

Notes from the Underground

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The Historical Underground

Feminism and Disney Princesses

By Mathew Shaw, Student

What comes to mind when you think of "Disney Princesses?" For some people, the term carries negative connotations ("A bunch of perky, singing bimbos!"), while others have a more forgiving view ("At least they're not like those slutty *Bratz* dolls!"). Much of our outlook toward the Disney Princess line relates to the state of our society and culture. Thus, one must first ask how much has society changed in the wake of the Women's Liberation Movement, and how has that evolution influenced the figures of the Disney Princess line?

For starters, let us take a look at the three original Disney princesses who were created in the middle of the twentieth century during Walt Disney's lifetime: Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. What traits do these three ladies have in common? The patience and compassion of a saint? Check. Good looks? Check. The uncanny ability to communicate with animals?

Check. Another major thing that comes to mind is that all three are incredibly passive. Unlike their more personable sidekicks, non of them do much during their screen time to drive the plot, either. In short, these three heroines are basically portrayed as helpless. They talk (well, sing) about their dreams, but do not take it upon themselves to make their dreams come true. Oh, and let us not forget their non-confrontational personalities. In fact, it is always the sidekick who contributes to the downfall of the main obstacle to their dreams. In other words, everything is done *for* them. I guess looking pretty and being able to sing does have its advantages: people will want to do stuff for you!

Of course, the personality traits of the three original Disney princesses have a lot to do with the society and culture that produced them. Walt Disney wanted to portray his heroines as inoffensive as possible so that the audience would have sympathy for them. Before the Women's Rights Movement (and for sometime afterwards), audiences had no interest in seeing a proactive and independent female character on screen because a woman violating her traditional social role would not be thought of as worthy of sympathy.

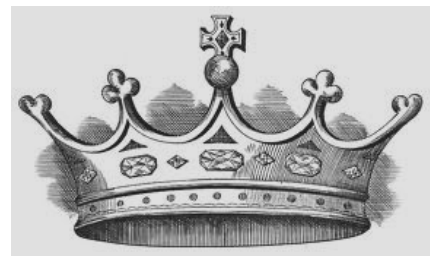
Around the time that Walt Disney died (1966), the Women's Liberation Movement was beginning to take off in society. This "radical" offshoot of the Women's Rights Movement sought to conceptualize the collective experiences and hardships of women in society, establish camaraderie (a.k.a. "sisterhood"), and push for independence from the oppressive patriarchal social values that prevented women from realizing their true potential as individuals. Another result of this social movement was the Renaissance-era princesses. The Disney Renaissance of the 1990s is thought to have begun in 1989 with the release of *The Little*

Mermaid. The period before the Renaissance (the 1970s and 1980s) was noted for the lackluster movies that were put out (although that is a matter of opinion).

The heroine of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel, is different from the previous Disney heroines. She is a more three-dimensional character. In the movie, Ariel's personal life is explored more in-depth. The biggest thing that sets Ariel apart from her predecessors is the fact that she is so headstrong. In fact, she takes it upon herself to make her dreams come true, rather than sit around on her tailfin, singing to Flounder or whomever else will listen, and wait for it to happen. Ariel is not without her detractors, however. Many criticize her poor decision-making, and among the most frequent critiques is her desire to drastically alter her life for some man she barely knows, not to mention her consulting a shady drag queen (ahem, witch) with questionable ethics to achieve that purpose.

Next in the Disney Princess line is exemplified by Belle of *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is one of the most popular heroines in the Disney franchise, and it's easy to see why. She does not fawn over Gaston like all the other young ladies of the village, and is constantly seen reading to her heart's content. Another

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Feminism and Disney Princesses, cont.

“What comes to mind when you think of Disney Princesses?”



“Can you imagine there being a chubby Disney Princess[?]”



characteristic that people find admirable about Belle is her ability to stand up for herself. She does not stand for the Beast's disrespect or any of his tantrums. This self-confidence is one reason Belle and the Beast are such an odd couple at first (never mind the fact that the Beast is literally a monster). The audience is left wondering how the Beast will ever be able to woo Belle after the poor way he presents himself to her. The Beast actually has to work for Belle's affections, and he realizes that he can start by treating Belle with respect and dignity. The evolution of Belle's thoughts and remarks about him are shown in lines such as these: "I don't want to have anything to do with him," "Thank you for saving my life," "I wonder why I didn't see it there before," "Please don't leave me! I love you!"

The attitude of Princess Jasmine (*Aladdin*), I think, embodies one of the biggest goals of women's liberation: autonomy. Jasmine resents being a pawn in an arranged-marriage, and she makes it clear that, if she did marry, it would be for love. More importantly, she desires independence. As she is running away from the palace, she explains, "I can't stay here and have my life lived for me."

The Renaissance-era films were largely formulaic. In other words, they were coming-of-age stories. Unlike the films from Walt Disney's time, the Renaissance-era films display characters who, for one reason or another, embark on a journey, and there are lessons that are learned by the end of that journey (although it's not always the heroines who are the center of those journeys or who learn anything). King Triton (from *The Little Mermaid*) learns that his authoritarian parenting only drives a wedge between him and his daughter; Belle and the Beast both learn that first impressions aren't always what they seem; and Aladdin learns the value

of being true to oneself.

The latest addition to the Disney Princess line, Merida (though, ironically enough, she's technically a heroine of a Pixar film, *Brave*), is radically different from her predecessors (more so than how the Renaissance princesses were different from the Walt-era princesses). Merida has no desire to fool around with suitors and would rather play a good game of archery instead. The movie does not revolve around Merida's romantic desires but instead around her tumultuous relationship with her mother, whose wants for Merida's life are in stark contrast with Merida's own wants.

The one elephant in the room that I have not heretofore addressed is body image. The bodies of the three original heroines are not put into focus in their respective movies. It is not until *The Little Mermaid* that their bodies become the objects of attention, practically to the point of being fan-service! If you hadn't noticed, Ariel is skinny. I don't know if it's due to something in the merfolk's diet, or perhaps all that calorie burning from swimming around, but frankly, Ariel practically looks anorexic. One scene I'd like to point out in which Ariel's body is on display as subtle (or maybe not so subtle) objectification is the scene in which she reaches the surface after acquiring her human legs. As she thrusts out of the water, you can see a silhouette of her body. She throws her head back, whips back her wet hair, puffs her chest out, and sticks out her rump. Not only that, but she has no panties on! This is eroticism, plain and simple, people!

Belle's body is not on display as much due to the fact that she dresses so modestly, except for the cleavage-revealing, not-so-modest, seducing ball gown that she wears during the famous "ballroom

scene." Jasmine, on the other hand, is *meant* to look sexy. Because she represents an exotic land (where they cut off your nose to spite your face, don'tcha know??), her sex appeal is amped up, because in the Western mindset, Oriental = exotic = sexy.

What about the sexual orientation of Disney princesses? All heterosexual, of course (although Merida has raised some eyebrows). Disney seems to have their own "don't ask, don't tell" policy when it comes to sexual orientation - their characters are either observably straight, or ambiguous or closeted. Can you imagine people complacently allowing an openly gay Disney heroine? Imagine the screeching headlines on various radical news outlets ("Disney is trying to turn your daughter into a lesbian!").

It wouldn't be a stretch to see the Renaissance-era princesses and beyond as an improvement, personality-wise, over the original Walt-era princesses, in the sense that modern princesses are more proactive. However, they achieve their goals, all the while looking good. This sends the message that it's okay to be an independent, proactive woman, just as long as you are thin, pretty, and heterosexual. Can you imagine there being a chubby Disney princess, or one who manages to accomplish her goals without having the simultaneous convenience of her looks being on display?

Through it all, it's interesting to observe how the changes in the Disney heroines' attitudes and personalities reflect the changing status of women in society. As women in society were allowed more freedoms, so, too, were the heroines in the Disney franchise, although obviously there are still various social/cultural barriers to overcome.

Power and People

By: Mahyar Taskindoust, student

Many of us know that every March is Women's History Month, and this time of the year some feminists criticize the patriarchal societies that have developed throughout history. Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth, and Joan of Arc are usually mentioned to support the claim that women are better rulers than men. However, though there may be some truth to this, it contributes to the darker parts of history being overlooked.

One such example is Elizabeth Bathory of Hungary. Born in 1560 into the privileged aristocracy, she grew up with a classical education and learned four languages. After getting married at fourteen years old, Elizabeth's husband left to battle the Ottomans, which made her responsible for maintaining her husband's estate as well as the well-being of the Hungarian people. She became increasingly bored and began using her wealth to hire witches, sorcerers, and any other types of "magic" user. At some point, she began torturing people excessively. With the help of her aunt and her husband's interrogation tools, Bathory tortured her prisoners who were locked up because of their debt. When she was 43 years old, her husband died and, already having dealt with abuse as a child, she spiraled into insanity in a desperate attempt to maintain her youth and vitality.

Around this time, Bathory was competing with other princes vying for power. One day, she struck one of her female servants, caus-

ing her to bleed profusely. Enjoying the sight, she thought that the blood made the place look fresher and brighter. After consulting her alchemists who confirmed her sentiments (probably because they didn't want to lose her hospitality), Bathory began hiring virgin peasant girls to work as servants in her castle for the sole purpose of torturing them to death and then bathing in their blood.

As time passed, she came to believe that the blood was defective, which meant she needed another source. From here she transitioned from using peasants to the daughters of nobility and other privileged members of society. She created an academy to "educate" these girls, but in reality she murdered them for their blood. Eventually, people started noticing all the disappearances, but not before she killed hundreds of women. However, Bathory was never tried or convicted (though some of her accomplices were). Eventually, the emperor of Hungary sentenced her to stay within a portion of her own castle, where she died four years later.

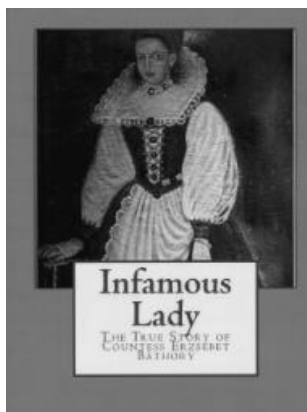
Then there is Irma Grese, who was not a national leader but her passion for violence and dominance helped her to become Senior Supervisor of Auschwitz. She worked at three concentration camps before settling at Auschwitz, eventually becoming the second highest female in a camp where she supervised over 30,000 Jewish women, whom she whipped, shot, sent attack dogs on, and sent

into the gas chambers. After the war, she was tried under the Geneva Convention and hanged, but thousands lost their lives because of her actions.

Referring to leaderships, John Acton once said that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Women are no exception, and these are just a couple of examples of how one's sex does not preclude one from committing horrors in positions of power. Some rulers were better than others of course, but as historians it is our responsibility to investigate the darker side of what people have done in history as well as the good parts so that we do not glorify a group of people without fully acknowledging the very real fact that all people can be sadistic. Women's history month is no doubt an important time to celebrate the accomplishments of women and to reflect on the absurdity of how long it has taken for women to make progress gaining equality in the world, but it should not be used to demonize one group over another. Rather, we must all understand that we're all human beings who deserve an equal chance. Instead, we have discriminated against one another simply based on genetic code, which has led to disenfranchisement, slavery, and even murder. And usually, its in the name of power.

"The Greater the Power, the more dangerous the abuse"

-Edmund Burke





Notes from the Underground

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"HISTORY IS OUR WEAPON OF CHOICE"



Join Us: Fridays 1pm/ESEE 1224

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Well, this edition has fewer articles than ever before, but we can assure you that has nothing to do with lack of contribution. In fact, we have articles written by students on backlog, waiting to be published next month! No, the reason for only two articles in this edition is because we wanted to make sure we didn't cut anything out. Granted, we usually ask for 200-500 words, but Mathew Shaw had a lot to say, and quite frankly it was worth every word! Here at the headquarters of *The Historical Underground* (location undisclosed in true underground fashion), we can say with prideful conviction that our students are taking more and more control over the articles in these monthly publications, and as a result are maturing into high caliber writers. We have invested a lot of time editing, revising, and guiding these students as they seek to express their ideas, interests, and beliefs with their pen, and it is definitely paying off, for they just keep getting better and better. Hats off to all the THU members who have worked so hard to become published authors. Not very many students in the state of Texas can say the same for themselves, especially at the undergraduate level. Much respect!

As for Women's History Month, it has been a busy one indeed. If you did not hear what Dr. Stephanie Cole had to say about the racial and gender aspects of the domestic service industry in America, then I hope you get another chance some day, for it was extremely informative and enlightening. Student Services showed the movie *The Help* for free in the Bistro, and they also have an excellent women's pictorial biography exhibit on display in the hallway of ESEE that you absolutely must see. Women have come a long way in this country from being forcefully confined to the private sphere, but this month provides us the opportunity to reflect on just how long of a journey it has been. Not only were slaves given the right to vote in this country before women, but they did not even have control over their own bodies until the 20th century when birth control was finally made legal. Now, we have a splintered feminist movement, and people argue excessively about what a real women should be like. And through it all, the very important fact gets left out: that all women are individuals, and as such have the same right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that the founding fathers inadvertently gave them when they etched those words into our history with the Declaration of Independence. Whether it's a homemaker, business women, star athlete, or even a religious leader, women have a right to pursue their dreams as human beings. Stay strong, keep reading, and try to show up to a meeting once in a while. Lately, the discussions at them have been better than ever.

~ Bradley J. Borougerdi, Greg Kosc, Kallie Kosc (Guest Editor), & Eric Salas

