Maleficent Reborn: Disney’s Fairytale View of Gender Reaches Puberty

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Fairy tales—indeed all tales—are told for a purpose. They are a form of social education, a form that some scholars argue is older than civilization itself. They imagine dilemmas and offer a range of permissible solutions, labeling socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, demarcating good and evil, exploring existential questions, binding the teller and the audience into a common understanding of community identity. It is in our best interest as individuals and citizens of a democracy to pay close attention to what stories people are telling our children.

Once upon a time, Disney-animated films dominated the American fairytale genre. These movies were as formulaic as they were popular; and into that mix Disney stirred in an unhealthy dose of sexism. In the holy trinity of Disney classic fairy tales: Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1952) and Sleeping Beauty (1959), the female protagonists were morally (and sexually) pure young princesses fresh out of puberty, with lives defined by longing for a prince. In a crisis, they became utterly dependent on his affections for rescue. Elizabeth Bell has described the rest of the formula: “Female wickedness—embodied in Snow White’s stepmother, [Cinderella’s stepmother], [and] Maleficent...is rendered as middle-aged beauty at its peak of sexuality and authority.” Old women, pear- (or apple-) shaped and post-menopausal, represent female sacrifice and nurturing as fairy godmothers and jovial servants.

For the magical ingredient, Disney gave us True Love’s Kiss (TLK): the
most powerful physical act a princess can perform, breaking spells and closing holes in the plot. Paradoxically, however, the formula required a princess to perform this act passively—accepting it from the prince who, by virtue of kissing her, became her One True Love (OTL) whether or not she even knew his name. Princes, for their part, were physically brave, intellectually uninteresting, and bestowed their TLKs on pretty women they barely knew—even ones who were passed out or presumed dead.

If you had fallen into a deep, deathlike sleep after seeing Walt Disney's 1959 animated musical Sleeping Beauty, and awoken in 1989 to see The Little Mermaid, you would not have missed much change in the formula. Indeed, The Little Mermaid represented a high-water mark in the history of Disney's negative portrayal of young women and celebration of patriarchy. The princess, Ariel, is scatterbrained, callow, and acquisitive—spending her days with her sisters in front of the mirror, or secretly collecting artifacts from the human world, which she sees as superior to her own. (At least Cinderella and Snow White were hard workers.) When she meets a human prince, Ariel falls instantly in love, giving up her family, her world and even her voice in exchange for a magic spell that gives her legs and access to his world.

With only three days to win the prince's heart and TLK, Ariel sees the problem with this sacrifice: how can he love me if I cannot speak? "You have your looks, your pretty face," answers the sea-witch, Ursula. "And don't underestimate the importance of body language" she adds, shaking her behind. "The men up there don't like a lot of blather... It's she who holds her tongue who gets her man." And, incredibly, the movie endorses Ursula's point: the prince does fall deeply in love with Ariel in three days, based solely on her looks and (presumably) her talents as a mime.

If you had fallen into that deep sleep again, waking to see the 2014 release of Maleficent, Disney's live action, computer-generated imagery (CGI) remake of Sleeping Beauty, your fairy-tale world would be turned upside-down. Maleficent—which takes its title from the original film's evil antagonist—is a fully feminist retelling of Sleeping Beauty that dispenses utterly with every major sexist element of the original. For Disney to remake its own classic fairy tale, under its own name, in so radical a fashion, represents a major moment in the fairytale film industry.

Maleficent Reborn

So what is so special about Maleficent? "Let us tell an old story, and see how well you know it," begins the voiceover, and from there we learn much that is new, and awfully familiar, about the world of Sleeping Beauty and its most glorious inhabitant, Maleficent. Here's the synopsis: Once upon a time there were two realms. In one realm (we'll call this the Red Realm), men were ambitious and warlike. There were huge disparities in wealth in the Red Realm, resulting in a lack of democratic institutions, high poverty, and crime. In the other realm, a magical realm called the Moors (we'll note the racial double entendre and think of this as the Blue Realm), there was a high degree of trust and an extremely democratic form of government. The creatures of the Blue Realm are a multicultural, multispecies collection of non-human, magical, CGI-animated beaties. Young Maleficent, adolescent, amply winged, bookish, and most powerful of all the fairies, is content to live within this pluralist democracy as a plain citizen, serving periodically as an advisor.

One day Maleficent meets a Red Realm boy, Stefan, who is thieving in the Moors. A victim of Red Realm social dysfunction (he grew up in a barn and is deeply antisocial) Stefan manages to charm the fairy. Soon the two teens become close friends, culminating in a "gift" he gives her for her 16th birthday—a gift he calls "True Love's Kiss." Alas for these star-crossed lovers, Stefan returns to the world of humans and soon enough the imperialist Red Realm is making war on the Moors. In order to curry favor with the king of the Red Realm, and win the hand of his daughter, Stefan visits his old love, regains her trust, and slips her a sleeping potion (think "roofies"). While she lies unconscious, he cuts off her beautiful wings. These he presents to the King and subsequently keeps in a special trophy case. Meanwhile Maleficent awakens and, in a horrifying scene, discovers she has been betrayed and mutilated. In her anger and shame, Maleficent establishes herself as queen and closes the Moors off from the world.

What follows is close to the same old story, but with Maleficent as the antagonist-hero. Stefan becomes king, has a daughter named Aurora, and holds a christening. Three bumbling fairies arrive to cast benevolent spells on the little girl, but before they finish Maleficent enters, uninvited, and bestows her own gift: a curse of eternal sleep at age 16. As an afterthought she adds, with irony cold as dry ice, that True Love's Kiss is the only thing that can break the spell.

Subsequently the three bumbling fairies secreted Aurora away to protect her from Maleficent, but she susses them out and, unbeknownst to them, keeps a watchful, increasingly protective, and even maternal, eye on the girl. Eventually Aurora and Maleficent become close friends. But despite an eleventh-hour effort by all involved, the curse comes to pass. In the end, it is Maleficent's kiss of maternal love, not that of a random prince, which saves Aurora. Stefan dies after a grotesque fight sequence. The walls come down, Maleficent cheers up, and the two kingdoms find peace.

Our interest here is not so much in the quality of Maleficent as a film, which earned deservedly mixed reviews. Instead, the question is what Maleficent tells its viewers about how girls and women are supposed to act and, further, what Disney's assumptions are about who would view this message and how they would receive it. (It is worth mentioning here that the role of Maleficent for Angelina Jolie was the first following her public disclosure of the private decision to undergo a preventative double mastectomy, which she discussed in a 2013
The feminism of Maleficent is not deep, but it is wide. The protagonist is a full person, good and evil, powerful and vulnerable, vengeful and loving. Both Choice: No little mermaid she.)

dee, but it is wide. The protagonist is a full person, good and evil, powerful and when Maleficent lets negative emotions she and teen-aged Aurora deeply value in the Red Realm, driven by a culture of fear, anger, and violence. Matriarchy let the idea of
in the Red Realm, driven by a culture

Two Decades of Transformation

The first change happened when Linda Woolverton cracked Disney's glass ceiling in 1991, becoming the first female screenwriter of a Disney animated feature. Her screenplay for Beauty and the Beast stuck to much of the Disney formula, but endowed the female protagonist, Belle, with a fine mind, strong work ethic, and aspirations for her life that did not involve bagging a man—decisions which “provoked discussion” among Woolverton's male counterparts, but carried the day. After the film's phenomenal success, Woolverton engaged numerous Disney projects including co-writing The Lion King (1994) and, 20 years later, sole authoring Maleficent. Following Woolverton's lead, women have gradually gained voices in all aspects of Disney film production.

Disney changed in other ways, too, as did the whole film industry. DreamWorks formed in 1994; Pixar released its revolutionary feature film, Toy Story in 1995. (Disney bought Pixar in 2006.) The result was an explosion of fairy-tale animated film that stretched the definition of what a fairytale film was and, to a large degree, what Disney itself was. The marketplace became so saturated that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences added the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2001, fittingly won by Shrek, a DreamWorks spoof of the fairytale film genre. In this mix, the traditional Disney fairytale film faded after Aladdin (1992). Not until Enchanted (2007), a self-mocking satire of Disney fairytale conventions that both challenged and defended “fairytale” gender dynamics, did the traditional Disney fairytale feature return. It turned out to be old-time gender's last stand.

In the Obama era, Disney revived the classic fairy tale, releasing a string of increasingly enlightened stories that revised or abandoned the old formula. The Princess and the Frog (2009) features an African American girl whose hard work and determination lead her to open a successful business, while her end-of-film marriage to an enchanted frog-prince is more about making the most of a bad situation (she has become a frog, too, and despairs of ever breaking the curse). In Tangled (2010), Rapunzel's cloistered childhood is so filled with academic study in science and the humanities that her tower looks more like a dorm room at Wellesley College than a prison. While she does fall for a rapscallion named Flynn, there is no talk of either TLK or OTL, though there is a gratuitous off-screen wedding at the end and the all-too-familiar sexually dangerous middle-aged witch thing. However, in Brave, a 2012 adaptation of the Greek legend of Atalanta, the plucky and highly capable Merida rejects her parents insistence that she marry, which leads to a minor rebellion among her young male suitors, who don't really want to marry either. It's Merida's betrayal of her mother, and subsequent rapprochement, that provides the emotional arc of the story. Romantic love is non-existent.

Which brings us to Frozen, a loose adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson’s The Snow Queen. Produced concurrently with Maleficent and written by Jennifer Lee, Frozen contains elements of familial and romantic love. It's the story of two sisters (princesses) who struggle to build a relationship when one of them has uncontrollable magical powers. It's also the story of a callow young woman who is duped into hasty wedding plans in the name of true love, only to find a deeper friendship with another man. In the end, a resurrection is performed by “an act of true love” between sisters, not prince and princess. The female characters are capable and complex people, while the TLK and OTL tropes are left in tatters. Indeed, Woolverton claims that putting a maternal “true love's kiss” in the climax of Maleficent and an “act of true love” among sisters in the climax of Frozen was not planned. “It's in the zeitgeist, isn't it, then?” she observes.

A Sign of Their Times

Do fairy tales indicate the spirit of the times? Do they help shape it? If you’ve ever taught students to critically analyze popular cultural artifacts, you are familiar with the knee jerk reactions. Disney movies are just supposed to be fun. Don’t over-analyze. (Or, alternatively), when fairy tales were originally told, society was patriarchal and sexist. Isn’t it fair to be faithful to the originals? Little girls know America is not a monarchy and that there are no fairy godmothers. (Or) what child, or adult, hasn't imagined being rich and enchanted? That love conquers all? That committed relationships can last forever? Indeed the last line of argument is the theme of the insipid film Enchanted.

These lines of reasoning are themselves fairy tales. Even a cursory look at the history of fairy tales demonstrates that there is no such thing as an “original” or “real” version. Folk tales with magical creatures and events crossed cultures, continents,
centuries, and each other in the oral tradition before being written into the literature of the European Renaissance. An unmistakable Cinderella-like story was written in China 700 years before being written down by a European.\(^4\) And like so much of folklore, the stories have continued to change form, substance, and meaning ever since.

Author and scholar Jack Zipes identified several historical shifts in the social education goals of fairy tales. The first revolution occurred, in Europe at least, during the Renaissance, when the printing press enabled mass production and consumption of books. First in Italy, and then more importantly in France, writers collected and revised folk and classical tales into anthologies, transforming the stories to speak to the values and concerns of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. These stories became guides for proper behavior, as well as subtle forms of social criticism. While the oral tradition continued, these elite literary tales found their way back into the vernacular culture through chap (cheap) books.\(^5\)

During the nineteenth century, a second revolution occurred when the Brothers Grimm and other writers collected and revised, or just invented fairy tales for middle class parents to give to their children, demarcating adult versus children's literature. The children's tales were written to be moral exemplars that endorsed the positions of emerging state educational authorities, including themes of Christianity, patriarchy, and the cult of true womanhood. As books replaced live storytellers as the primary medium for the fairy tale, Zipes observes, their focus shifted from communal consumption to private consumption, separating storyteller from audience and audience member from one another.\(^6\)

The third revolution was led by Walt Disney in the early twentieth century. It is hardly radical to question the messages in Disney films when Disney himself is the greatest radical in the history of the fairy tale—not only revolutionizing and (for a time) largely monopolizing the delivery of fairy tales in the form of feature cartoon films, but revising the stories with specific social, political, and economic educational ends in mind. Disney was a genius at finding what in a particular fairy tale could be streamlined and generalized for mass-consumption, for assembling groups of talented visual and musical artists, and for building a global entertainment empire. He was less interested in teaching children to behave than in trying to “control children's aesthetic interests and consumer tastes.”\(^7\) His films became vehicles for child consumers to identify and demand a host of cultural goods: apparel, art, literature, toys, games, and even associations such as Mickey Mouse Clubs. Meanwhile, as Henry Giroux and others have shown, Disney pursued a socially conservative political agenda that stretched beyond what cultural critics have often seen as sexism and racism in his films.\(^8\)
It may be that today we are in the middle of a fourth revolution in social education through fairy tales. The transformation of the film industry at the end of the twentieth century grew out of changes in digital technology that have revolutionized virtually all forms of cultural production, distribution, and consumption. The House of the Mouse is large, but no longer in charge. Distribution and production are increasingly diffuse; the distinctions between "television" and "film," as well as the lines between live action and animation, have blurred almost beyond distinction. Video games, including those with complex fairy-tale plots, have emerged as a multi-billion dollar industry in which a single game can earn as much money as a summer blockbuster. Disney is certainly a player in all these changes, but not the player. What once made Disney revolutionary—perfecting the medium of animated fairytale film—now seems quite ordinary.

And so perhaps Disney has finally reached puberty on gender issues because of competition from a digital world full of storytellers. Or perhaps Disney itself reflects a changing culture where women work alongside men as screenwriters, artists, and CEOs. Or both. Certainly social change in the Obama era has reshaped women's places in households. The Great Recession has had disproportionately ravaging effects on men's income and employment, leaving women in relatively greater positions of economic autonomy. The year 2013 saw a record number of households where women are the primary or sole breadwinners, over 40 percent, up from just 10 percent when the original Sleeping Beauty came out.9

Today more than ever, the old fairy tales about female inferiority and dependency, not to mention the joys of housework, don't cut much ice. Frozen sure did though, earning nearly 90 percent favorable ratings from critics and viewers alike on Rotten Tomatoes.com. Readers of the website rated Maleficent and Brave 75 percent favorably, well ahead of the critics in the case of Maleficent. Disney is wise to be rebranding; people seem to be buying it.

Regardless of its motivations, however, Disney's maturation on gender messaging in its feature fairytale films means that a new generation of American children will grow up encountering healthier lessons about what it means to be a man and a woman. Of course the celluloid juggernaut has still not crossed the Rubicon of sexual orientation or explored non-traditional or non hetero-normative households—major omissions in these increasingly enlightened days. Nevertheless, Disney's recent achievements in offering female role models who work hard, improve their minds, and do not define themselves in terms of men are an encouraging sign that American patriarchy may finally be cracking. For social educators, that would be a dream come true.

Notes
6. Ibid.

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