

A trousers matter: are Disney's female characters clothes of the latest animated and live action films empowering or a weak façade?

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Abstract Princesses wear gowns, beautiful capes, wonderfully handmade dresses. Or do they? In the latest Walt Disney Animated Films, princesses and women have been wearing trousers and pants substituting the “average” and worldwide known princess outfit. From *Maleficent* to *Toy Story 4* to *Frozen II*, many female characters started wearing more comfortable clothes which allow them to fight and move comfortably wherever they want.

Disney is diving into its old filmography and rethinking their old fairy tale classics changing key characteristics to make the stories more “feminist” according to contemporary standards (Koushik, Reed 2018). Although it has been a clear sign of empowerment, are these changes following feminist roots? Are the female characters empowered?

Feminism's reemergence in the mainstream has forced and is still forcing businesses and media organizations to be aware of and even to promote gender issues relevant to the marketing of their products (Schiele, Louie, Chen 2020). Queen Elsa from *Frozen*, for example, is an insecure character but she does not face her fears as her sister Anna does. However, in *Frozen II*, Elsa changes her attitude and with it her clothes change too. Is queen Elsa, however, really one of the most powerful Disney characters?

On a visual language perspective, are trousers the best way to show how women can be empowered? Is it a clothes matter or is it more a motif matter? Is using stereotypical heritage from fairy tales a wise choice? And are the characters from *Encanto* a new perspective on the matter?

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0. Introduction

When a child faces gender stereotypes and gender biases frequently, this new knowledge becomes part of his or her own perception of the roles of genders in society. Since children are daily influenced by the stereotypical models that they also see in medias, gender biased behaviour will also develop and model after what young human beings see and watch in films and tv series (Indumathi 2019). When speaking of female and male characters portrayal in products which are available also for children, it is hard to find a way to follow a path that will give the audience less gender biases as possible.

«The strongly gendered messages present in the resolutions of the (Disney, AN) movies help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity» (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek 2011: 565).

The newest Disney female characters have been created as proactive and brave people; changes, however, were made not only in their behaviours but also in their appearances. For the newest Disney heroines, whether they come from live action remakes or animated features, there are hardly any huge ballgowns. Trousers are winning a new spotlight in Disney's visual storytelling. If analyzed thoroughly, however, Disney's female representation might become more counterproductive than a real and avant-garde feminist innovation (Shehatta 2020).

1. Feminism in cinematography

«The percentage of U.S. top grossing films featuring female protagonists declined precipitously from 40% in 2019 to 29% in 2020» (Lauzen 2021: 1). Female representation in films has always been problematic, as Dr. Martha Lauzen says in her annual reports. Films' protagonists are males more often than females and when the latest happen to be the main characters they are usually younger than their male counterparts in the same kind of roles.

«Feminism is defined as a social movement and systems of thought that include a “wide ranging set of theories, politics, and practices that contest the dominant gender order» (Hearn & Hein 2015: 626); it is not surprising, therefore, the fact that feminism started having a voice also in cinematography. Female representation in films has improved in the latest decades, but feminism is still being active every day in order to guide current generations into better plots and character-wise choices.

It is apparent that gendered stereotypes and behaviors are still very prevalent in the Disney Princess line, though their depiction has become more complex over the years, reflecting changing gender roles and expectations in American society. Gender expectations were less complex when the first Disney Princess movies were produced (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek 2011: 563).

As it often happens, female characters have more responsibilities on their shoulders than their male counterparts. Still today there are numerous gender beliefs about Emotional Intelligence which relates on gender stereotypes. Human Beings expect a certain human gender to be more emotional and, therefore, expect a wider range of emotions from the humans who are generally perceived in the group of this gender. To sum up, gender stereotypes are about the perceptions that people have about men and women and how these two “categories” are expected to act by others (Bosak, Sczesny, & Eagly 2008: 1148–1155).

In 2019 article by Meia Chita-Tegmark, Monika Lohani and Matthias Scheutz, these scholars demonstrated that gender stereotypes can be applied to robots too. Humans expected a higher and wider emotional reaction from robots with female markers than from robots with male markers, although the robots were the exact same (Chita-Tegmark, Lohani, & Scheutz 2019).

It is of no surprise, then, that female characters are expected to be more revolutionary and more surprising as the years go by. The Walt Disney Company, and cinematography in general, therefore, are trying to apply feminist principles to break these biases.

2. Disney princesses through the years

Excluding Anna and Elsa from *Frozen* (2013), who have their own line and merchandise, the official Disney Princess line includes 12 “princesses”: Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Cinderella from *Cinderella* (1950), Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992), Pocahontas from *Pocahontas* (1995), Mulan from *Mulan* (1998), Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010), Merida from *Brave* (2012), Moana from *Moana* (2016). Beside Mulan, all the characters happen to be princesses or become princesses during the plot.

Disney Princesses are not only iconic but also role models for young girls. Throughout the years females’ characters by Disney changed the most and these changes are visible principally in the above Disney Princess Line. While the earlier Disney princesses, such as Snow White, Cinderella or Aurora, were the image of the age they were drawn in (1937, 1950 and 1959), and therefore were the ideal model of woman that existed in the 30s, 40s and 50s, the later princesses became more outspoken and proactive as the years went by (although, also the first three princesses of the line were somehow active throughout their story). As a matter of fact, all the characters in the official princess line, including the first more moderate three, have always had one characteristic which differentiated them from their literary counterparts: a rebellious nature.

This is probably the main difference that Walt Disney put into his female characters. As Bruno Bettelheim said in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* about female fairy tales’ characters:

[...] Adolescence is a period of great and rapid change, characterized by periods of utter passivity and lethargy alternating with frantic activity, even dangerous behaviour to “prove oneself” or discharge inner tension. This back-and-forth adolescent behaviour finds expression in some fairy tales by the hero’s rushing after adventures and then suddenly being turned to stone by some enchantment. [...] While many fairy tales stress great deeds the heroes must perform to become themselves, “The Sleeping Beauty” emphasizes the long, quiet concentration on oneself that is also needed. During the months before the first menstruation, and often also for some time immediately following it, girls are passive, seem sleepy, and withdraw into themselves. While no equally noticeable state heralds the coming of sexual maturity in boys, many of them experience a period of lassitude and of turning inward during puberty which equals the female experience. [...] a fairy story in which a long period of sleep begins at the start of puberty has been very popular for a long time among girls and boys. [...] This is how the symbolic language of the fairy tale states that after having gathered strength in solitude they now have to become themselves [...] (Bettelheim 2010: 228-229).

If the usual female fairy tales’ characters used to have a rebellion against their conditions in their sleep or in their quiet zone, Walt Disney Company’s characters wanted to change their own fate. This became especially obvious from *The Little Mermaid* animated film in 1989. The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen was already a rebellious female character, who wanted to know about the human world, but Walt Disney Studios’ version gave the character an even more insurgent soul. Disney’s Little Mermaid, who was given the name of Ariel, speaks up for herself with her father and does not “behave”, although she is asked to. She breaks the rules more than once to fulfill her dreams.

Ariel is obviously not the only example, the character of Belle in 1991 animated film *Beauty and the Beast* was written by Linda Woolverton as a feminist heroine:

Woolverton's fight to shape Belle into a new kind of Disney heroine was just that—a fight, every step of the way. The first woman to write an animated Disney film, she worked closely with Howard Ashman, the movie's lyricist, to create a female character who could see beyond the end of her hairbrush, "one that isn't based on being kind and taking the hits but smiling all the way through it," she says. "I just didn't feel like that's the message that we wanted to move into the next century with. And that's the Disney heroine that I grew up with." [...] Woolverton set to work on a script that reflected her self-directed mandate to move women and girls forward (Berman 2016: 2).

Belle is the first declared feminist character written by the Walt Disney Company. She is not only outspoken, but she saves the day more than once by being proactive and while staying true to herself.

The more Disney princesses were released, the more they got new characteristics which made them more active in their stories.

3. Presence of male and female protagonists in Walt Disney Animation Studios films

The protagonists of the 60 Walt Disney's Animation Studios films are still males for the larger part. Obviously, the Walt Disney Company did not release only Walt Disney Animation Studios films (different divisions released other films, such as Pixar or Walt Disney Pictures), however, since this is still the main part of the Walt Disney Productions, the number of female and male protagonists in this particular list, as seen in the diagrams and in the tables below, is rather indicative. Out of the 60 Walt Disney's Animation Studios films, more than half of them have male protagonists and hardly any important female characters (in films such as *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*, released in 1949, the female character hardly has any lines, but also more recent films such as *Brother Bear* (2003), *Chicken Little* (2005) or *Meet the Robinsons* (2007), female characters are no more than secondary).

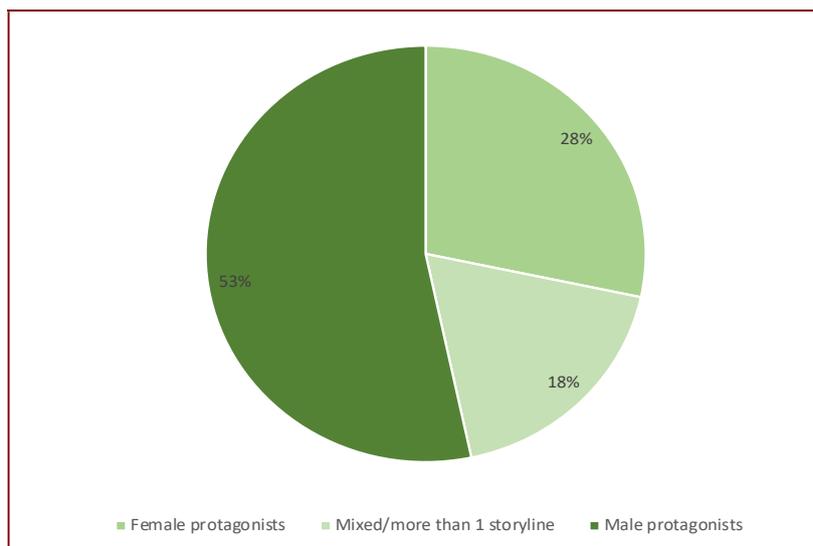


Diagram 1: Gender of the protagonists in Walt Disney's Animation Studios films

The criteria used for this partition followed both the screen time and the importance of the characters plot wise. There are anyway certain exceptions in all the groups; for instance, in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) Aurora has a total of 18 minutes of screen time (Green

2014 *Empire*), however she is still the main character since the plot revolves around her and her actions. The category “Mixed/More than 1 storyline” includes all those films which evolve around different protagonists who are both male and female (for example: *Lilo & Stitch* or *The Rescuers* and its sequel *The Rescuers Down Under*). In the same category there are those Walt Disney Animation films which were a compilation of short films (*Make Mine Music* or *Fun & Fancy Free*) and that, therefore, did not have a proper protagonist (or protagonists). The only exceptions of these kind of “compilation films” or package film are *The Three Caballeros* and *Saludos Amigos*, since throughout the short films the characters of Donald Duck, José Carioca and Panchito Pistoles are in various scenes and complete the subplot of this animated musical. Table 1, 2, and 3 show the names of the films and the years they were released divided by female, mixed and male protagonists.

Female protagonists	Release year
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	1937
<i>Cinderella</i>	1950
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	1951
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	1959
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	1989
<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	1991
<i>Pocahontas</i>	1995
<i>Mulan</i>	1998
<i>Home on the Range</i>	2004
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	2009
<i>Tangled</i>	2010
<i>Frozen</i>	2013
<i>Zootopia</i>	2016
<i>Moana</i>	2016
<i>Frozen II</i>	2019
<i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>	2021
<i>Encanto</i>	2021

Table 1: A list of Walt Disney’s Animation Studios films with female protagonists

Mixed/More than 1 storyline	Release year
<i>Fantasia</i>	1940
<i>Make Mine Music</i>	1946
<i>Fun & Fancy Free</i>	1947
<i>Melody Time</i>	1948
<i>Lady and the Tramp</i>	1955
<i>One Hundred and One Dalmatians</i>	1961
<i>The Aristocats</i>	1970
<i>The Rescuers</i>	1977
<i>The Rescuers Down Under</i>	1990
<i>Fantasia 2000</i>	2000
<i>Lilo & Stitch</i>	2002

Table 2: A list of Walt Disney’s Animation Studios films with mixed protagonists

Male protagonists	Release year
<i>Pinocchio</i>	1940
<i>Dumbo</i>	1941
<i>Bambi</i>	1942
<i>Saludos Amigos</i>	1942
<i>The Three Caballeros</i>	1944
<i>The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad</i>	1949
<i>Peter Pan</i>	1953
<i>The Sword in the Stone</i>	1963
<i>The Jungle Book</i>	1967
<i>Robin Hood</i>	1973
<i>The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh</i>	1977
<i>The Fox and the Hound</i>	1981
<i>The Black Cauldron</i>	1985
<i>The Great Mouse Detective</i>	1986
<i>Oliver & Company</i>	1988
<i>Aladdin</i>	1992
<i>The Lion King</i>	1994
<i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i>	1996
<i>Hercules</i>	1997
<i>Tarzan</i>	1999
<i>Dinosaur</i>	2000
<i>The Emperor's New Groove</i>	2000
<i>Atlantis: The Lost Empire</i>	2001
<i>Treasure Planet</i>	2002
<i>Brother Bear</i>	2003
<i>Chicken Little</i>	2005
<i>Meet the Robinsons</i>	2007
<i>Bolt</i>	2008
<i>Winnie the Pooh</i>	2011
<i>Wreck-it Ralph</i>	2012
<i>Big Hero 6</i>	2014
<i>Ralph Breaks the Internet</i>	2018

Table 3: A list of Walt Disney's Animation Studios films with male protagonists

Another key point, shown in diagrams 2 and 3 below, is the presence of important female characters in male films and, on the opposite side, the presence of important male characters in those films with female protagonists.

Although the original number of films with male protagonists and with female protagonists is quite different (out of the 60 Walt Disney Animation Studios films, only 17 have female protagonists while 32, more than half of the films, have male protagonists) the percentage of presence of the protagonist's opposite gender is higher in films with female protagonists, as seen in fig. 2 and 3. For instance, the film *Tangled* has Rapunzel as a protagonist, a female character, but Flynn Rider is an important part of the plot, therefore he can be categorized as a relevant male character inside a film with a female protagonist. Out of the 17 films with female protagonists, 9 (52,94%) do not have relevant male co-protagonists.

As for the films with male protagonists, the percentage is rather different. Out of the 32 films, only 12 (37,5%) of them have relevant female co-protagonists (films such as

Aladdin, *Hercules*, or *Tarzan*) while 20 films hardly have female characters which are relevant (sometimes, as in *Dumbo*, they are hardly definable as secondary).

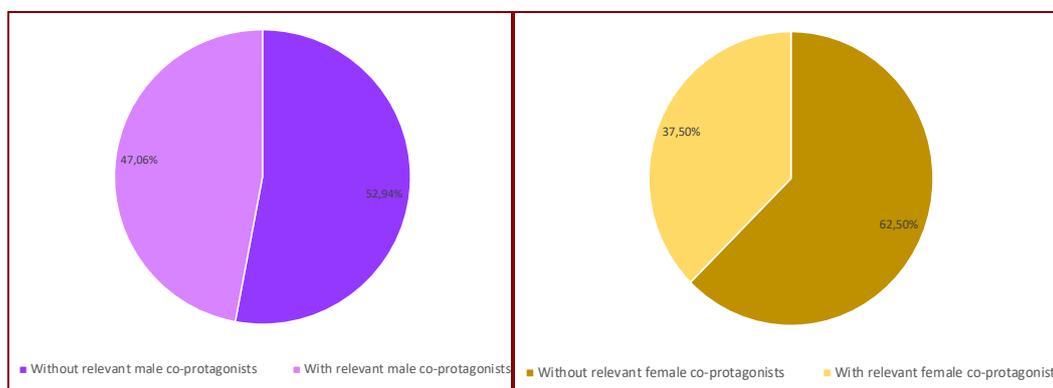


Diagram 2 & 3: Relevance of co-protagonists of the opposite gender of the protagonist of the film

Although Disney's protagonists in Walt Disney Animation Studios films are still mainly males, in the latest years most of the protagonists have been females. Out of the latest 11 films of the chronological list, only 4 have a male protagonist and two of these have a female relevant co-protagonist (*Wreck-it Ralph* released in 2012 and *Ralph Breaks the Internet* released in 2018). All the other 7 films (*Tangled* released in 2010, *Frozen* released in 2013, *Zootopia* released in 2016, *Moana* released in 2016, *Frozen II* released in 2019, *Raya and the last Dragon* released in 2021 and *Encanto* released in 2021) have female protagonists, often accompanied by male relevant co-protagonists. As Kristen Schiele, Lauren Louie and Steven Chen stated in their 2020 article about marketed feminism in youth media:

Businesses can promote positive messages that encourage people to transcend the gender norms that characterize our society. In their animated films, Disney and Pixar encourage young female consumers to push through patriarchal and domestic expectations to achieve their own agency (Schiele, Louie, & Chen 2020: 9).

Since the Walt Disney Company can and does influence new generations, it is of no surprise their interest in keeping their characters updated and as contemporary as possible.

4. A change of outfits

What happened then in the latest years? As stated above, characters kept evolving with time and female characters became more proactive. However, it is not only their behaviour which went through a not-so-subtle change, their own outfits evolved with them.

Up until princess Jasmine from *Aladdin*, hardly any female protagonist of Walt Disney's Animation Studios films, or of any Disney Production in general (not counting films set in the contemporary world), wore trousers. However, this changed in the latest years, bringing new clothes to the newest female characters created by The Walt Disney Company.

Speaking about the Animation Studios, the main female characters who had the chance to wear trousers were Anna and Elsa in *Frozen II*, where Elsa only wears two gowns (a dress at the beginning and a night gown) out of all the 5 outfits that she has in the film, since her final Spirit dress also has trousers underneath the long skirt (Julius 2019).

A few other film divisions of the company decided to give their characters more comfortable clothes. Bo Peep from Pixar's *Toy Story 4* (2019) wears some kind of trousers, along with Maleficent from *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), and Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) live action. Moreover, also Alice from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016) wears trousers instead of her Disney signature light blue dress (which she already wore in the former film *Alice in Wonderland*, released in 2010).

All these characters have one thing in common: they were created to look and be as courageous and brave as possible. The audience did not only have to find them relatable and, in case of Alice, Belle and Maleficent, somehow similar to their animated counterparts, but they also had to perceive the characters stronger than any other character they saw before.

Disney started recreating their own masterpiece in live-action version a few decades back, and the company is not new to "reinventing" its own products. Although, more often than not, the company appears to neglect certain older characters (in order to make the newest versions of the above more proactive), the newest protagonists have often a change of outfits which wants to follow their new behaviours and characteristics. As the Oscar-winning costumer Jacqueline Durran said during an interview with journalist Jazz Tangcay:

The village costume was fun because there was the back and forth between the history and the animation and our interpretation of Belle. It was a look that combined a lot of elements and themes of what we were trying to create in the film. [...] She (Belle, AN) is also wearing bloomers, they're not strictly 18th century, but they free her up to behave in a different way. The fact she has this thing under her skirt meant she could be active (Tangcay 2017: 2).

The use of these visual representations, however, might be perceived as misleading. Disney female characters have always been strong and proactive despite the nature of their clothes. Although the oldest princesses and characters might be perceived as weaker and more passive, their stories and the choices they made in their own plots were always, as already stated, courageous and brave.

Disney's female characters come, for the largest part, from fairy tales and, therefore, have some stereotypical characteristics. Therefore, Disney created the character of Queen Elsa in the 2013 feature length animated film *Frozen* by changing it completely from its original story.

"Elsa was going to be the complete antagonist," explains director Jennifer Lee. "They kept calling her the 'villain.' But there came a point where we said, 'We can't use that word anymore.' You care about someone who's been forced to hide who they are. Elsa's not a villain, she just makes some bad choices because she's in a very difficult situation (Solomon 2013: 14).

Elsa went from being the villain of the story (as in the original fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen which *Frozen* was inspired by: *The Snow Queen*) to being a revolutionary character (Solomon 2013). Positively or negatively, the character of the queen of Arendelle created a new path for all the other Disney's characters. However, what happened was a complete misinterpretation by the audience. The creators of

Frozen, made Elsa as an imperfect and scared character because of all the neglect and the closure she suffered throughout her growth. The audience, on the other hand, perceived Elsa as an extremely strong and outspoken character, features which are more proper of the character of her sister Anna. Therefore, the audience itself made *Frozen*'s Snow Queen a role model to follow.

Since the audience changed dramatically Elsa's perception, the consequence in the second film was to make her as proactive as possible, to fulfill what the audience expected.

At first glance, the familial theme seems to be an antidote to the commonplace female preoccupation with marriage and other gender stereotyping found in Disney movies. [...] *Frozen* ostensibly departs from gender-circumscribed plots. A closer look at *Frozen*, however, reveals questions about whether its princesses do indeed provide an improved model for young girls coming of age (Streiff, Dundes 2017: 1).

These new outfits given to the characters, therefore, are the projections of the characters' new way of behaving. However, the partial masculinization of the outfits has often the opposite consequence or reaction. Instead of seeing these characters as capable females who can do anything no matter what the situation is (a perfect example of such a character is Merida from *Brave*, for instance), the more masculine clothes become vectors of a counterproductive thought. Elsa could not evolve in *Frozen* while she was wearing gowns, but she does evolve when in *Frozen II* she wears trousers. The message that might pass would then be that no matter how hard someone tries, if the person or character wears a gown or a dress, then they are always going to be weak and are never going to improve.

The perception of characters such as the newest Anna and Elsa or the live action Alice or also of Bo Peep in *Toy Story 4*, is going to be linked to their outfit not because they might be more comfortable but because they fill something that poststructural feminism has been trying to avoid in the latest years. For instance, both the idea that if someone has more female or male characteristics then, as a consequence, certain actions will be more likely to be done by them, and the idea that an outfit can make a person more feminine or more masculine if the clothes have gowns or trousers.

This clothes matter is reinforced by the fact that, as it happens inside real society, only female characters are facing these changes. Male characters hardly ever go through a change of style and if they do, they are usually anthropomorphic animals and, therefore, non-human (for instance, Timon in *The Lion King* wears a Hawaiian traditional costume). As Schiele, Louie and Chen stated in their 2020 article: «To break traditional gender roles, some Disney heroines assume masculine attributes or masculine identities. Thirteen of the 17 current-epoch films have female lead characters that display characteristics that are traditionally categorized as masculine» (Schiele, Louie, Chen 2020: 8).

Heroines nowadays, therefore, gain some stereotypical masculine traits in order to be perceived as stronger. In this way, however, the stereotype is confirmed, and female characters look stronger not because they have strong traits but because they are often "dressed like the boys", and therefore can do anything (on the opposite side, the belief that a woman is weaker if she wears a ballgown is stronger than ever, especially while speaking of Disney female characters).

Again, in the opposite direction, nothing is being done. Male characters keep having masculine traits and hardly ever dress with female clothes or behave with those traits which are usually perceived as stereotypically feminine. In this way, characters go

through a massive, unbalanced situation and stereotypes are reinforced instead of discredited.

To summarise, clothes and characters' features should not be connected. To avoid stereotypes and actively depict realistic characters, the most avant-garde thing to do would be to avoid any existing prejudice about gender and create characters who are masculine and strong without the need to wear trousers or feminine and rebels while wearing a wonderful gown.

Real feminist empowerment is not solely suggested through violent and risky actions that might seem masculine, but joint masculine-feminine acts that break gender stereotypes of both femininity and masculinity. [...] Thus, girls and women can be brave to climb mountains, be competitive to defeat male rivals, be skilled in using weapons to fight and rescue others (Shehata 2020: 187).

Regarding this, the biggest change in Disney happened in 2021 with the release of the film *Encanto*. The film has several female characters in the plot, beside the protagonist, and the biggest step Disney has ever done comes from one of them. One of the protagonist's sisters, Luisa, possesses the gift of super-strength and for the first time Disney decided to give a female character some physical features which stepped out from the stereotypical Disney character. As Meg Park, Visual Developmental Artist of the film, stated:

We looked at a lot of female Olympic athletes, mostly hammer and shot-put throwers. I like that she has a soft feminine side to her playing with the balance of a strong figure. (Reyes Lancaster-Jones 2022: 90)

Luisa is a character that goes out of the box. She is extremely strong, because of the power she was gifted by her family's magic, but she is also feminine and wears skirts throughout the whole film. Dylan Ekren, illustrator, and character modelling supervisor who worked on *Encanto*, stated during a few interviews that it was difficult to convince Disney to create a bulky character who would not have the usual slender Disney-ish shape, because the creation of such a character, is not the "norm". The merchandise for the film, as a matter of fact, showed exactly this Disney issue, since Luisa's merchandise was not created but the company prioritized, for example, Isabela's dolls (this character is more into the Disney ideal of female shape).

Merchandise aside, not only having a bulky, muscled character is groundbreaking for the company, but making the same character wear feminine clothes is exactly what fighting gender stereotypes should look like. As Brett Lunceford would put it:

[...] to think critically about the clothing they wear, they can begin to question how gender norms come into place [...] reconsider taken for granted norms of society [...] opens the door for questioning other norms (Lunceford 2010: 67).

5. Stereotypes in animation: a fairy tale heritage

Western animation, and Disney animation in particular, is extremely dependent on fairy tales. Most of the stories that the public relates to the original fairy tales are actually the Disney versions of them, since the films of the company are so popular. Fairy tales in general were born as cautionary tales, as Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp says in his work *Historical Roots of the wonder tale*, and evolved into the genre of children's literature with the creation of said genre and the consequent studies in the 20th century (Propp 1946).

Fairy tales have a unique symbolism which make them simple and easy to understand. In his work *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, Max Lüthi describes exactly that.

The real world shows us a richness of different hues and shadings. Blended colors are far more frequent than pure tones. By contrast, the folktale prefers clear, ultrapure colors: gold, silver, red, white, black, and sometimes blue as well. Gold and silver have a metallic luster, black and white are nonspecific contrasts, and red is the least subtle of all colors and the first to attract the attention of infants. (Lüthi 1947, eng. tr.: 27-28)

Colours are only an example of the stereotypical and simplified language used in fairy tales. Said language was taken and adapted in animation to keep the simplicity of the fairy tales while making the stories in an audio-visual version. Ějzenštejn himself said in the second volume of his book *Metod*, however: «Art tries invariably [...] to revive in people this incessant thirst (zhazhda) for ideal states» (Ějzenštejn, 2002: 161). Symbolism, as well as simple shapes are crucial in folktales. As Lüthi says, «Rather, by virtue of the definition and clarity of their size, shape, color, and material composition, these beings have become representatives of the folktale's extremely stylized form» (Lüthi 1947, eng. tr.: 69) and these characteristics applied in Western animated films too. Having stereotypical characteristics or characters, therefore, was principally a matter of tradition and heritage. However, Disney has always been an avant-garde company which has tried to keep up with the timing the world is living in. If stereotypical characters were acceptable in the 30s, 40s or 50s, they are not anymore nowadays. The way clothes were perceived decades ago has deeply changed and their use cannot be kept in stories and animation stereotypically. This does not mean not to use trousers for female characters, as stated before, it means to use them thoughtfully and not only to make the audience perceive the character as proactive and courageous, since it could create the bias of a character being strong only with features that are still perceived as more masculine. As highlighted in paragraph 5, Luisa's character in *Encanto* is the first positive example of refusing stereotypes. A character can be multi-faceted, strong, brave, and at the same time feminine (and vice-versa). Although fairy tale language is simple, simplicity should not be an excuse for stereotypes to be part of biased beliefs.

6. Conclusion: better timing and storytelling are the answers

The way feminism is influencing medias, and, in this case, also Disney's featured films, is positive and can open up new paths and ways which will eventually deconstruct gender stereotypes and biases.

Poststructural feminism focuses on the deconstruction of gender binaries and the ways our experiences are understood. [...] By examining how feminist themes and gender schemas are communicated through film, managers may better understand how organizations can respond to and participate in feminist movements and discussions of gender. (Schiele, Louie, Chen 2020: 3)

It could be stated that there is no right way to create any character and that, as a matter of fact, keeping up only with two stereotypical genders is a biased decision, since the idea of gender is nowadays being deconstructed (the idea of a mere bipartite gender will most likely be removed by the post-contemporary society). However, since it is unlikely for genders to be deconstructed soon in audio-visual communication such as animated films, having more female characters and more representation is most definitely the

right path to follow. The creation of the character of Luisa from *Encanto*, a film with mainly female characters, is most definitely a fresh start.

First, marketers and media producers should include more top-billing female leads and be mindful of the gender balance in their media. This means not only increasing the quantity of female characters in media but also increasing their speaking time, considering the content of what they say, and enhancing their character roles (*ivi*: 10).

Clothes, as well as colours and shapes, are nothing but a reflection of the story that is being told, whether the story is audio-visual, oral, or written. Their use, therefore, can be as powerful as it can be dangerous and it is necessary nowadays, since we're gaining more awareness on topics such as gender stereotypes and gender biases, to use them in the best way possible while creating different forms of art. As Vygotsky would put it:

Psychological investigation reveals that art is the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society, that it is a method for finding an equilibrium between man and his world, in the most critical and important stages of his life. This view of course completely refutes the approach according to which art is an ornament [...] (Vygotsky 1965, eng. tr.: 262).

Society develops as well as its forms of art. The use of certain types of clothes in a symbolic way can be a good path to follow if not biased by stereotypes themselves.

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