FEMALE SYMBOLS AT THE CROSSROADS IN DISNEY'S FAIRYTALES (CINDERELLA, BELLE, AURORA AND MALEFICENT)

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează)
Assist. Prof. , „Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract:Beyond their entertaining role, the quests narrated by fairy tales, which take their readers/ spectators on the peaks of fantasy, also hide striking secrets unveiled by the interpretation of symbols (especially since fairy tales carry cultural and social values and have always served as education tools). The Walt Disney Company has transformed well-known fairy tales, such as "Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty", "Beauty and the Beast" into successful animated movies, initially spreading patriarchal values that taught women about their "proper" social role and duties. Across time, Disney's perspective has gradually changed, due to the evolution of social mentalities and taboos, bringing important changes particularly from a feminist perspective. This paper approaches several female characters, analyzing their evolution from passive child-like women, with a gender-based lifestyle (Cinderella and Aurora in Disney's animated movies) into more emancipated and audacious women, whose actions lead to decisive plot twists (Cinderella in the movie "Cinderella" (2015) and Aurora in "Maleficent" (2014); Belle in the animated movie "Beauty and the Beast" (1991) and in the movie with the same name released in 2017). Special attention is also paid to the evolution of Maleficent, the negative female character from "Sleeping Beauty", whose Disney representation is changed radically in "Maleficent".

Keywords: fairytale, female representation, Disney, princess, social values

1. Introduction

Children, who are characterized by rich, even borderless imagination, are influenced heavily by the fairytales they come into contact with. Fairy tales play an important role both during childhood and adulthood. In fact, fairytales represent a primary education tool, as far as children are concerned, instilling social prejudices, conceptions, perspectives. Fairy tales reflect an era's social environment and point of view. Children start getting their first impressions of male- female relationships through fairy tales.

In his work, *American Heroes, Myth and Reality,* Marshall W. Fishwick (1954: 3) asserts the following:

> "Different ages and cultures vary the heroic personality, but all heroes are true to their age. Whatever their situation, the motives they urge are elementary, the morality they advocate is obvious. (…) The search for heroes is inherent in human nature."

The human being will always need a hero/ a role model; s/he will always feel the need not only for protection but also the need for an icon, for a model of goodness, justice and altruism. The hero provides a pattern which in some respects is similar to that of the ordinary human being (a hero, in his/her essence, has a human nature; for instance, he or she is able of feelings such as love and hatred, just like any ordinary human being).

In her online article "Cinderella in the Classroom: Children's Responses to Gender Roles in Fairy-Tales", Elle Westland (1993) defines fairy tales as changing according to the changes in social structures: "its development depends on the dominant value system of the culture that appropriates it." Fairy tales told in the past had the cultural value systems of that society in that time and fairy tales told nowadays, although they have the same plots, carry the social values of our contemporary systems.

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The Walt Disney Company has transformed well-known fairy tales, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* into successful animated movies, which entertained its public and spread patriarchal values, teaching women about their "proper" role and duties within society. Some decades ago, these fairytales were extremely popular, and all the girls wanted to be like the princesses in these fairytales, i.e. "the damsel in distress", waiting for her prince, whom she met "Once upon a dream". These fairytales mainly taught girls to look beautiful, to be passive, kind, gentle, generous, self-sacrificing and forgiving, while the male child was (and still is) advised to grow up to be a handsome brave prince and a successful wise king. Boys were encouraged to impersonate brave princes and knights in order to become leaders, fighters and protectors, and to master all situations.

For instance, at the time *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was released, a girl's task was to be a good housewife, looking after the children and making her husband happy. Thus, in *Snow White* (1937), the eponym heroine is first seen cheerfully scrubbing the stairs of her stepmother's castle, surrounded by a squad of tweeting white birdies. Moreover, she then goes on to clean up the seven dwarfs' cottage, cook their dinner and badger them into washing their faces and hands. In her turn, Cinderella (1950) is presented as a gentle beautiful child-like woman to whom everyone orders around and who has a gender-based lifestyle. All these princesses, surrounded by birds and little animals, endure their hard life hoping that one day their prince will come and change everything. In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Princess Aurora represents, like Snow White and Cinderella, the epitome of womanhood and femininity. She is so passive that she does not even touch the spindle on her own initiative; she touches it because she is in a trance induced by Maleficent and she sleeps through the whole story while her prince is struggling for her life and her future.

Although Disney 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). However, over time, Disney's perspective on the princess/ main female character has gradually changed, due to the evolution of social mentalities and taboos, triggered by feminist movements. Thus, towards the end of the twentieth century, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* had brought important changes from a feminist point of view. The perspective on Disney's heroines changes, i.e. they become more emancipated, rebel, audacious and ready to take their own decisions, trying to escape patriarchal manipulations. Moreover, in the 1990's a woman's task changes into looking beautiful because this way she can earn power and rule her man, which is reflected, for example, in *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel, in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) is a rebellious adolescent who, after falling in love with her prince, disobeys the orders of her father, King Triton, and goes after her prince. Belle, in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) is an intelligent and audacious young woman who refuses Gaston's misogynistic marriage proposal and rescues her father from the Beast, by deciding to sacrifice herself and to remain the Beast's prisoner (later, she even succeeds in "taming" the Beast and in breaking the spell cast on him).

Nowadays, most little girls want to be like Ana, Elsa, Princess Sophia or Rapunzel from Tangled, Merida from Brave, who are empowered and powerful female characters, able to save the situation by themselves, and who do not need brave knights to rescue them. This shift from the damsel in distress to the empowered princess was triggered by women's emancipation, also reflected in new animated movies, such as *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Shrek* (2001), *Sophia the First* (2012-2018), *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), or in the reinterpretation of old fairytales, such as the animated movie *Tangled* (2010) or the movies *Cinderella* (2015), *Maleficent* (2014) or *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). However, the last three are quite recent and did not have such a big impact upon small children, since they are movies and not animated movies.

The evolution of these perceptions on Disney's main female characters reveals the passage from the woman seen as an object and placed within the domestic space (and also having a gender-

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based lifestyle and waiting for the prince, the male, to come and rescue them and change their lives) to the independent woman who rebels against patriarchal values and takes the initiative in order to organize by herself her own way of life.

2. The damsels in distress, representations of female passivity: the animated movies Cinderella (1950) and Sleeping Beauty (1959)

In the 1950 animated movie, Cinderella appears as a child-like woman, with her blonde hair, blue eyes, button nose and tiny body. Her life is gender-based, as she is presented as a perfect housekeeper whom everyone orders around (her entire daily activity is represented by housework and domestic chores, such as cleaning, cooking, washing, and sewing). Moreover, although she is abused and manipulated by her two stepsisters and her stepmother (Lady Tremaine), she does not contest their orders and does not act for herself. Despite her sadness and hardships, she takes refuge in her dreams, as there she loses her heartaches and her wishes come true. She thinks that if she keeps on believing in her dreams of happiness, they will come true and her life will change.

Gender roles are also influencing the mice that Cinderella takes care of and befriends with. For instance, when the male mice Jacq and Gus want to help the other little animals to mend Cinderella's dress for the ball, one female mouse tells Jacq: "leave the sewing to the women", and she takes the needle from him (Randall, 2016).

The entire story is focused on Cinderella's kindness and patience, on her capacity to forgive and on her maternal traits. Furthermore, her salvation from her stepfamily's slavery comes through marriage to a man whom she simply waits and barely knows (not to mention the fact that she runs away from her prince at the ball and he has to find her).

In *Sleeping Beauty*, Princess Aurora is, like Cinderella, the representation of the perfect woman, in terms of physical appearance. From the very beginning, baby Aurora receives from each fairy a gift that will make her the embodiment of perfection: the first fairy grants her beauty and the second fairy gave her the gift of song.

The fairies try to rescue Aurora from Maleficent's curse; hidden (and exiled) in the forest, the princess does not know about her real identity; just like Cinderella, she is surrounded by little and fluffy animals and dances and sings "Once Upon a Dream", hoping that one day she will meet her prince.

Aurora also lacks control of her life because she is unable to mold her own fate. She is so passive that she does not even touch the spindle on her own initiative; she touches it because she is in a trance induced by Maleficent and she sleeps through the whole story while the prince is struggling for her life and future.

3. The villains from the animated movies Cinderella (1950) and Sleeping Beauty (1959), representations of negative female empowerment

In the animated movies *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the main villains are adult and powerful women who try to harm the protagonists out jealousy, revenge, competition or struggle for power.

Both Lady Tremaine and Maleficent are deeply contrasted with the heroines. One the one hand, the protagonists are beautiful and sweet and innocent young women, with a melodious voice, surrounded by sunshine and by furry animals. They are passive and submissive and embody the angel-like woman. On the other hand, the female antagonists have an evil/ demonic complexion, wear dark, cold colors and are surrounded by gloom and evil (even monstrous) beings (i.e. the cat Lucifer in *Cinderella* and crows and monster-like beings in *Sleeping Beauty*). According to

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Mattinson, in the animated movie, Maleficent, the self-proclaimed "Mistress of All Evil", "was designed like a giant vampire bat to create a feeling of menace" (qtd. in Solomon, 1989: 182). Moreover, Maleficent's original version was also known as "one of the most sinister Disney Villains" (Roby, 2016: 56).

Maleficent and Lady Tremaine are older, life-experienced and artful women, with low, scratchy and unpleasant voices; they are the embodiment of the unattractive demonic woman. According to Maio (1998), in these fairytales, "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" (Maio, 1998). Therefore, these powerful and strong females, characterized by vanity and jealousy, are a threat to masculine authority and their womanly characteristics are diminished. The message transmitted by these fairytales is that a good woman (according to social standards) should be like Aurora and Cinderella, i.e. obedient, naive and passive, with a gender-based lifestyle, while powerful adult women are portrayed as wicked, evil, unattractive.

Disney's renaissance in the 1980s was marked by the emergence of a new type of woman. The first two movies in the second wave of the Disney canon, *The little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, signaled a change in the gender experiences addressed by Disney, due to the transformation of women's roles in postwar America and Europe. Female heroines became more and more active and empowered, driven by the desire to escape the prisons of domesticity and from their provincial lives.

4. A step forward in Disney's female empowerment: the animated movie *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)

Stung by the criticism, Disney started showing more sensitivity in terms of gender issues in their next animated movie, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). For this purpose, the company hired a woman, Linda Woolverton, as screenwriter and promoted their new heroine, Belle, as modern, active and even feminist.

According to Claire Fallon (2016), in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Woolverton confessed that the process of portraying Belle as a more feminist protagonist was extremely hard because "the whole idea of the heroine-victim was baked into the cake, especially at Disney". Satisfied with the outcomes, the screenwriter further stated that the protagonist "has an independent, open mind. She loves to read and to explore the outdoors. But even so, every day was a battle of making it happen (...). Every single line of her dialogue was a battle."

Nevertheless, the animated movie kept some of the old habits, i.e. Belle is the self-sacrificing daughter of a silly inventor (she switches places with her father when the Beast takes him prisoner) and the movie still perpetuates the idea that women's true happiness is to be found only in the arms of a prince.

However, it should be noted that, in Constance Grady's opinion (2017), the original purpose of this fairytale (written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont) was to teach the French girls from the 18th century

> "that arranged marriages aren't as scary as you might think", because "once the young wife learns to see the goodness in her husband's heart and love him just for that, he will come to seem beautiful and brilliant to her".

From the very beginning, Belle is portrayed as bookish, bored with provincial life, and devoted to her old father. Her thirst for adventure and interest in books, knowledge, and learning differentiate her from the "little people" in her "poor provincial town" and from the previous Disney princesses. Aware of the fact that she is marginalized by her community because of her intellectual and inquisitive features, she asks her father: "Papa, do you think I'm odd?" Then she

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tells him: "It's just that I'm not sure I fit in here" (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991). Her passion for books marginalizes her. The scene in which Belle helps her father mend one of his inventions also emphasizes her non-conformist and inquisitive nature, as she gives him all the tools he needs, sometimes even before he asks for them.

Belle's unconventional nature and non-conformism transform her both into the object of Gaston's desire and into the perfect candidate that would break the Beast's spell.

Gaston is the embodiment of the classic egocentric and narcissist chauvinist and Belle is not impressed by his looks or body. In their first meeting in town, Gaston grabs Belle's book and throws it in the mud. Then he tells her that "it's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas, thinking…". In response, Belle tells him: "Gaston, you are positively primeval" (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991), an insult that he takes as a compliment.

Furthermore, her denial of Gaston's marriage proposal shows her strong personality. He organizes the wedding, as he is sure that Belle will not refuse his proposal, and then knocks at her door (not before thanking the guests for their presence and telling them that first he had to go and propose to the girl). When Belle opens the door, Gaston almost forces himself inside. As he tells Belle that all the girls in town would "love to be in her shoes" (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991), he looks in the mirror and checks himself out before resuming his speech, which highlights his narcissistic nature.

When Gaston claims that all Belle's dreams will come true (if she marries him), he sits down and puts his feet on Belle's book. Belle replies, "What do you know of my dreams?" (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991), as she picks her book up and cleans it off. Trying to get her marry him, Gaston corners Belle at the door but she outsmarts him by opening the door while he tries to kiss her. Belle turns the handle of the door (which shows her independence and wits), then Gaston flies out of the house into a puddle of mud, with a pig on his head, being thus humiliated by a woman. Additionally, this also represents a metaphor for his true nature, i.e. a male chauvinist pig.

It is obvious that Belle is immune to Gaston, the advocate of married life, whose proposal holds little appeal: "Picture this, a rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire, my little wife massaging my feet, while the little ones play on the floor with the dogs, we'll have six or seven" (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991). Thus, the domestic realm does not disappear entirely, because Gaston offers Belle a domestic (gender-based) role, in the "provincial life" that she wants to escape from. Belle's empowerment lies in the decisions she makes: she refuses Gaston's marriage proposal, she goes to the Beast's castle by herself to save her father, and she does not allow anyone to manipulate her.

Moreover, Belle successfully "tutors Beast in manners and behavior acceptable for her to love until he recognizes his need to behave like a gentleman (…) and to adopt the codes of white-western maledom to achieve Belle's love and his transformation" (Craven, 2002: 133). From this perspective, Belle may be seen as a feminist protagonist that not only does "tame" a beast but also learns to love him, i.e. an allegory for a lesson in what real beauty is (also hinted at in the question "who could ever *learn* to *love* a Beast?", from the animated movie's advertising). In this regard, the fairytale also transmits the message that outer beauty can also be deceitful and hide a monstrous and egocentric soul, as in Gaston's case. Although he is handsome and strong, he is the one that behaves like a beast (he tries to force Belle to marry him by locking her father up; he manipulates the townspeople, instigates them to attack the Beast's castle and stabs the Beast in the back, although the latter had spared his life).

5. Turning the story upside down: the good and evil *Maleficent* (2014)

The dark fantasy movie *Maleficent,* directed by Robert Stromberg and inspired by the 1959 animated movie *Sleeping Beauty*, presents the story from the antagonist's perspective, i.e.

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Maleficent, an initially good-hearted fairy whose traumatizing past transformed her into a vengeful and dark creature.

According to a large number of reviewers and commentators, the disturbing scene in which Stefan drugs Maleficent and cuts her wings is a metaphor for rape. For instance, Hayley Krischner (2014) stated that "it's impossible to ignore a metaphoric rape that occurs in a Disney movie". The same critic praised the movie for transmitting a positive message, as it allows "the woman to recover. It gives her agency. It gives her power. It allows her to reclaim the story" (Krischner, 2014). In her turn, Monika Bartyzel (2014) also explained the scene's implications: "*Maleficent* offers a dark, surprisingly adult exploration of rape and female mutilation". In an interview with BBC Radio 4, *Woman's Hour*, even Angelina Jolie – the actress that played Maleficent – tackled this issue, explaining the intentional nature of this allegory:

> "We were very conscious, the writer and I, that it was a metaphor for rape. This would be the thing that would make her lose sight... The core of [the movie] is abuse, and how the abused have a choice of abusing others or overcoming and remaining loving, open people. The question was asked, 'What could make a woman become so dark? To lose all sense of her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness?'" (*Holmes, 2014*).

In this regard, Gloudeman (2014) emphasizes that Maleficent's wings represent her power source, which increases as she ages. Furthermore,

> "like a young woman's sexuality, they are precious, and the crude way in which they are sawed off her back — her trust broken, her body violated — leaves her ravaged inside and out. Her choices are driven at every turn by this moment of betrayal, and what happens next is really a survival story, as she slowly learns to love and trust again".

Pained, weakened and betrayed by the man she loved, Maleficent is radically changed by her trauma and has to deal with many internal conflicts. In Judith Jones's perspective (2014), "the film depicts a type of gender motivated violence and the intentional destruction of a woman's body used as a weapon against her, similar to how rape is used". Haunted by the thirst for revenge (and also willing to defend her magic kingdom), Maleficent irrevocably curses Aurora, the king's newborn child. The three fairies chosen to raise and protect Aurora are extremely incompetent and Maleficent, driven by heartache and the desire to see her curse fulfilled, takes care of and even saves Aurora's life several times from the distance, like a guardian angel. However, eventually, Maleficent finally finds genuine beauty, kindness and innocence in Aurora and her stone heart is gradually soften by the maternal love for "her victim" and realizes that the princess may bring peace in the land.

Maleficent's maternal love for Aurora is the key that undoes the curse: when she kisses Aurora's forehead, the princess wakes up. In this regard, Scott and Dargis (2014) stated that "with (…) an astonishing maternal kiss, *Maleficent* demolishes stereotypes that were only tweaked in *Frozen*". Thus, the true love's kiss (as requested by her unbreakable curse) comes from the once upon a time evil Fairy Godmother, which radically changes the message of the original fairytale, i.e. true love can take a wide variety of forms, it can heal old heartaches and it can soften hearts of stone.

It is also noteworthy that in the 2014 movie, Aurora is not depicted anymore as a "damsel in distress", whose only destiny is to marry a prince. She is more empowered, active and inquisitive. She helps Maleficent to get her wings back, allowing her to defeat Stefan. Moreover, the movie does not end with Aurora's marriage to the prince, but with her crowning as queen over the two kingdoms (i.e. the magical and the human one).

Lisa Thatcher (2014) remarks that Maleficent is also the representation of the Greek Goddess Nike who leads her battalions of magic creatures, an allegory of female power and potent mind. Thus, in the perspective of the above-mentioned critic, Maleficent portrays "one of the most progressive female characters" and tells "the story of feminism rising from its ashes of revenge,

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reclaiming its viciously hacked off wings" (Thatcher, 2014). In the end, Maleficent is restored by the healing powers of maternal love.

6. Kindness – symbol of female empowerment and courage in the remake *Cinderella* (2015)

The romantic fantasy movie *Cinderella* directed by Kenneth Branagh received mostly positive reviews. For instance, it was perceived by David Rooney (2015) as "an uplifting movie that invests warm sentiment in universal themes of loss and resilience, experience and maturity". In his turn, Richard Corliss (2015) noticed that the movie "successfully updates and revitalizes Disney's "ill-conceived" animated film", empowering Cinderella. Katy Waldman (2015) also praised the "authentic upgrade that does not undermine its heroine while maintaining its classic splendor and charm", while Lawrence Toppman (2015) explained that the new version is characterized by "more psychological depth than usual".

The 2015 movie highlights even more the psychological abuse suffered by Cinderella, inflicted by her stepmother and stepsisters, in order to portray a protagonist with a backbone, who sticks up for herself. Ella was raised by her mother to be kind (the dying mother advices Ella to "have courage and be kind"), and despite all hardships and humiliation, she follows her mother's piece of advice and remains kind.

Her strength, resilience and determination are emphasized by her actions and by the choices she makes. For instance, although her stepfamily mocks her and treats her like a slave, she does not run away from home, she does not take revenge and continues to respect her stepmother and stepsisters, which is extremely hard. Thus, she also honors her parents' memory. According to Deborah Stokol (2015), Ella appropriates her oppression "when she starts calling herself Cinderella instead of Ella". The same above-mentioned author explains that this is "her way of taking on her abused identity as a badge of bravery and survival, and a means to transcend her mistreatment" (Stokol, 2015). When she meets the prince at the ball, she does not try to manipulate him, as her stepmother does (who also sneaks out and spies on the Grand Duke). She remains herself, i.e. the same brave, kind and forgiving Ella.

It is also noteworthy that, at the end of the movie, Ella refuses to be passive anymore and finally makes a fearless stand. Suspecting that Ella is the mysterious princess that everybody is looking for, Lady Tremaine enters her room, finds the glass slipper and threatens her again. She tells Ella that she will allow her to marry the prince if she agrees to let her manipulate him and reign over the kingdom. Ella boldly rejects her stepmother's proposal: "No (…). I was not able to protect my father from you, but I will protect the prince and the kingdom. No matter what becomes of me" (*Cinderella*, 2015). However, her altruism is obvious, as she does not care about the consequences of her refusal; she cares about the fate of the kingdom and of the man she loves.

Although she goes through psychological and physical abuse, Ella survives, demonstrating strength and virtue (Odenigbo, 2015). Thus, after Kit finds her, she does not want to take revenge on her stepmother and stepsisters. On the contrary, she has the strength to forgive them, which reflects, once again, her kindness and resilience. In Stokol's perspective (2015), she "that takes a strength of will in which many women can find inspiration".

Both the 1950 animated movie and the 2015 movie are focused on an unrealistic love story because the romantic relationship between Cinderella and the prince takes shape in only one night (and a short random encounter in the forest, in the movie), which, in real life, would not be enough for a strong and happy marriage. Let us not forget that unlike real life (where this type of romance would be considered as inacceptable, crazy and impulsive), in fairytales, "sudden declarations of love and marriage are somehow completely acceptable" (Antebellum, 2016). Moreover, in almost all fairytales, "poor, less-fortunate female main character" are "rewarded by a marriage to royalty"

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(Antebellum, 2018) and Cinderella is no exception, as her salvation comes through the marriage with a prince that she barely knows, as a reward for her kindness and good behavior.

Not only is the heroine characterized by moral perfection, but also by an ideal/ beautiful physical appearance. In the 1950 animated movie, although Cinderella carries out different types of housework, her hair is never out of place and her waistline is perfect, emphasizing that girls should look good in order to charm the man who will rescue them. Almost the same thing happens in the 2015 movie, where the prince is charmed by Ella's beauty but also by her wits. At their first encounter in the woods, despite her messy hair and simple dress, Prince Kit is impressed by her beauty, kindness and wise answers and falls in love with her. Moreover, at the ball, he cannot contain his emotions and stutters when he asks her to dance with him. However, it is noteworthy that the emphasis is placed more on Kit's royal status than on his personality. This reveals that despite the evolution in Cinderella's representation, "Disney is still caught in the old, constrained messages" of the previous versions of the fairytale. "The old cultural expectations are hard to remove since they are inherently contained within the storyline itself, yet they seem so incredibly out of place today" (Antebellum, 2016).

7. Granting Belle even more agency: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017)

The 2017 musical romantic fantasy movie directed by Bill Condon is a remake of the 1991 animated movie. In order to highlight Belle's agency, the movie amplifies several elements that were only subtly presented or hinted at in the 1991 animated movie; additionally, for the same purpose, new plot pieces were introduced (Gray, 2017). For instance, if the 1991 version presents Belle as a bookish girl, passionate about reading, in the 2017 remake, she tries to teach a girl how to read (this symbolizes that Belle also wants to empower other women); however, this attracts the villagers' anger. Another evolution lies in the fact that Belle is an inventor in the 2017 movie (in the animated movie she only helps her father with his inventions); she invents a washing machine, a contraption she rigs up to a horse.

Moreover, the 2017 movie emphasized Belle's romantic agency. For instance, she rejects Gaston's romantic proposals even more clearly and categorically, compared to the 1991 animated movie. In the animated movie, she answers his marriage proposal in the following way: "I'm very sorry, Gaston, but… but… I just don't deserve you" (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991). In the remake, she tells him: "Gaston, we can't make each other happy. No one can change that much. (…) I'm never going to marry you Gaston. I'm sorry" (*Beauty and the Beast*, 2017).

When Belle's father is imprisoned in the Beast's castle, she forces him to switch places with her, i.e. she hugs him and whispers "I will escape, I promise", then pushes him out of the prison and closes the gate. Afterwards she tries to escape, making a long chain of dresses. Another scene that defines Belle's agency is represented by the moment when Belle and her father are kept captive by the townspeople. She wants to escape, in order to save the Beast and asks for her father's help. He tells her "It's dangerous." She answers: "Yes. Yes, it is." This is enough for Maurice, who picks the lock, acknowledging his daughter's empowerment, strength of character and courage.

Belle and the Beast's relationship

In both versions, i.e. the 1991 animated movie and the 2017 film, Disney attempted to present Belle as an empowered young woman (Watkins, 2017a). However, reviewers and commentators debated whether Belle suffers from Stockholm syndrome, defined by *Cambridge Dictionary Online* as "the situation when a person who has been taken prisoner starts to like or trust the person or people who have taken them", or by *Oxford Dictionary Online* as "Feelings of trust or affection felt in many cases of kidnapping or hostage-taking by a victim towards a captor". According to Psychiatrist Frank Ochberg, who coined the notion of "Stockholm syndrome", "the

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case for *Beauty and the Beast* not being Stockholm syndrome is stronger than the case of it being Stockholm syndrome" because this condition emerges when captors "terrorize, traumatize, and infantilize the captive", the latter "feeling that they are going to die" (Watkins, 2017b); the captives cannot do anything without the captor's permission. Later, because the captors keep their prisoners alive, the latter start feeling gratitude and affection for the former. As far as Belle is concerned, she does not experience such symptoms, the Beast does not cause her such trauma, i.e. she does not feel that her life is threatened.

Emma Watson – the actress that played Belle in the 2017 movie – also rejected the idea that Belle would suffer from the Stockholm Syndrome, arguing that

> "Belle actively argues and disagrees with [Beast] constantly. She has none of the characteristics of someone with Stockholm Syndrome because she keeps her independence, she keeps that freedom of thought" (interview with Anthony Breznican, February 16, 2017, *Entertainment Weekly*).

Although she is a prisoner, Belle gradually contributes to the Beast's moral transformation, which will eventually break the witch's curse.

Moreover, the actress also explains that Belle and Beast's romance builds up gradually, unlike the love at first sight that characterizes other fairytales. Both Belle and the Beast are outsiders and marginalized; slowly, they discover that they are alike (i.e. they share similar values, they both love reading), and their affection grows gradually:

> "In fact, she gives as good as she gets. He bangs on the door, she bangs back (...). I think that's the other beautiful thing about the love story. They form a friendship first and that gap in the middle where there is this genuine sharing, the love builds out of that, which in many ways I actually think is more meaningful than a lot of love stories, where it was love at first sight" (interview with Anthony Breznican, February 16, 2017, *Entertainment Weekly*).

In the movie, Belle and the Beast talk about literature and he helps her to find out what happened to her mother, by taking her to Paris, through a magic book. These moments of emotional intimacy connect them even more, implying also that the Beast earns Belle's heart gradually.

Just like the 1991 animated movie, the 2017 remake transmits a similar message: real beauty lies within one's heart, while outer beauty can be deceitful and hide real monsters. In this regard, the 2017 movie emphasizes even more Gaston's egocentrism, selfishness and malice. For instance, if in the animated movie he mocks Maurice (Belle's father), accuses him of madness and locks him up in order to force Belle marry him, in the 2017 film he hits Maurice and lets him die in the woods, when he realizes that he does not agree with his marriage to Belle.

Conclusion

Over time, Disney has shown great changes as far as its female protagonists are concerned. It started with perfect young women, such as Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, characterized by gentleness, kindness and passivity. The male-centered fairytales featuring these protagonists infused the young girls' minds with stereotypical images of women that have gender-based lifestyles, subjecting the value of woman to man's power.

Then, Disney slowly switched to more empowered female protagonists, such as Belle and Ariel, constructs of the female self in much more independent ways. For instance, fairy tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Shrek* (2001), *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) are characterized by unique perspectives, overcoming patriarchal prejudgments and reflecting modern female role-models. Moreover, since its previous fairytales were grounded on ancient and outdated social mentalities and traditions, different from those promoted nowadays, Disney attempted to update them in remakes (for instance, the movies *Maleficent* (2014), *Cinderella* (2015) and *Beauty and the Beast*, 2017). Disney's latest

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reinterpretations of these stories reinforce even more the idea of female empowerment, courage and independence, suggesting even the idea that true love comes in different shapes and that, sometimes, there is no need for a man to save the situation.

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