and Cinderella. Both women fall under "traditional notions of femininity" with "incredibly slender, sexualized bodies and unrealistically large 'doe eyes'" (Seybold, 76).

However, after Elsa transforms into her liberated self, she loses the circles in her character design and gains triangle shapes in her hair and dress. Her bangs become pointy, and her blue dress has a triangular slit going up to the middle of her thigh. Elsa's new character design indicates a newfound disposition for aggression, energy, conflict, and tension (Fogelström, 5). Meanwhile, Anna retains the circular elements of her character design after wearing winter clothes instead of her original summer dress. Her bangs remain in a soft, swooping shape and she wears mittens that round out her long, slender fingers. Anna retains her naivety, playfulness, and desire for unity that the circle represents (Fogelström, 5). Unlike Elsa, the winter does not incite a substantial change in Anna's appearance. Nonetheless, both girls have a striking likeness to the Classic Disney Princess designs with their dainty builds and circular faces.

In 2016, Disney's *Moana* depicts a darker-skinned heroine with curly hair and a larger, non Eurocentric nose. All of Moana's facial features are circular with her rounded eyes, lips, and nose. She also has wavy hair that exudes an easiness to her disposition and temperament. Though her legs and feet are not small and dainty like Anna and Elsa, Moana shares their small waist and full hips. Likewise, Mirabel's curls and rounded facial features convey a playful and comforting nature. Released in 2021, *Encanto* features Mirabel with Latin American features and an outfit that doesn't hug her body and accentuate her curves. Instead, Mirabel wears a loose-fitting shirt and skirt that flows when she dances. Finally, the most circular heroine among the protagonists is Mei in *Turning Red* (2022). As the youngest of the five women, her body is much less slender, and she has a significantly softer silhouette. The roundness of her teeth, cheeks, eyes, hair, glasses, and clothes all illustrate the extent of her youth as a 13-year-old girl. The shift from thin and sexualized bodies to rounded, less sexualized bodies reflect the change from women being objects of desire in their own plots to being autonomous individuals with motivations beyond

romance. Disney's portrayal of a woman's purpose shifts from being a romantic object to being an autonomous individual with her own passions and goals. The heroines reflect a change in women's social roles within their respective worlds.

While the character designs for protagonists have shifted since 2013, Disney continues to attribute more angular, square features to its masculine characters in positions of power and authority. Representing qualities like stability, honesty, order, conformity, and masculinity, characters with comparatively square or diamond-shaped faces and/or bodies exude authority (Fogelström, 5). Square characters like Moana's father, Abuela, and Ming Lee illustrate the opposing perspectives that the circular and square characters have because the shapes themselves convey opposing qualities, beliefs, and positions within the plot. With his boxy, square build, Moana's father believes that she should remain on the island and uphold the status quo. He wants the current order to persist. In opposition, the circularly shaped Moana wants to disrupt the status quo and venture into the ocean.

Similarly, Mirabel and Abuela represent changing and upholding the status quo, respectively. Though Abuela has some circular shapes in her eyes, she has a diamond-shaped face that is angular like a square. She doesn't have the same masculine design as Moana's father, but she does have power and influence over her family. Her power is derived from more passive than active action. She keeps secrets and excludes Mirabel rather than outright forbidding her from doing things. Her few circular features indicate a passiveness to her nature while the square ones illustrate the power she holds as matriarch of the Madrigal family. While *Turning Red's* matriarch, Ming Lee, has a rounded face, she has angular, square shoulders that rest in a blazer. Like Abuela, Ming exercises a great deal of power over her family. Ming dictates her daughter's extracurricular activities, free time, and choices about her panda. While her square shoulders

convey the matriarchal position Ming holds, her round eyes and cheeks reveal that she has a softer side that greatly cares for and cherishes her daughter, Mei.

Like shapes, colors also reveal a character's attributes and disposition. Both Anna and Elsa wear blue, which signifies loyalty, integrity, care, devotion, authority, conservatism, order, and peace (Fogelström, 12). Because Anna wears mostly blue, green, and pink throughout the movie, the connotations of blue do not apply to her to the same extent they apply to her sister. Elsa's primary color is blue. She is a conservative, concerned, orderly, and authoritative character. Elsa has a masculine personality but retains the sensitivity and fearfulness stereotypical of women. She wants to be left alone because she cares too deeply for her sister and country to put them in danger of her wintry powers. Her fear of hurting others makes her act orderly and strictly. Consequently, when Elsa embraces her powers in the seclusion of the mountains, she "achieves her true 'freedom'" and wears a "low-cut dress, reflecting the postfeminist notion that a woman's power finds expression in becoming heterosexually attractive" (Seybold, 76). Though women may find embracing their sexuality as empowering, catering to heterosexual, male-determined standards of beauty still portray them as a sexual object for male viewership. Upon first glance, Disney portrays a newly liberated woman who embraces her powers and sexuality. However, Disney falsely equivocates sexual liberation with liberation as a whole and only contributes to the sexualization of women. Elsa remains largely void of power and autonomy because Arendelle shuns her and drives her out of the kingdom. Though she is now free to use her powers, it comes at the cost of being a prisoner in her own castle on the mountain.

Unlike her sister, Anna has a sunny disposition and optimism that creates a feminine aura for her character. The first time Anna appears on screen as an adult, she drools and has messy

hair. Then, she changes into a green dress for Elsa's coronation. Green represents a need for belonging, compassion, growth, and vitality (Fogelström, 12). Green also represents traditionally feminine desires of community and qualities of sociability and liveliness. Starting her adulthood in green coincides with Anna's wish to rejoin society, find love, and express her compassionate nature towards people. During the supernatural winter, Anna wears a dark blue skirt and has a formidable drive to retrieve her sister from the mountain. She, like Elsa, becomes orderly and determined. She also exhibits bravery and selflessness when she sacrifices herself to save Elsa from the blow of a sword (01:26:21). However, by the end of the movie, she wears green again and is more relaxed and intent on rebuilding her community to include Elsa. Anna exhibits masculine characteristics and colors that signify her newfound status as a heroine during her journey to find Elsa. The addition of masculine characteristics throughout Anna's journey indicates that women must acquire masculine qualities and capabilities in order to complete a quest. Yet, at the end of *Frozen*, Anna wears a light green dress. Her return to wearing green and return to being bubbly and romantic conveys that Anna's personality does not endure real change after her adventure. Once her adventure is over and she does not need the masculine characteristics that helped her find Elsa, she neglects them in favor of feminine ones that coincide with green.

Unlike Anna, Moana does not wear different colors and largely grows into her masculine characteristics. Her sleeveless shirt is red with designs from her culture. Wearing red exaggerates and illuminates a character's action, energy, assertiveness, confidence, courage, and power (Fogelström, 11). On her quest, Moana repeatedly displays her assertiveness towards Maui when she says over and over again, "I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti." Her language is active rather than passive and she does not

ask for permission from Maui. She demands that he join her quest to return the heart of Te Fiti. She also displays her athleticism when she scales a cliffside that Maui believes she will fall off from (00:55:30). Moana's red garb illuminates her passion and power as a heroine. Red also indicates her disposition as a masculine character with the confidence and determination to succeed. Moana's resolution also depicts her as the leader of her community. She wears a fiery-colored headdress and teaches her father how to sail (01:35:41). She becomes a figure of authority and knowledge like her father before her. Wearing red suits Moana's personality and her status at the end of the movie.

Like Moana, in *Turning Red*, Mei's primary color is also red as she has red hair and can turn into a red panda. Mei first turns into a panda when she experiences extreme embarrassment and anger the morning after her mother reveals her crush on a cashier (00:16:08). Thus, the movie initially associates red with a lack of control over emotions, anger, and power. As Mei learns to control her shapeshifting, she decides to use her novel ability to raise money so that she and her friends can buy tickets to see their favorite band, 4 Town. Mei also goes against her mother's orders and decides to keep her ability to turn into a red panda (01:10:02). Red comes to represent control, power, and sheer will as Mei learns how to navigate her supernatural ability and her new habit of deceiving Ming. It is also important to note Chinese connotations of red as *Turning Red* features and is directed by a Chinese woman. For a Chinese audience, red indicates "happiness, luck and victory" and that something good may be approaching (Chen & Zhang, 74). It can also mean "revolution" as the color is strongly associated with the socialist party (Chen & Zhang, 74). Mei's family dynamic undergoes a revolution and she gains more independence. Red not only conveys Mei's personal characteristics but also her character arc. Like Moana, Mei exhibits determination, passion, and power. Her connection to red indicates the masculinity in

her personality. However, her round face and character design remind the audience of her youth and identity as a middle-school-aged girl.

Unlike the other heroines, Mirabel wears a plethora of colors and doesn't seem to have a primary, characteristic color. She has an ombre blue skirt with embroidery done with purple, pink, yellow, and other colors. She also wears a white shirt, green glasses, and pink shoes. Mirabel has green qualities of growth, renewal, and family orientation (Fogelström, 12). Her blue skirt indicates Mirabel's loyalty, perseverance, and caring nature (Fogelström, 12). The pinks and purples she wears also represent her creative, humanitarian, and unique character (Fogelström, 12). Compared to her family, Mirabel has no clear color scheme and wears a lot of different colors. Her unique, colorful clothes further the notion that Mirabel is somewhat of an outsider within her own family. As the only Madrigal without a gift, her unusualness is exaggerated with her eclectic style. Furthermore, as the only heroine who wears so many colors, Disney indicates that it has shifted to portraying more complex female protagonists. She wears multiple colors to illustrate the multiple facets of her character and personality. Mirabel does not fit into a clear box that can be indicated with one color like Elsa, Anna, Moana, and Mei can.

Though Disney's use of shapes and colors in *Frozen*, *Moana*, *Encanto*, and *Turning Red* has expanded the way it portrays women, it still perpetuates masculine dominance and feminine submission. Characters in power like Ming and Abuela have masculine shapes to give them an air of authority. Their identities as women do not diminish their power because Disney attributes sharp, angular shapes to their shoulders and faces, respectively. Characters in power retain a proximity to masculinity while subversive heroines remain in the realm of femininity. By creating heroines who upset the status quo and appear reminiscent of the Classic Disney Princesses, Disney characterizes femininity as disruptive and consequently demonizes

femininity. Nonetheless, Disney has expanded its portrayal of women and relies on more than female stereotypes for its character design. In *Frozen*, the heroines wear classic princess colors like light blue and shades of pink. However, in *Moana*, *Encanto*, and *Turning Red*, the heroines wear many colors or masculine colors like red. As Fourth Wave feminism has emphasized the importance of diversity and intersectionality, Disney has grown to portray women beyond a princess archetype. The heroines are daring, athletic, bold, and caring – and their character designs reflect the growing recognition of how diverse women are.

Family as a Source of Patriarchal Oppression:

Since 2013, Disney's heroines have become significantly more independent and have goals that do not involve romance. However, patriarchal forces still impact the female protagonist's ability to carry out her mission. In both *Frozen* and *Moana*, the fathers set rules and boundaries meant to protect their children but ultimately harm or hinder them. Despite well-meaning intentions, the fathers are "restrictive, suppressive, and even harmful to the heroine" and her "ambitions and identity goals" (Schiele et al., 665). In all four movies, the heroines want to please and help their families. Anna wants to regrow her relationship with Elsa while Mei and Mirabel try to reconcile with matriarchal figures in their lives. Moana ignores her father's rule and ventures into the ocean to save him and the rest of their village from a decaying island. The heroines are mostly family-oriented as opposed to romantically oriented. However, to accomplish their familial goals, the women must break a rule set by the head of the household. While the absence of heterosexual relationships for most women grant them more independence, they still experience patriarchal limitations to their autonomy via their parents. Whether the parent is a father or a mother with masculine attributes, Disney continues to exercise masculine

pressures and powers on the heroines. Their lack of romantic entanglements does not mean that gender roles and patriarchal forces are nonexistent. As the movies progress chronologically, Disney more frequently uses parents, instead of a heterosexual relationship, to exert patriarchal forces on the heroine.

Disney's older princesses like Snow White and Jasmine have romantic partners but do not have important parent figures like the mother. In the sample of films released since 2013, Disney places their protagonists in multigenerational or nuclear households where both parents and possibly extended family members are present in the household. The only exceptions to the heroines having both parents in their lives are Anna and Elsa – whose parents die during both girls' early adulthood but are present during childhood and adolescence. By removing the parents in *Frozen*, Disney lessens "the perception that families are relevant to children and their abilities to overcome obstacles" (Zurcher, 12). In *Frozen*, the girls struggle with following the rules that the parents set while the sisters are children. Consequently, Elsa accidentally harms Anna, and she must be healed by the trolls. The King then tells Elsa that she must wear gloves and remain apart from Anna (00:09:03). Parents prime their children to meet their expectations by communicating "the goals they want their children to attain, the aspirations they want their children to fulfill, and the values they want their children to internalize" (Spera, 130). Elsa deeply internalizes her father's teachings that her powers are dangerous, and she becomes a recluse. Following the rules kept Anna safe and Elsa's powers hidden for a long time; but when Elsa becomes Queen of Arendelle, she cannot hide behind the rules her father set for her safety. Instead, Elsa and Anna must learn how to navigate their new lives without their father's rules. Only by breaking their father's rules do the girls reunite and find love with each other. Elsa

resolves the conflict and restores summer with her love for Anna. The lack of a patriarchal figure in the girls' lives allows both to eventually find the freedom to be social and express themselves.

A large part of Disney's recent adventures for female protagonists orients around leaving home against the wishes of parents. Disobeying the rules and completing their quest is what allows her to achieve self-actualization and restore balance to her world. The clearest example is Moana's father, the patriarchal force who creates rules that the protagonist breaks to resolve the conflict. He forbids Moana from venturing into the ocean and tells her, "You must find happiness right where you are" (00:09:25). Moana tries to find happiness in Motunui. She learns from her parents about how to become a Chief and sacrifices her yearning for the ocean to win her father's pride and love. She succumbs to her father's wishes and serves her community to keep peace within her family. She caters to male need. Moana is a postfeminist character in the "sense of maintaining exacting self-discipline of [her] actions and fulfilling the traditional female roles of emotional caretaking and submission to male leadership" (Seybold, 76). She submits to her father's wishes and leadership as a way of obtaining his happiness. He is happy when he has control over Moana's actions and she caters to his emotions by fulfilling his wishes for her to become the Chief of Motunui. She is not a feminist character in a feminist world because she still feels the oppression that her father's patriarchy exerts and submits to it.

When Moana leaves the island, she breaks free of her father's rules and begins her journey of self-actualization (Schiele et al., 666). Moana's mother and grandmother also upset the patriarchal order by encouraging her to adventure outside the reef. The grandmother encourages her to return the heart to Te Fiti while her mother stumbles upon her packing food and helps her gather more (00:30:55). Women become the forces of disruption by disregarding the Chief's rules and helping Moana leave Motunui. By the end of the film, they also become

beacons of justice and balance restoration. Moana's island becomes vibrant and luscious again as her people return to their voyaging roots because of Moana's disobedience. Though Moana establishes a new order outside of her father's intentions for Motunui, she appears troublesome for breaking tradition and rules. Her grandmother tells her, "You are your father's daughter, stubbornness and pride" (00:09:55). The characteristics Moana shares with her father give her power but not dominance. As Chief and the man, he has power over her which makes him the dominant character in their family. Thus, adopting a post-feminist rhetoric allows Disney to portray the heroine with an illusion of power as she continues to exist in a male-dominated society (Seybold, 76).

Unlike *Moana*, *Encanto* depicts a matriarch who casts the heroine as the black sheep of the family rather than an integral member of society and the Madrigals. Mirabel struggles with feeling like an outcast in her family because she is the only Madrigal who does not have a supernatural ability gifted to her by the magical candle her grandmother has. When Mirabel expresses the isolation that she feels and criticizes the standards of perfection that Abuela holds the family to, it causes Casita to crack and fall apart (01:12:37). Casita's "cracks are a direct vision for the foundation of the family," and when Mirabel illuminates the "family script," the status quo of appeasing Abuela ceases (Conroy, 309). In a family script, "every family member is cast in a role that works toward a larger story about the family" (Conroy, 309). The Madrigals have a reputation for philanthropy for their town and for using their gifts for the betterment of their community. Mirabel, with no gift, has no way to better her community like her sisters and cousins. She does not fit in the family script and Abuela ostracizes her because of it.

A part of the family script involves having a position that serves the community. Mirabel describes her sisters, Isabella and Louisa, as the "beauty and the brawn" who can do no wrong

(00:07:40). Mirabel's older sisters fall into the feminine and masculine binary until Mirabel questions and upsets the family status quo. Louisa, the oldest, has the gift of strength. She moves houses and lifts boulders with ease. With her broad shoulders, square jaw, and low voice, Louisa presents as a masculine character. When Mirabel begs her to question the pressure that Abuela puts her under, she loses her strength and cries repeatedly. Louisa loses her masculine attributes and gains traditionally feminine ones of sensitivity and feebleness. Meanwhile, Isabella is the embodiment of traditional femininity and is responsible for the beauty of her community. She wears purple and pink, has a high voice, and is graceful in all her movements. When Mirabel and her sister begin arguing, Isabella makes a prickly cactus sprout instead of a delicate flower (01:08:29). She also stains her clothes with pollen of all different colors that cover the pink and purple dress she wears. She becomes loud and messy with the spiky, carnivorous plants she grows during the song she sings with Mirabel, "What Else Can I Do?" Isabella neglects perfect femininity for more boisterous behaviors. Mirabel catalyzes the upset of the Madrigal status quo by making her sisters think about the unfairness of Abuela's pressures on them. When Louisa and Isabella reject the roles that Abuela imposes on them, they transgress the binary roles of masculinity and femininity. The resolution of *Encanto* is the rejection of the family script and the roles that family members must play for the sake of Abuela's happiness. With Isabella and Louisa, Disney illustrates that people are complex beings that only abide by roles when those roles are imposed on them. People do not naturally fit into binary roles of masculinity and femininity. They are a combination of the two. Disney also places power within a matriarch instead of a patriarch. However, Abuela's masculine appearance and assertiveness reinforce masculinity as a source of power.

Like *Encanto*, *Turning Red* illustrates a matriarch who creates boundaries as opposed to a patriarch. Mei's mother forbids her from turning into the panda or seeing the 4Town concert while her father takes on a more passive, sensitive parental role. Disney portrays a reversal of traditional gender roles with Mei's parents by giving Ming masculine qualities and Jin more feminine qualities. Ming loudly dictates many of Mei's extracurricular activities and creates most of the rules and boundaries in the Lee family. Jin quietly and calmly cooks, gives advice, and tries to diffuse tense situations. Mei's relationship with her mother "constructs the base of [her] journey and the storyline of the film" as she tries to find the balance between individuality and "filial piety" (Bayar, 2). The beginning of *Turning Red* illustrates how Mei devotes her entirety to honoring her parents. The first line of the movie is: "The number one rule in my family: Honor your parents" (00:00:47). Because of Mei's cultural norms around filial piety, her parents, particularly Ming, have a lot of power over Mei's autonomy. She has very little autonomy because carrying out her parents' wishes is equivalent to showing respect to them. Furthermore, Ming's position as the characteristically masculine authority figure – despite her being a woman – perpetuates patriarchal notions of masculinity as a source of dominance.

Mei's mother cares deeply about Mei's well-being and success in school. However, her care costs Mei's independence and individuality. During adolescence, children have an increased need for autonomy (Spera, 141). However, Ming does not grant Mei the independence and autonomy she desires going into her teenage years. When Ming finds drawings of a boy that Mei has a crush on, she confronts the boy and accuses him of having ill intentions towards her daughter. By bringing "female teenage sexuality" into the plotline, Disney illustrates that Mei is growing up and needs privacy for her new feelings and desires (Bayar, 6). Mei shifts from sharing all of her thoughts and feelings with Ming to keeping secrets about boys, turning into the

panda, and her after-school activities. Consequently, her connection with her mother changes and reflects how adolescence is “marked by an increasing sense of self-exploration and autonomy” that results in changes to the family unit (Spera, 126). However, Ming struggles with and rejects Mei’s desire for independence. She goes through Mei’s belongings and monopolizes her daughter’s free time with chores to do around the family temple. Ming asserts her unsolicited opinions about Mei’s friends while Mei withholds rebukes to her mom’s criticisms (00:10:40). Mei even calls her mother “the empress” to signify the power she has over her (00:43:13). Mei’s mother wants to protect Mei by controlling who she is friends with, the media she consumes, and how Mei spends her free time. Like Moana’s father, Ming controls her daughter under the pretense of protection.

In addition to control, Ming also possesses masculine attributes that designate her as a character of influence, power, and dominance. A great deal of her masculinity shines through her assertiveness, position as a leader within her family, and physical strength. Ming asserts her opinions about Mei’s friends and repeatedly says how Mei is merely a child despite her growing into her teenage years. Ming’s strength and assertiveness appear most when she turns into her panda form after Mei leaves the ritual to attend a concert. Out of anger and shock, Ming transforms into a giant, red panda as large as the skyscrapers in Toronto (01:11:09). She displays the sheer power and strength she has by crushing large signs and severely damaging the concert venue (01:15:05). When in her panda form, Ming incites fear with her size, strength, and rage. By coding Ming as a masculine character, Disney reinforces the authority that masculinity has over femininity. The masculine Ming has more authority over Mei than her more feminine husband, Jin, who rarely, if ever, gives Mei a direct order or contradicts Ming. She also has some authority over Jin as opposed to an equal partnership. When Mei asks to attend a 4Town concert,

her mother immediately says no, turns to Jin, and asks if he agrees only to answer for him with an assertive, “See? Your father agrees” (00:38:45). As the matriarch who rules with a masculine appearance and assertiveness, Ming holds the power in her family. She does not display the passivity and sensitivity that her husband does. Though Disney reverses traditional gender roles with Mei’s parents, it reaffirms masculine dominance by placing masculine characters in positions of power. The feminine characters remain on the sidelines or suffer in a power struggle with the masculine character.

Disney shifts power and masculinity but keeps the two paired together to perpetuate patriarchal notions of who should have power. In *Frozen* and *Moana*, male characters have masculine attributes and agency over the heroines. They have broad shoulders and blocky builds that emphasize their authority, knowledge, and leadership. In *Encanto* and *Turning Red*, matriarchs have masculine characteristics and power over the heroines. Despite women becoming beacons of authority, Disney does not attribute femininity with power. Instead, Disney maintains the relationship between masculinity and power by placing feminine heroines in a struggle for power and placing power in masculine characters. Ming Lee wears a green blazer that sharpens her shoulders and makes them square-like. Her opinionated and authoritative personality denotes her as the figure of authority and power. Abuela’s diamond shaped face and status as the leader of the Madrigals fills her with power. Because both matriarchs have masculine characteristics and attempt to oppress feminine autonomy (the heroines), Disney uses them to perpetuate feminine subordination and uphold patriarchy. Because the heroines gain some autonomy as part of the resolutions as the movies progress chronologically, Disney implies that the feminine must earn respect and authority. Disney does not grant women and feminine people the same respect and autonomy that it freely gives to men and masculine people. Instead,

it makes its heroines work for the same – or merely better – treatment that men and masculinity receive automatically. Disney’s postfeminist folly is that women and men can do and have the same things, but women must prove or earn it while men do not.

Conclusion:

The evolution and progression of Disney’s heroines between 2013 to 2023 reveals a shift in the portrayal and representation of women. Their roles as characters are significantly more fluid as they retain a great deal of traditionally feminine characteristics while taking on traditionally masculine ones as well. The heroines in these movies are more diverse in terms of race and appearance. Moana, Mirabel, and Mei are all women of color and two of them have dark curly hair instead of long, straight hair. Disney’s image of a woman has expanded from Eurocentric princesses like the white, light-haired Aurora, Cinderella, and Ariel. The modern heroines who debuted in 2013 are more than “damsels in distress” or mere love interests. The protagonists are more complex than the Classic Disney Princesses; they have goals outside of romance and are oriented toward action, adventure, and independence. The more boisterous and commanding behaviors that they display tend to reflect Disney’s shift towards more masculine heroines. Most do not seek love and would rather explore places, resolve conflicts, or simply demonstrate their independence. Coinciding with finding independence, the heroines also learn how to find balance within their families and personal lives. Parents and children find new boundaries and resolve existing tensions. Ultimately, the heroines’ social role shifts farther away from domesticity as the movies progress chronologically from *Frozen* to *Turning Red*.

Disney gradually affords its heroines greater autonomy in their journeys and resolutions. Family hierarchies and tensions dissolve to afford greater power to heroines like Mirabel and

Mei. As Fourth Wave feminism has catalyzed discourse about diversity and structural oppression, Disney has released movies portraying a more diverse group of women with different levels of power. It replaces patriarchs with matriarchs, gradually removes romance, and replaces the male sidekick with women. However, it continues to perpetuate masculine dominance with postfeminist rhetoric. Masculine characters – whether they be a man or woman – remain in positions of power and authority over the feminine ones. Simultaneously, Disney portrays femininity as laughable and a weakness. As a result, Disney portrays and perpetuates real-world structures of gender inequality with masculinity dominating femininity.

Though Fourth Wave feminism has broadened Disney's idea of a woman, the entertainment company largely operates with a postfeminist lens that prevents its heroines from being feminist representations of women. By themselves, Elsa, Anna, Moana, Mirabel, and Mei could be feminist characters. However, the worlds they live in prevent them from being feminist representations as their worlds are patriarchal. These settings valorize traditionally masculine characteristics and cater to male needs for power to enforce masculine dominance over the feminine. Most prominently, *Moana* depicts Moana and Maui's relationship as a supposedly equal one despite Maui holding more authority over their mission than Moana. Disney also perpetuates the association of power with masculinity by putting masculine characters in positions of power such as Moana's father, Ming Lee, and Abuela. Though Ming and Abuela are women, their masculine characteristics take precedence over their feminine identity to award them their authority. They also hinder the heroines from reaching their goals by obstructing access to independence and positions of authority. Disney maintains the pairing of masculinity and power to reinforce patriarchal notions about femininity and weakness. The entertainment giant allows women to have power and autonomy, but it costs their femininity. Disney's

postfeminist rhetoric allows it to portray supposedly progressive women without challenging societal notions of misogyny. Thus, Disney's criticisms for "wokeness" are largely unfounded claims as it remains largely conservative in its portrayal of masculinity and femininity.

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