

# Disney's dolls

The skin colour of the female characters in Disney's recent animated films may be different and the marketing more sophisticated.

But **Kathi Maio** argues that underneath all the buckskin and the scales they're still happy homemakers looking for a man.

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It is more than a little ironic that the Walt Disney Company's current animated feature, *Mulan*, retells an age-old legend about the Chinese successfully fighting off a foreign invasion. The American media giant chose to make this particular story into its 36th animated feature precisely because it was the perfect vehicle for a strategic incursion into the Chinese film market.

The legendary woman warrior, Hua Mu-Lan, who bravely fought off alien onslaughts has now herself become an agent of a US conglomerate's ambition to dominate the culture of Asia – and the entire globe.

It's a heavy burden for one young, doe-eyed heroine to bear. But so it is for all of the young women Disney has co-opted for the screen. They aren't simply cartoons. They are symbols of the times – and one company's measurement of how their target audiences want to see women.

Disney's first animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), set a standard for full-length animation and established a pattern for later Disney heroines to follow. Snow White is young, virginal, pretty, sweet-natured and obedient. Domestic drudgery doesn't faze her since she is sure that a handsome owning-class chap will, someday soon, come and save her.

Meanwhile, when faced with danger she runs away on tiny high-heeled shoes and then falls in a weeping heap. She finds a shelter in a dusty and dishevelled cottage and immediately feels compelled to clean it from top to bottom (since the owners, a group of full-grown, if quite short, miners, obviously don't have a 'Mother' to clean for them).

Snow White's one adversary is her wicked and powerful stepmother, the Queen. Like most Disney crones, the Queen is eventually destroyed. But not before feeding her lovely step-daughter a poisoned apple that places her in a death-like coma. Snow White is lovingly waked by her housemates who place her on a bier. But she is awakened only when Prince Charming comes and plants one on her rosy lips. Back among the living Snow White rides away with her new boyfriend, with nary a second thought for her short friends.

It's prototypical Disney. Young women are natural-born happy homemakers who lie in a state of suspended animation until a man gives them a life. Older women are the enemy, especially if they seek power. And the working class (hardworking, but dirty and uncivilized) are there to serve the rich and privileged, never questioning their subordinate position.

Although the Disney team made use of different fairytales over the years, the basic formula for telling women's stories through animated features changed very little from *Snow White* to *Cinderella* (1950) to *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

Then came the sixties: Uncle Walt died in 1966. And Disney's animation teams fell into years of disarray and second-rate work. Some felt the Disney studio would never again produce a 'classic'. They were wrong. Several years after management of the studio was assumed by Michael Eisner the company made an impressive comeback with *The Little Mermaid* (1989). With its vibrant animation and music *The Little Mermaid* proved that the Disney studio still knew how to make a first-rate cartoon feature. The movie also proved that old attitudes towards women die hard. Looking at the film you'd never know that the women's movement ever happened.

Disney's take on Hans Christian Andersen is the 'same old, same old'. Except, for the first time, there is a new nymphet quality to the virginal heroine. Above her green tail Disney's Ariel wears only a string bikini top made from a couple of sea shells. And as innocent, wide-eyed and flipper-tailed as she is, there is something distinctly sexy about her too. Her image may not be informed by feminism, but it has most certainly been informed by the eroticizing of the pubescent female, so common in Western advertising and popular culture.

Like Disney heroines before her, Ariel is looking for a romantic solution to the yearning in her heart. (Andersen's mermaid looks for human love only as a means of achieving her true desire: an immortal soul. Disney's mermaid sees a cute fella as her be-all and end-all.) Ariel will do anything to have the bland handsome Prince fall in love with her. She'll disobey her stern but loving father, King Triton. She'll even make a bargain with the devil – played by a corpulent, white-haired sea witch named Ursula. Again, the older, powerful woman (representing evil) must be annihilated. The young Prince, who embodies a healthier form of (inherited patriarchal) power, finishes the witch off. But not before she makes big trouble for our lovelorn heroine.

Ursula gives Ariel a set of shapely legs, but takes her voice in trade. Hence, in *The Little Mermaid*, we are given a female protagonist who is literally silenced by her desperate need for male approval. 'Shut up and be beautiful', the movie seems to tell young girls. (Books like *Reviving Ophelia* have argued that this is a message pre-teen girls constantly get from their society. Why not from their cartoons?)

Since *The Little Mermaid* is a Disney flick, Ariel gets her voice back and she gets the guy. But she is nevertheless forced to abandon completely her sea world (her family and friends) for the land-locked kingdom of her Prince. In the end, Ariel is a woman without

a social support system, investing her entire life in a romance. Not a situation that I've ever found to have 'happily ever after' written all over it.

And many women agreed. Stung by the criticism, Disney promised to show more sensitivity towards gender issues in their next movie, a re-telling of Beauty and the Beast (1991). The company hired a woman, Linda Woolverton, as screenwriter. And they put their PR department into overdrive – promoting their new heroine, Belle, as 'modern', 'active' and even 'feminist'.

It worked with most critics. But, as far as I could tell, the most feminist thing about Disney's Belle was that she liked to read. Like the eighteenth-century folk-tale's Beauty, this Belle remains a self-sacrificing daughter of a silly and cowardly father (switching places with her papa when the Beast takes him prisoner). Still, Disney's idea of an 'independent' woman didn't bother me half as much as their concept of a male romantic hero.

The original fairy-tale (and all the retellings I've ever read or seen, from Cocteau's 1946 movie masterpiece to the cult late-1980's American TV show) portrayed the 'Beast' of the story as a big teddy bear. He looked fierce and strange, but was really kind, tender – and hopelessly devoted. The moral: Don't judge a book by its cover. An ugly exterior can hide a loving heart.

But Disney admitted that they went out of their way to create a hero with a 'very serious problem'. Their Beast is, well, beastly. He terrorizes his household staff. And he intimidates his lovely prisoner, as well. Although he isn't violent with Belle, that always seems a distinct possibility. It is her poise and exquisite beauty that tame his savagery.

The problem? Disney's reworking of the old fable implies that women are responsible for controlling male anger and violence. If a woman is only pretty and sweet enough, she can transform an abusive man into a prince – forever. If only it were true. But this is a blame-the-victim scenario waiting to happen. In a realistic sequel, Belle would seek refuge at the village's battered women's shelter.

No matter its sexual politics, Disney's Beauty and the Beast was an international hit, spawning an equally successful stage musical. Disney's cartoon features were back in the groove and they proved it again with 1992's Aladdin. It's hardly worth mentioning the portrayal of women in this translation of an 'Arabian Nights' tale. The only significant female character is Princess Jasmine, who is nothing more than a comely pawn bandied back and forth between the hero Aladdin, the evil vizier and the sultan who just happens to be her foolish father.

More interesting is the obvious racism and ethnic stereotyping in the story. The dastardly characters (like Jafar, the vizier) are decidedly Arabic looking. While the hero, Aladdin, looks and sounds ('Call me Al') like a fresh-faced American. And then there were the song lyrics, the most insulting of which went like this: 'I come from a land...where they cut off your ears, if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.'

Obviously, Disney never means to offend anyone. That would be bad business. But even animators and songwriters internalize racism. And the 'imagineers' at Disney obviously look to reinforce cultural assumptions and push a few buttons in their audience members, if for no other reason than it's the most efficient way to tell a story. Boyish Tom Cruise look = Good guy. Swarthy, hook-nosed Basil Rathbone look = Villain. Most audience members don't even notice when this happens. It is simply the undertow of the 'Disney Magic'.

Some of that same undertow can be felt in the most successful animated feature of all time, a Hamlet fable in fur called *The Lion King*. Here, despite the African locale, the young hero is voiced by All-American white actors (Jonathan Taylor Thomas, Matthew Broderick), while disloyal, vicious hyena baddies are given street-jive dialogue and voiced by actors like Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin.

Women don't fare well in this story either. Although Simba's childhood playmate, Nala, can kick his butt in a mock fight, when Simba runs away Nala and the other lionesses are powerless to resist the oppressive rule of Scar (a crypto-homosexual villain, another Disney favorite).

With the tremendous success (over \$766 million in worldwide box office) of *The Lion King*, Disney plunged wholeheartedly into its own 'Wonderful World of Multiculturalism'. The next animated feature, *Pocahontas*, blended their traditional all-for-love Princess tale with a true story from Native American history. And there lies the outrage: *Pocahontas* is not a fictional character to be casually re-interpreted. She was a real woman, who deserved better than the cartoon portrait Disney painted of her.

There's no room in this article to list all the inaccuracies in this 1995 film. Suffice it to say that Disney's buckskin Barbie bears little resemblance to the pre-pubescent girl who first met John Smith. Her real name was Matoaka and her 'saving' of Smith from 'execution' was probably nothing more than a tribal adoption ceremony. There was no romance between the two. She called him 'father' when she met him again, years later.

In an attempt to put a cheery spin on what amounts to genocide, Disney ends their film with peace achieved between the natives and colonists. No mention is made of the eventual decimation of the Powhatan nation. And neither in this movie, nor its 1998 straight-to-video hit sequel, *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*, is any mention made of the fact that *Pocahontas* was kidnapped, held hostage, forcibly 'civilized' and converted to Christianity, then married off to a colonist who viewed her origins as 'accursed'.

Later, as a publicity gimmick for the Virginia colony, she was taken to England where she sickened and died. It's hard to make two upbeat cartoon adventures out of such a tragic story. So Disney didn't try. Instead, they drew a barefoot babe and gave her cute, comical animal sidekicks and a penchant for falling in love with hunky anglos. Sadly, millions of people around the world saw *Pocahontas* not only as a colorful cartoon but as a palatable history lesson.

In the newest animated film, *Mulan*, Disney has laid claim to a Chinese hero who, although real, lived so long ago that her story has passed into myth. The basic legend tells of a young woman who – to protect her disabled veteran father – enters the imperial army, fighting bravely for many years. As you'd expect, Disney has declared its good intentions and its sincere respect for this Chinese national hero. In fact the distortion level in Disney's *Mulan* equals that of *Pocahontas*.

In Disney's version the woman warrior is discovered after she is injured in battle and sentenced to die. But her handsome commanding officer, Shang (a Disney invention), cannot kill her. Instead, he expels her from the army. In the legend, Hua Mu-Lan isn't discovered until after the war when her comrades visit and find her in women's attire. In the Disney version, Shang (Mulan's would-be executioner) shows up after the war to court his former buddy – to the delight of her family and her. The real *Mulan* had no interest in romance.

So, even though *Mulan* is a brave, strong hero, her motivation for entering the army has nothing to do with her own ambitions and everything to do with serving patriarchy (represented by her father and her emperor). Disney makes it clear that men still command *Mulan* and they always retain the power of life-and-death over her. But not to worry, all they really want to do is marry her and turn her into a Disney happy homemaker.

By looks alone, kick-boxing *Mulan* would seem to have little in common with dainty *Snow White*. But looks are deceiving. Disney has changed only the trappings and in recent cases the skin color of its heroines. At heart, they all still identify with male authority instead of seeking their own empowerment. And in the end a good-looking boyfriend remains the truest measure of feminine happiness and success.

As I write this, the Chinese Government has still not given its permission for a mainland theatrical release for *Mulan* (although the film is already a hit in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other Asian markets). Chinese officials are engaged, as the *Sunday Telegraph* put it, in a 'wider struggle to suppress foreign-backed interpretations of the country's literary heritage'.

More power to their struggle. But there may just be no stopping the cultural *tsunami* called the Walt Disney Company.

**Kathi Maio** lives in Boston. She is the film editor of *Sojourner: The Women's Forum* and is the author of two books of film essays, *Feminist in the Dark* and *Popcorn & Sexual Politics*.

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