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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I investigate Disney's positioning of the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as feminist. Up to this point, Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* has both been hailed as presenting audiences with an empowered princess and criticized for the Beast's aggressive behavior and the positioning of Belle as a woman meant to propel the Beast's story forward. I provide an assessment of the gender politics depicted in Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, and I problematize the tendency to classify texts as either entirely feminist or utterly antifeminist. As a whole, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the gender politics of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* to address the importance of acknowledging that popular culture texts are complex and cannot be reduced to an either/or binary opposition between progressive and retrograde. To label a film such as Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as purely feminist or strictly antifeminist ignores the potential for contradictory messages to be communicated.

TALE AS OLD AS...FEMINISM? THE (RE)MAKING OF *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

by

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B.A. Rowan University, 2019

A.A. Rowan College of South Jersey (formerly Cumberland County College), 2017

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication & Rhetorical Studies.

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## Introduction

In 2017, I entered a movie theater with my father, mother, and younger sister. A family of Disney enthusiasts, it should come as no great shock that we were there to view a Disney film, *Beauty and the Beast*. However, the motion picture we were about to consume was *not* another animated feature; on the contrary, this movie was the second in a new trend of filmmaking: live-action (re)makes. Following the release of a live-action retelling of *Cinderella* in 2015, the Walt Disney Company reimagined its animated blockbuster, *Beauty and the Beast*, transforming the tale into a live-action spectacle. After all, if Disney could capture the hearts of audiences once (and continue to reap the financial rewards), why not attempt to repeat this success and, in so doing, reintroduce and extend the legacy of a beloved story?

In this thesis, I investigate Disney's positioning of the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as feminist.<sup>1</sup> Up to this point, Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* has both been hailed as presenting audiences with an empowered princess (see Downey 188, 190-208; Henke et al. 234, 237-239, 241-242, 245-247) and criticized for the Beast's aggressive behavior (see Coates et al. 123-131; Olson 449-454, 455-459, 462-476) and the positioning of Belle as a woman meant to propel the Beast's story forward (see Craven 129, 131-133; Cummins 23-27; Jeffords 166-169).<sup>2</sup> I provide an assessment of the gender politics depicted in Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, and I problematize the tendency to classify texts as either entirely feminist or utterly antifeminist. Over the course of three chapters, I 1) introduce the Disney princess franchise and examine how Disney encourages identification with its princesses; 2) review the Aarne-

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<sup>1</sup> I define the term "feminist" as any entity advocating for justice and equity for *all* people, especially members of the Black and Indigenous People of Color community and acknowledges and (attempts to) dismantle patriarchal and colonial societal systems and practices.

<sup>2</sup> I employ the term "empowered" here in reference to the postfeminist portrayal of women as confident, "autonomous agents [seemingly] no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 153).

Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type classification and twenty written adaptations of “Beauty and the Beast” as a way of testing the Disney corporation’s branding of itself as providing a progressive version of an old tale; and 3) contend Disney’s live action *Beauty and the Beast* has both feminist and antifeminist qualities through an autoethnography highlighting my own shifting interpretations of the film since its release. As a whole, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the gender politics of Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast* to address the importance of acknowledging that popular culture texts are complex and cannot be reduced to an either/or binary opposition between progressive and retrograde. To label a film such as Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as purely feminist or strictly antifeminist ignores the potential for contradictory messages to be communicated. It is in the contradictory messages communicated by popular texts that we gain access to cultural contests over gender ideologies and values as those are unfolding in particular historical contexts. What is more, an either/or framework perpetuates the notion that there is a universally agreed upon version of feminism, and it promotes a narrow interpretive practice that rejects those popular cultural texts that do not faithfully reflect its purportedly universal criteria for what counts as feminist.

## NOSTALGIA AND THE LIVE-ACTION FILM

As a corporation consistently churning out new content, Disney has had to adapt to constantly shifting political and societal ideals. No longer is a passive, helpless princess an acceptable role model to present to children, especially girls. However, careful not to exclude more conservative audiences who cling to the heteropatriarchal ideologies Disney films once unabashedly promoted, the company has done its best to strike a balance when crafting its

motion pictures between presenting viewers with texts in support of more progressive politics and simultaneously reminiscent of the content Disney is known for producing.<sup>3</sup>

*Beauty and the Beast* is not the first animated film Disney decided to reintroduce as a live-action spectacle. The reimagining of previously animated Disney princess motion pictures began with *Maleficent* in 2014; yet, this readaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* was markedly different than the live-action remakes which would follow it. Telling the story from Maleficent's point of view as opposed to Aurora's, *Maleficent* and the live-action *Alice in Wonderland* are "edgier live-action retellings of their animated stories rather than straightforward remakes of the animated films" (Benson 28). Despite the financial success each motion picture derived, the company acknowledged "[n]either *Alice in Wonderland* nor *Maleficent* seemed to inspire nostalgia for their animated counterparts" (29). Therefore, after *Maleficent*, the Walt Disney Company "shifted their strategy for their live-action films ... [to a] 'play the hits' mentality" (30). Desiring to (re)capture the attention of audiences, Disney would remain faithful to the narratives which already held a place in the hearts and minds of viewers across the globe.

Resulting from the prominence Disney secured and has maintained since (and perhaps even prior to) the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, viewers have had the opportunity to experience Disney animated films as children and can presently relive (some of) those encounters as adults. Braun states "[a] sentimental yearning for some happy time from the past is what we call nostalgia." More specifically, Pierro et al. assert one characteristic of "nostalgic memories [is that they] carry an overall positive affective signature" (653). Therefore, when we reflect on, "[m]emories of childhood play, holidays spent with family, and other pivotal life events, for instance," we can experience pleasant emotions by way of remembering (Pierro et al.

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<sup>3</sup> I define the term "progressive" as a reference to something representative of the promotion of equality for those who have historically been and continue to be oppressed and marginalized.

63). When recollections such as these combine with “practices of consumption,” the potential arises for us to generate “meaningful identities” (Dickinson 5). Dickinson explains “[b]oth memory and consumption are located in the places of everyday behavior ... [and] [t]hese places call on complex, intertextual relationships to trigger resources of memory, foster consumption and provide places for the bodily enactment of identity” (5). Therefore, the author asserts, “memories and memory places are not just comforting responses to the fragmentation of postmodern consumer culture, they are an integral part of contemporary performances of identity” (5). In an effort to conjure a sense of stability in our continually changing lives, we turn to past experiences to generate sanguine feelings and locate (relatively) consistent sources and representations of our personhood.

If viewed, internalized, emulated, and/or enjoyed as a child, Disney motion pictures can function as not only markers of an individual’s self but also, when viewed again in adulthood, can reignite past feelings of pleasure associated with particular films in the present. Wulf et al. posit “nostalgic thoughts and feelings are presumed to arise because of some sentimental meaning media content has with one’s past” (797). Conducting two investigations in which “the cognitive and affective processes inherent to engagement with nostalgic ... media” (796) were examined, Wulf et al. deduced from the first study conducted that “media-induced nostalgia is particularly likely to occur when people view media content that they have already seen and that they first engaged with earlier in life (e.g., during childhood)” (805). Moreover, the authors determined “[i]n terms of affect, nostalgic entertainment experiences represent a unique blend of both pleasurable and meaningful experiences” (805). Therefore, if an adult were to watch a film they initially encountered as a child, the motion picture has the potential to create both an enjoyable as well as a profound encounter. For illustration, one of my favorite movies when I

was younger was Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. As an individual with red hair and who has always been relatively quiet (perhaps due to my consumption of the movie), I identified as a child with Ariel and her (often silent) persistence. Since entering into my twenties, whenever I view this particular film, I am reminded of how carefree I once was, how simple my life was as a child, and how I continue to relate to Ariel and her aspirations. Wulf et al. also determined "nostalgic entertainment experiences were unique from both meaningful and pleasurable experiences in that they were characterized by reflection on the past self and on connections between the past and present self" (806). Hence, while viewing media from an individual's childhood when older can conjure gratifying emotions, this type of watching can act as a link between one's former and current identity as well and provide opportunities for critical self-reflexivity.

#### "BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:" A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ADAPTATION

Before Disney released its animated telling of "Beauty and the Beast" in 1991, this fairytale was widely circulated. Existing both orally and in written form, there is a multitude of adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" produced within various countries including France, England, Germany, and China (Urban).

In order to evaluate the claims made on feminism by Disney, this thesis will provide an in-depth examination of the tale "Beauty and the Beast," tracing the history of the narrative from written story to live-action film. The literary version of *Beauty and the Beast* "that comes closest to being definitive" in relation to Disney's now iconic animated version of the story is the narrative written by Madame Leprince de Beaumont (Cummins 23; Craven 126; Deutsch;

Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* 49; Olson 451).<sup>4</sup> According to Cummins, “Beaumont’s Beauty was considered a new kind of heroine, a marked departure from the protagonists of earlier fairytales” (23). Depicted as members of “the merchant class” rather than “being nobles,” de Beaumont’s narrative emphasizes the benefits of “hard work” and “education” (23). Cummins notes “[i]n fact, Beaumont wrote ‘Beauty and the Beast’ specifically to reinforce the goals of meritocracy for the young women who were the intended audience of her story” (23).

Yet, based on Disney’s animated version of *Beauty and the Beast*, one is likely to come away from the film with the impression that the main focus of the fairytale is the love story between Belle and the Beast. However, Cummins explains that while “‘Beauty and the Beast’ has always been in part a love story, earlier printed versions of the tale offer[ed] valuable lessons in addition to emphasizing the love relationship [that develops amongst Beauty, or Disney’s Belle, and the Beast]” (22). More specifically, the author notes “Beaumont’s Beauty was considered a new kind of heroine, a marked departure from the protagonists of earlier fairytales” (23). Stressing the necessity for females to receive an education, Madame Leprince de Beaumont positions Beauty as the daughter of a merchant who ensured both his sons and daughters were educated; from the outset, as Cummins explains, Beaumont desired to provide girls with a female figure whom they can look to for ethical and academic direction:

Beaumont emphasizes Beauty’s love of music and books, creating a heroine who is a ‘reading woman,’ an important concept at a time when the general population was only just becoming a reading population and when literary heroines represented a new kind of female protagonist, one who thinks and learns. (23)

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<sup>4</sup> According to Craven, de Beaumont’s adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* was published in 1756 (126).

It is de Beaumont's Beauty that Disney worked from as they endeavored to adapt her version of the tale into an animated film ("Beauty and the Beast;" Cummins 23).

#### WHITESTREAM FEMINISM, HETEROPATRIARCHY, AND HETEROPATERNALISM

Scholars like Sharon Downey (188, 190-208) and Jill Henke et al. (234, 237-239, 241-242, 245-247) have argued Belle in Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* can be interpreted as a feminist princess. However, a single comprehension of what feminism is or what characteristics constitute an entity as feminist does not exist. Therefore, since I am investigating Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* in relation to feminism, it is pertinent to have a foundational understanding of what the majority of (white) individuals mean when referring to feminism.

Feminism is a term predominantly understood as a movement pursuing equality for women in relation to men. According to Merriam-Webster, feminism is defined in one of two ways: 1. "[T]he theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, or 2. "[O]rganized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" ("feminism").<sup>5</sup> However, though feminism is aligned with the pursuit of promoting and achieving justice for women, most often the feminism we are exposed to is one which strictly caters to the "rights and interests" ("feminism") of *white* women. Despite the triumphs of white women feminists, as Grande explains, they have historically neglected and refused to address not only racial oppression but also their role in perpetuating colonial marginalization:

While, like other indigenous women, I recognize the invaluable contributions that feminists have made to both critical theory and praxis in education, I also believe their

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I am purposely using a definition of feminism provided by Merriam-Webster rather than one from a feminist to highlight what I believe is a popular understanding of feminism.

well-documented failure to engage race and acknowledge the complicity of white women in the history of domination positions ‘mainstream’ feminism alongside other colonialist discourses. (329)

“...[M]ainstream, or, [as Grande deems is a more appropriate title and the classification I use in this essay] ‘whitestream feminism,’ (Grande, qtd. in Arvin et al. 10) refers to the prevailing form of feminism uplifted and advanced in Western society which solely addresses to the inequities of white, heterosexual, middle/upper-class women (330).<sup>6</sup>

Most relevant for this study is the emphasis of whitestream feminism on autonomy via capitalism. According to Grande, “...characteristics of whitestream feminism include a heavy dependence on postmodern/poststructuralist theories ... and an undertheorizing of patriarchy as the universal oppression of all women...” (330). Positioning, as Gill explicates, “female autonomy, agency and choice” as representative of freedom from patriarchal constraints (Banet-Weiser et al. 5), postfeminism, in particular, is rooted in “[a] grammar of individualism” (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 153). More specifically, “[n]otions of choice, of ‘being oneself’ and ‘pleasing oneself’, are central to the postfeminist sensibility that suffuses contemporary western media” (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 153). As a result of “the discursive tactics of postmodern/poststructuralist theories ... whitestream feminists [are able] to distort the material significance of their privileged position” (Grande 331). For example, interpreting independence (i.e. the ability to make decisions on one’s own behalf) as reflective of an escape from patriarchy, postfeminism positions an exercising of “freedom of choice” as all that is necessary to be achieved to escape oppression. According to Butler, “it appears that the only thing

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<sup>6</sup> Grande notes in *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity* “Canadian sociologist Claude Denis coined the term whitestream to connote the idea that, while society is not white in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally structured around the basis of white, Anglo-Saxon experience” (330n6). For further explanation, see Grande 330-332 and Arvin et al. 10-11, 13-14.

postfeminism requires is that women ‘be who they want to be...’ (44). Thus, whitestream feminists actively ignore the societal structures which restrict particular bodies (e.g. Black and Indigenous People of Color, transgender individuals, etc.) from attaining recognition and justice (Grande 331-332; see also Ebert’s discussion of “ludic feminism” 795-796). Ultimately, despite whitestream feminism’s presentation of itself as a proponent of liberation for more than just the white, heterosexual, middle/upper-class woman, Grande, referencing Ebert (805), asserts whitestream feminism indeed only caters to one type of woman:

In a discourse that reduces politics to a ‘language effect...aimed at changing cultural representations,’ it becomes possible to reduce the emancipatory project to one simply concerned with ‘giving voice’ to the ‘silenced desires’ of (white) women – a pedagogy primarily concerned with how white women feel and whether they are free to express and act upon how they feel. (331-332)

Understanding “patriarchy as a universal and totalizing system” (Grande 332), whitestream feminism refuses to acknowledge difference and the systems in place which function to ensure white, heterosexual, Christian, middle/upper-class people remain in positions of relative power compared to others.

*“Beauty and the Beast”: A Heteropatriarchal Fairytale*

Since “Beauty and the Beast” is representative of heteropatriarchal ideals, it is necessary to have an understanding of this term as well as heteropaternalism. Both of these concepts will be employed to assess the feminist merit of Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast*.

To begin, “heteropatriarchy ... mean[s] the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived

as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent” (Arvin et al. 13). Second, “heteropaternalism ... mean[s] the presumption that heteropatriarchal nuclear-domestic arrangements, in which the father is both center and leader/boss, should serve as the model for social arrangements of the state and its institutions” (Arvin et al. 13). As two terms which are inextricably “linked,” Arvin et al. state each structure is dependent on strict, binary conceptualizations of people:

Thus, both heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism refer to expressions of patriarchy and paternalism that rely upon very narrow definitions of the male/female binary, in which the male gender is perceived as strong, capable, wise, and composed and the female gender is perceived as weak, incompetent, naïve, and confused. (13)

A recognition of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism allows for the ideologies which form the foundation of Western society to be exposed.

In addition to heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism, an understanding of settler colonialism is crucial when assessing a product produced by a culture which continues to promote white supremacist ideals. Despite the usual consideration of settler colonialism as strictly in the past, settler colonialism is an *ongoing* system; according to Wolfe, “settler colonialism and patriarchy are structures, not [historical] events” (qtd. in Arvin et al. 12). Therefore, settler colonialism is defined by Arvin et al. as “a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the indigenous peoples that are there” (12). Arvin et al. state that though in the United States, in particular, slavery has “ended,” the country persists in its efforts to ensure the land settlers stole from Indigenous people and the labor of Black people brought here as property remains exploited and in service of the white man’s aspirations:

The triad relationship among the industrious settler, the erased/invisibilized Native, and the ownable and murderable slave is evident in the ways in which the United States continues to exploit Indigenous, black, and other peoples deemed ‘illegal’ (or otherwise threatening and usurping) immigrants, which is why we describe settler colonialism as a persistent structure. (12)

To perceive settler colonialism as not only the foundation but also a continuing organization of society in the United States is necessary when conducting an analysis on a recent film which I believe abides by the logics of this “persistent structure” (Arvin et al. 12).

Relying on a (white) male/female binary and subjecting those who do not exemplify the characteristics assigned to either distinct category to violence and abusive labor practices, the “modern/colonial gender system” upholds the naturalization of gender and, in so doing, “entrenches oppressive colonial gender arrangements, oppressive organizations of life” (Lugones 187). In the article “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” María Lugones theorizes “the light and the dark sides of the colonial/modern gender system” (201). According to Lugones, “[t]he light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering only the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the modern/colonial meaning of men and women” (206). Positioned as the “reproduce[rs] [of] the class and the colonial and racial standing of bourgeois, white men,” middle/upper-class white women are interpreted as passive, weak, and sexually pure humans (206). Moreover, this “gender system is heterosexist, as heterosexuality permeates racialized patriarchal control over production, including knowledge production, and over collective authority” (206). Considered to be a natural, biological predisposition, “[h]eterosexuality [on the light side] is both compulsory and perverse among white bourgeois men and women” because the established binary guarantees

white, middle/upper-class men remain in power and possess control over the minds and bodies of white, middle/upper-class women whose labor as child-rearer and home maintainer is constructed as innate. However, “[t]he dark side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent” (206). Located in opposition to whiteness and the colonial gender binary, Black and Indigenous People of Color and individuals who are of the “third gender,” meaning “breaking with sex and gender bipolarities” (Horswell, qtd. in Lugones 201), are condemned and forced to endure the violence of colonizers because colonizers have classified them as inferior. For illustration, Black slave women were required to perform extremely strenuous tasks because considered to be the opposite of their white counterparts, “nonwhite, colonized women ... were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor” (Lugones 203). As an organizing principle undergirding the function of all institutions, colonial conceptions of gender ensure white bodies are considered sacred while the bodies of Black and Indigenous People of Color are constructed as animalistic (Lugones 201). In the analysis of *Beauty and Beast* provided here, I demonstrate how these ideologies continue to circulate widely in popular texts.

## POSTFEMINISM AS A CRITICAL LENS FOR THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Given that I am working with a heteropatriarchal text, which Disney brands as progressive in terms of its gender politics, as well as my sincere interest in the complex manner in which fans decode popular texts a postfeminist critical lens is the most appropriate methodological approach for this study.

I will be employing postfeminism as an analytical mechanism through which “contradictions of media culture” can be exposed (Gill, “Post-Postfeminism” 622). Highlighting the extremely contested nature of the term “postfeminism,” Gill explains:

The term ... has been characterized in various different ways: as a backlash against feminism, to refer to an historical shift—a time ‘after’ (second wave) feminism; to capture a sense of an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting an alignment with other ‘post’ movements (poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcoloniality); and to propose connections to the Third Wave. (612-613)

Echoing Gill, Butler contends label has been restricted to “three definitions— postfeminism as linear, backlash, or sex-positive” (43). Moreover, not only is postfeminism a highly disputed word, but also it is a term primarily overwhelmed by negative connotations, including the commodification of feminism, through which “the figure of [the] woman [is positioned] as empowered consumer”; undeniable connections to the “white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (Tasker and Negra 2); and a palpable presence “in the media ... [promoting] female ‘confidence,’ self-love, and self-esteem as one-size-fits-all solutions to gender injustice” (Gill, “Post-Postfeminism” 618). However, for Gill and Butler, though the term “postfeminism” is problematic, it still possesses critical relevance, especially in relation to the presentation of feminist issues in the media (“Post-Postfeminism” 611-614; 41-46). For Gill, while feminist identities portrayed in popular culture can be inherently problematic, the author believes we should be aware of the ways in which these forums can also be empowering (619-622). According to the author, when employed as a critical analytical lens, postfeminism allows for incongruities within texts to be made evident:

Critical uses of the notion neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow “become feminist,” but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist, and backlash ones. (622)

Ultimately, understanding postfeminism “as a sensibility ...emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 149). Regrettably, most often when critics and academics discuss Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (both the animated movie and live-action film), they argue that the text is either feminist or that it promotes themes which are clearly anti-feminist. Therefore, I feel it is pertinent to critically analyze the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* and the fan/media culture surrounding the motion picture through a postfeminist lens, allowing for multiple, contradictory readings of texts to be accomplished.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

### *Cultivating Identification through Nostalgia and Progression*

In chapter 1, I highlight how Disney encourages consumers to closely identify with its princesses by inundating their lives with princess merchandise. In an effort to ensure princesses remain prevalent, Disney has attempted to update its depictions of women; casting newer princesses as strong, independent figures, Disney supplies audiences with more empowering figures. However, in its more relevant portrayals of princesses, Disney is careful to ensure conservative audiences are not insulted by the “progressive” messages Disney is sending to some of its viewers. Moreover, I present the campaign “Dream Big, Princess” and Disney’s live-action

adaptation of “Beauty and the Beast” as a postfeminist effort to position the Walt Disney Company as an advocate of equality for women. Casting Emma Watson as Belle, Disney leans into the notion that Belle is feminist (again, see Downey 188, 190-208; Henke et al. 234, 237-239, 241-242, 245-247) and capitalizes on Watson’s reputation as an actress, who supports the real-world political position that women should be empowered “to build businesses, raise families, and give back to their communities” (“UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT”). However, careful not to push more conservative audiences who cling to Disney’s status as crafter of worlds that are innocent and comfortable, the company ensured its re-envisioning of the still beloved animated *Beauty and the Beast* did not stray far from the corporation’s original masterpiece.

### *The Making of a Disney Classic*

In chapter 2, I test Disney’s claims that its presentations of “Beauty and the Beast” are, in fact, progressive. In order to do so, I begin by detailing the ATU tale type of the fairytale “Beauty and the Beast.” Utilizing the ATU tale type as the basis for my analysis of the authorial moves Disney makes in its adaptations of the fairytale, I expand upon the arguments of feminist scholars like June Cummins and Susan Jeffords, who demonstrate how Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* shifts the focus of the narrative from Belle to the Beast. Through a comparative analysis that takes into account twenty written variations of the fairytale, as well as Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast,” I show, as academics such as Linda Coates et al. and Kathryn Olson have highlighted and analyzed, how Disney introduced overt violence into a narrative that initially presented the beast as a creature who, though a captor, used kindness to win the heart of Beauty. Just like the written iterations of “Beauty and the Beast” I review, in de

Beaumont's narrative, the experiences of Beauty and her father take precedence over the Beast's background and the Beast is not in any way aggressive to Beauty. Studying the ways in which Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* departs from earlier written versions of the tale representative of the ATU tale type for "Beauty and the Beast" 425C, it is clear Disney's choices are not feminist by any stretch of the imagination.

*Disney's Beauty and the Beast: A Feminist and Not-So-Feminist Fairytale*

In chapter 3, I argue Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* should be recognized as a narrative of female empowerment entangled with colonial and patriarchal ideologies of femininity. Understanding this film as both feminist *and* antifeminist, I assess Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* through, as explained by Rosalind Gill, a postfeminist sensibility (Banet-Weiser et al. 4-5, 8-10, 13, 16-17, 21; Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 148-149, 162-163). As a burgeoning scholar immersed in Disney fan culture, I use autoethnography to highlight how my perspective of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* has shifted from one of admiration to one of skepticism. Tracing my experience with this motion picture allows me to showcase the importance of acknowledging texts as multifaceted rather than simply either/or in relation to feminism. As well as to demonstrate how the contradictory messages in popular cultural texts provide valuable material for critically reflexive identity formation, development, and revision.

## CONCLUSION

Conducting a thorough assessment of the gender politics of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* allows for a reading of this film as both potentially empowering to women and

girls struggling to find agency in their own lives and complicit with the norms and values of white heteropatriarchal culture. Regrettably, designating this motion picture as either purely feminist or completely antifeminist reifies the perception that a text must be all-or-nothing. When the contradictions inherent in popular cultural texts are not acknowledged, a reduction of worth occurs; no longer can a text or individual be understood as a combination of differing meanings and potential if classifications of various subjects remain tethered to a binary. Therefore, the goal of this thesis is to provide an evaluation of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* in relation to feminism in a manner that moves beyond an established feminist-antifeminist binary and recognizes the complexity of a text and company whose influence is far and wide.

## **Chapter 1: Cultivating Identification through Nostalgia and Progression**

Imagine you are walking hand-in-hand with a loved one down the middle of a paved street. Located on either side of you are store fronts, each with its own whimsical window display. If you look down, you will notice tracks which allow for an old-timey trolley to travel up and down road. However, the crowning achievement of this transportation into the past has yet to be reached. For at the end of this cemented pathway sits a magnificent and magical castle. Promising happiness and an escape from real world woes, this entrance sparks joy in adults and children alike. Evoking nostalgia, we are drawn to this place because it not only transports us to previously experienced pleasurable moments but also guarantees new enjoyable experiences will be generated. This is Main Street U.S.A; this is the Magic Kingdom; this is Walt Disney World; and, most importantly, this is the place ““Where Dreams Come True”” (“Disney Parks”).

In this chapter, I situate gendered identifications with Disney princesses in the context of the Disney corporation’s branding practices and corporate discourses, which addresses consumers as film spectators, tourists to its theme parks, as customers of souvenirs and merchandising in the late twentieth century, and as potential consumers of integrated marketing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In these ways, consumers go from being addressed by Disney, invited to visit Disney World (enter the simulacra), collect bits of Disney through souvenirs to take home, to making the home or at least the child’s bedroom into its own kind of themed space, making Disney identifications a way of life incorporated into the everyday and not just something that happens exceptionally while one is on vacation at the park. To illustrate this dynamic, I introduce the Disney princess franchise and address how the company ensures through merchandising children and adults can be fully immersed in the realm of princesses even when not at a Disney theme park. Offering an overview of the princess canon, I reveal how

Disney has endeavored to “update” the qualities of its princesses while making every effort to maintain the support of more conservative consumers. Ultimately, through the “Dream Big, Princess” campaign and the casting of Emma Watson as Belle in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney’s engages in a postfeminist effort to position the Walt Disney Company as a supporter of women’s liberation. Encouraging consumers to closely identify with the princess it has so carefully crafted via persistent consumerism and mimicry, Disney entices audiences to literally buy into the corporation’s situating of itself as an advocate of progressive politics.

#### PRINCESS POPULARITY: A FRENZY OF MERCHANDISE

Despite the variety of content the Walt Disney Company has successfully produced, the princesses of the Magic Kingdom are the true stars of this global enterprise.<sup>7</sup> Positioned just behind Walt Disney’s welcoming grin awaits “the centerpiece” of Disney’s Magic Kingdom, Cinderella Castle (Philips 30). Perhaps the most iconic symbol of the Walt Disney brand, the Cinderella Castle is a landmark. This magnificent structure acts as a direct link from story to reality. Before the start of every Disney film, Cinderella Castle is shown to viewers. As Walt Disney’s “corporate logo” (Do Rozario 34), the persistent presentation of this image to audiences acts as a visual cue; when spectators witness Cinderella Castle, they are reminded of all that a Disney production represents: love, kindness, and, above all, magic. Then, upon entering the Magic Kingdom and gazing longingly up at the grand structure before you, after having been exposed to numerous digital versions, it is as if we are living in a fairytale. In general, our initial

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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge the Walt Disney Company has global authority. For example, as Yang states, Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast* “...earned \$44.7 million in its first three days in China, the single biggest contributor to foreign ticket sales, according to film industry consulting firm Artisan Gateway.” Moreover, the author notes *Beauty and the Beast* was “also the biggest live-action debut for a Disney film in China.” However, since Disney’s reach is so expansive, I am unable to account for the company’s global impact. Therefore, my focus in this thesis is strictly on the influence of Disney and the content it produces in the United States.

introduction to Disney is through the viewing of its films. More specifically, “[o]ur *first* movie memories are often of a Disney film...” (Salamone and Salamone 86; emphasis added).

Therefore, when we are standing in front of Cinderella Castle, we are experiencing more than just a breathtaking view. By way of its physical presence, we are transported back to the stories that once touched our hearts. Acting as a link between film and reality, the Cinderella Castle is a fixture which ensures the Disney brand is not only recognizable but also responsible for crafting pleasurable and memorable moments for its guests first on the big screen and then constructing embodiments of those instants of happiness which are guaranteed to make real life just a bit more magical.

Though Mickey Mouse is known as the mouse who started it all, the statue portraying himself holding hands with Walt Disney pales in comparison to Cinderella Castle.<sup>8</sup> In a cartoon titled *Steamboat Willie*,<sup>9</sup> “Mickey Mouse first appeared on screen ... on November 18, 1928” (“Mickey’s 90th Spectacular”). A truly “beloved” character, Mickey Mouse is a mascot of the Disney brand (“Mickey’s 90th Spectacular”). However, as Walt Disney shifted from cartoons to feature-length movies, a new star was born. In 1937, Disney released its “first animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*” (Davis 88). Making a whopping “\$184.9 million at the box

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<sup>8</sup> One of Walt Disney’s most famous quotes acknowledges “I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing, that it was all started by a mouse” (Kendall). What Walt Disney meant by this is that his creation of Mickey Mouse saved his company from financial ruin. For more information on the history of Mickey Mouse, see Davis (75-82) and Kendall.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, a contributing factor to the success of Mickey Mouse is reflection of minstrelsy (Abate 1074-1076; Sammond 1-4). As Abate explains, though “it is not widely known or commonly remembered by contemporary audiences, Disney’s now-iconic mouse was itself modeled after blackface performers: He wore white gloves, had a white face, and bore a large grin” (1075). More specifically, according to Nicholas Sammond, “[w]ith their white gloves, wide mouths and eyes, and tricksterish behaviors, Mickey and his friends [in this case, the author is specifically referencing the cartoon short *Mickey’s Mellerdrummer* (1933)] were just a few more in a long line of animated minstrels that stretches back to the beginnings of American commercial animation in the first years of the twentieth century” (Sammond 1-3). Abate notes “Walt Disney was acutely aware of the widespread appeal of blackface” (1075). Therefore, desiring to create a financial success, Walt Disney “sought to link his new cartoon personality with this well-established performance style that audiences already loved” (1075).

office,” which is equivalent to “more than \$982.1 million” as of 2019 (Fieldstadt), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* marked the beginning of what would in later years become a princess frenzy. According to Do Rozario, although “[t]he princess is a fairytale staple,” Disney has established itself as the creator of the ideal princess figure:

One of the most prolific authors of the princess today is the Disney organization which produces her in animation, theme parks, on the stage, and in merchandise. Combined with Disney’s popular and global profile, this makes the Disney princess in effect the ‘princess of all princesses,’ and, although she was born into the paternal world of Walt Disney, she is, especially in the latter decades, putting her own stamp on the kingdom.

(34)

Moreover, as Davis states, “[w]hen examining Disney feature animation as a body of work, the image which comes through is one of fairytale princesses and little girls on magical adventures” (92). Therefore, while Mickey Mouse remains a prominent representation of Walt Disney, when Disney comes to mind, fairytales and princesses are the (literal) focal point of this enchanting empire.

Today, Disney princesses are a trademark of the company in and of themselves. As Henke et al. acknowledge, “American swim in a sea of Disney images and merchandise. Children can ... go to sleep in *Beauty and the Beast* pajamas, rest their heads on *The Little Mermaid* pillow cases, [and] check the time on *Pocahontas* watches...” (229). Though initially each princess film produced by Disney was its own, individual spectacle, beginning in the late 1990s/early 2000s, the Disney princess line was born. According to Orr, “[t]he Disney princess line began in 1999 with the ... premise of lumping eight princesses together as a single brand to be marketed...” (9). In other words, no longer were Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel,

Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan simply princesses; on the contrary, now each princess was a member of the Disney princess franchise.

When Disney embarked on this “[i]ntegrated marketing” endeavor, the company was attempting to establish a new category of merchandising (Orr, 9).<sup>10</sup> According to Orenstein, the combining of eight Disney princesses “was the first time Disney marketed characters separately from a film’s release, let alone lumped together those different stories.” When “**Andrew ‘Andy’ P. Mooney** ... joined the Walt Disney Company as president of DCP [Disney Consumer Products] in December 1999” (“Andy Mooney;” emphasis in original), he was attempting “to save a consumer-products division whose sales were dropping by as much as 30 percent a year” (Orenstein). Though desiring to position each princess under the same umbrella, it remained pertinent to ensure each princess maintained an individual identity within the grouping. Therefore, “[t]o ensure the sanctity of what Mooney called their individual ‘mythologies,’ the princesses never make eye contact when they’re grouped: each stares off in a slightly different direction as if unaware of the others’ presence” (Orenstein). Negotiating the balance between princess independence and interdependence is crucial; after all, it is necessary not to isolate the consumer who loves all of the princesses from the customer who only identifies with one. As a result, each princess must be understood as an autonomous individual who is still, undoubtedly, a Disney princess.

Resulting from the presentation of princess once separated by film and time as one entity, a Disney princess culture spanning generations was born. With “no marketing plan” in place, having conducted “no focus groups,” and completing “no advertising,” the company was taking

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<sup>10</sup> According to Orr, “[i]ntegrated marketing means that companies simultaneously release related products in multiple formats, from digital to print to collectibles” (9). More specifically, as noted by Goldstein et al., “[t]hese expanded, interdependent products cannot be examined in isolation, for ‘every ‘text’ (including commodities such as toys) effectively draws upon and feeds into every other text’” (qtd. in Orr 9).

a gamble (Orenstein). As if with a wave of his magic wand, “[t]he first Princess items” produced were willingly purchased by consumers (Orenstein). Mooney bases this success on the premise that “[w]e [the Walt Disney Company] simply gave girls what they wanted” (Orenstein). In this case, the conception of what girls “desire” is guided by a longing for “the nostalgic girl that was” (Heatwole 1). Deeply rooted in western ideals of white femininity, “Disney sells visions of youthful girlhood to women of all ages, constructing girl identity as a set of clearly identifiable ideals that operate along the lines of contemporary norms” (1). Through alterations to the narratives which serve as inspiration for its princess films, “patriarchal gender norms are strictly adhered to in the scope of Disney’s conservative, American framework for the fairytale” (2). Therefore, as an extension of the motion pictures themselves, Disney Princess merchandise crafted for girls encourages a commitment to “a heteronormative, conservative ... [cultivation] of romance for girls” (2). Via princess merchandise, Disney attempts to ensure girls are supplied with consistent reminders that you can “...cultivate yourself in the image of Disney princess...” (2). Therefore, thinking “...‘[w]hat type of bedding would a princess want to sleep in? What kind of alarm clock would a princess want to wake up to? What type of television would a princess want to wake up?’”, Mooney explains despite “the rare case where you find a girl who has every aspect of her room bedecked in Princess, ... if she ends up with three or four of these items, well, then you have a very healthy business” (Orenstein). Since the popularity of Disney remains strong and pervasive, Disney’s main concern when selling merchandise is ensuring, as Mooney explains, they “...‘get as much product out there as [they] possibly can that allows girls to do what they’re doing already: projecting themselves into the characters from the classic movies’” (Orenstein). Ultimately, the presence of princess products in the home ensures Disney is woven into the fabric of consumers’ everyday lives.

Once the cycle of being inundated with princess merchandise begins, the possibility that the purchasing of this merchandise will continue is likely because “[w]hat Hains describes as ‘Princess Culture,’ intended to introduce young girls to Disney consumerism, is also always operating at a level where it is designed to appeal to already adult fans who have already been seduced by Disney’s charms” (Heatwole 9). According to scholars such as Rebecca Hains, “*The Little Mermaid* launched Disney into a new era of marketing and merchandise centered entirely on the Disney princess ‘canon,’ making the brand so popular it has sparked a trend ... labelled ‘Princess Culture’ (Heatwole 3). In order to maintain those indoctrinated into this “culture” as children, “[t]he wedding gowns, expensive jewelry, and ball-themed outings available for older girls and women ... [function as] extensions of the princess dresses, toy jewelry, and trips to Disneyworld that are part of ... [a] continual process of seduction...” (9). Consistently “selling” to consumers of all ages, Disney has crafted “a universal girlhood that can continually be accessed again via consumption” (9).

When it comes to the marketing of its princesses, Disney does not restrict its target to girls. On the contrary, Disney includes adult women in its promotion tactics; capitalizing on nostalgia, Disney reignites the dreams of becoming a princess that occupied women’s youthful fantasies. As children, girls are surrounded by Disney princesses; “[t]he trademarked Princesses ... are not simply characters in films but painted faces on sippy cups and backpacks, flesh-and-blood creatures at theme parks, and the subjects of their own website” (66).<sup>11</sup> A testament “to Disney’s mastery of corporate convergence, they [princesses] are literally almost everywhere” (66). Then, when girls enter into adulthood, the magic leaps from the screen and transforms their reality. Once engaged, women can live their fairytale via “a variety of wedding options Disney

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<sup>11</sup> Here, Sweeney is referring to the website <http://disney.go.com/princess>. Though this website still exists, it has been updated. You can view the most up-to-date version of the website at <https://princess.disney.com/>.

offers to grown-up Princess enthusiasts, including wedding rides in Cinderella's coach and designer wedding gowns that echo those of the Princesses" (70). Moreover, once married, the child/children who was/were delighted by the Disney princess products their parents filled their bedroom with are likely to repeat this behavior when having children of their own. According to Orenstein, as of the year 2006, "Disney conduct[ed] little market research on the Princess line, relying instead on the power of its legacy among mothers as well as the instant-read sales barometer of the theme parks and Disney stores." Resulting from the company's persistent strategic marketing tactics and "corporate rhetoric, Disney maintains the myth that the desire for all things princess is natural for most girls (and many women)" (Sweeney 70).<sup>12</sup>

As the epitome of heteropatriarchal femininity, Disney princesses represent youthful attractiveness. According to Bell, "Disney artists sketched the flesh and blood ... [of Disney princesses including Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora] with contemporaneous popular images of feminine beauty and youth" (109). In Disney princess films, "girlhood is opposed ... to both masculinity and *older women*" (Heatwole 6, emphasis added). More specifically, frequently, the villainesses in Disney princess films (e.g. the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Cinderella's stepmother, and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*) "are portrayed as possessing alternative physical traits and qualities [in comparison to the princesses] coded as

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<sup>12</sup> An introduction to Disney princesses has the potential to lead to the social reproduction of motherhood as well. According to Griffin et al., primarily in Disney animated films, "[t]he mother [or mother figure(s)] ... who keeps the home and cares for the family, is valorized" (880). Present in times of need, "[t]he mother figure is regularly used to resolve crises experienced by one (or more) of the characters" (880). Though typically the motherly figure(s) present in Disney animated films is/are some sort of a fairy godmother, the princesses themselves often are depicted as possessing "natural" maternal qualities. For example, "[o]n finding the dwarfs' house Snow White assumes they are orphans because 'a mother would never leave a house like this.' She 'naturally' assumes the mantle of mother within the household despite having little experience in this area ... sending the dwarfs off to the mines with a kiss on the cheek, cleaning the house and cooking the dinner" (880). Therefore, the combination of witnessing princesses and fairy godmothers valued for their kindness and care for others and being supplied with princess merchandise (potentially by one's mother(s) or grandmother(s)) can cause girls to understand themselves as natural mothers.

bad” (6). Hence, as Heatwole explains, “[c]ompared to the pale, shapely, virginal heroines, these female figures are clearly meant to present an image of ‘bad’ femininity: femininity lost with age, femininity oversexualized, [and] femininity gone wrong” (6). Considering the Western, heteropatriarchal societal standards for a woman’s physical appearance no matter their age are reflective of assets lost due to the natural aging process (e.g. no wrinkles, no gray/white hair, etc.), Disney princesses represent beauty as its (socially constructed) peak for women. As Marshall and Katz (2012) assert “[t]o grow older without aging, as our culture appears to mandate, implies the timeless and coercive upkeep of unvarying functionality, permanent performance, unfailing memory and unceasing activity” (224). Moreover, “[s]uch impossible standards have tended to affect women most prominently because of the cultural idealization of their bodies as age-defying technologies” (224). Therefore, if princesses are understood as “offer[ing] the possibility of romance and transformation for females of all ages” (Sweeny 70), it is possible women who as children, were surrounded by Disney princesses, may cling to these characters because they are not only representative of youth and beauty themselves but also they reflect a time when women themselves were youthful.

#### NOSTALGIC AND RELEVANT?: RECYCLING AND REPURPOSING DISNEY PRINCESSES

Beginning with the introduction of Snow White in 1937, the Disney princess has remained a staple of the Walt Disney Company. Though her reign in the Magic Kingdom remains strong, she has not escaped criticism. Over the years, countless feminist critics have critiqued the films’ roles in perpetuating stereotypical presentations of women. For example, a number of scholars have criticized the frequent depictions of Disney princesses as “pale and

pathetic compared to the more active and demonic characters in the film” (Zipes 37).<sup>13</sup> In general, Davis observes “the real difference between the male and female characters [in Disney motion pictures] is their level of activity (as opposed to passivity) within their stories” (109). This dynamic is reflective of a “pleasure in looking” identified by Mulvey as the “male gaze” (11). According to Mulvey, there exists a “split between active/male and passive/female” (11). As a result, presented for the presumed male viewer, “women [in film] are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (11). More specifically, in terms of the princess film franchise, though viewers are presented with “young women as ‘heroines,’” princesses such as Cinderella and Aurora “are helpless ornaments in need of protection, and when it comes to the action of the film, they are omitted” (Zipes 37). Even princesses like Ariel and Belle, who can be interpreted as rebellious and determined, have been criticized for sacrificing their autonomy for male companionship (Lacroix 223; Murphy 132-133; Sells 179-181)<sup>14</sup>.

However, in their comparative analysis of the depictions of white heroines and heroines of color in Disney animated tales, Lacroix notes that while “[i]n the case of Disney, the representations of women have long been restricted ... a pattern is evident with regard to the settings and heroine characters that increasingly emphasizes the exotic, the foreign and the sexual” (218). For example, when assessing the physical activeness and appearances of Ariel and

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<sup>13</sup> See also Bell 112-115; Davis 92-94, 100-102, and 109-110; Henke et al. 234-236; Hoerrner 560-565; Lacroix 218-220; Murphy 126-128 and 132-136; and O’Brien 159-163 and 170-173.

<sup>14</sup> These conventions are reflective of the romance genre as a whole. Referencing Radway and Turpin, Franiuk and Scherr explain “[r]omance novels follow a clear script regarding heterosexual romantic relationship development by putting men and women in the dominant/submissive roles and eroticizing aggressive male behavior” (16). Moreover, according to Radway, “[f]emale sexuality, in fact, is not banned from the ideal romance. It is, however, always circumscribed by the novel’s assumption that patriarchy, heterosexuality, and male personality are givens that are absolutely beyond challenge” (143).

Belle in relation to Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Esmerelda, Lacroix notes “the characters [appear positioned] on a spectrum of activity and sexual/physical maturation where the White women occupy the least active bodies and mature bodies, whereas the women of color are represented as both physically mature and athletic” (221)<sup>15</sup>. The white Disney princesses Aurora, Cinderella, and Snow White whose bodies and movements were based on those of ballerinas and Ariel and Belle who “despite a more active physical presence than their early counterparts, continue to be drawn with tiny waists, small breasts, slender wrists, legs, and arms, and still move with the fluidity and grace of the ballet model used for the older Disney animated films” (Lacroix 220; Bell 109-115). In contrast, the physical appearances of Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Esmerelda on screen present audiences with a combination of “costuming ... [that] reflects stereotypical images of each woman’s ethnicity ... [and an] increasing voluptuousness ... [which] works to represent White characters as more demure and conservative, while associating the women of color with the exotic and sexual” (Lacroix 222).

Regrettably, as Lacroix contends, “[t]hese images will lay a groundwork for young children’s understanding of themselves and others that will most assuredly articulate with the field of images of both women of color and White women in popular culture” (227). Therefore, the children viewing Disney princess animated motion pictures are taught “what it means” not only “to be a White woman in Disney’s world” but also a woman of color (Lacroix 227).

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<sup>15</sup> This depiction of white women in opposition to women of color is not restricted to Disney animation. Dubrofsky and Wood state in the media “while white women are presented as actively fashioning their bodies for public display (through exercise and diet), the few bodies of celebrities presented as women of color ... are positioned as always already gaze-worthy, reducing their agency” (94). More specifically, in their study of “how tabloids, in their stories, use the Twitter activities of celebrities to make statements about the celebrities...,” Dubrofsky and Wood explain “[w]hite women attest to their postfeminist desire to be agents in their own objectification by working hard to shape bodies ready for display, and then use surveillance technologies (Twitter) to show off these bodies” (99). However, “[w]omen of color, while presented as willingly inviting the gaze (through the posting of photographs, are passive in their sexualization since their bodies are articulated as already gaze-worthy, regardless of their actions” (99).

According to Lacroix, “[t]he White heroine is largely asexual, focused on romance and marriage ... [and] is demure, although her world tolerates a contained rambunctiousness or rebelliousness” (227). On the contrary, Disney’s women of color are presented “as sexualized beings, whose bodies are privileged as the sites of their power and agency” (227). Furthermore, resulting from the prominence of white Disney princesses, children are educated to understand whiteness as most desirable:

[A]s Hains and others point out, the lesser visibility of the ‘non-white’ princesses within the Disney princess franchise, both on screen and in toys and other merchandising, associates beauty and desirability with the skin colors, hair types, and clothing styles of upper class whiteness throughout history, thereby sending a message to girls that these are the only standards they should aspire to. (Hains, qtd. in Heatwole 4)

Despite their popularity, Disney princesses, have been heavily criticized for their colonialist, heteropatriarchal depictions of physique and personality.

In recent years, Disney has taken the aforementioned critiques into consideration when developing new princesses to expand its franchise. Princesses like Merida from *Brave*, Queen Elsa from *Frozen*, and Moana from *Moana*, have been celebrated for their presentations of princesses as independent, determined, and not in need of a heterosexual romance to achieve happiness. While the newer princesses are depicted as more assertive, heteropatriarchal values still permeate these films on a symbolic (or metaphorical) level. For example, in a “critical content analysis” of the film *Frozen*, Streiff and Dundes perceive Elsa’s snowy powers as the ultimate impediment to her discovery of her sexuality. The authors explain “[t]here is undoubtedly merit in having an attractive, strong female character who is happy without a romantic relationship ... However, Elsa’s power appears to both substitute for romance and deter

male suitors who risk emasculation in having a love interest who is powerful” (1). Unfortunately, the desire of Elsa’s father to ensure his eldest daughter’s powers are hidden from outsiders can be interpreted as an assurance that his daughter will remain sexually pure (Streiff and Dundes 4-5). More specifically, the gloves Elsa is instructed to wear and her father’s “urging [of] her to, ‘Conceal it. Don’t feel it’” are, according to Streiff and Dundes, reflective of a father’s traditional preoccupation with maintaining his daughter’s virginity until she is married:

Instead, we suggest that the subtext of her father’s commands is that Elsa must not expose her sexuality to others (now *concealed* metaphorically with the gloves and that she should repress (avoid *feeling*) any awakening sexual interests. This brings to mind some fathers’ resistance to future sexual activity of ‘daddy’s little girl.’ (4)

Ultimately, Elsa eventually embraces her powers and allows herself to shed her cape and gloves and trade her matronly apparel for a formfitting, sparkly dress, she also becomes subsumed by her power; not desiring for anyone to join her in her newly created ice palace, Disney continues to make it clear to its audiences that “for women, power is apparently so all-encompassing that it leaves no room for romance” (7). In general, despite Disney’s crafting of “girl characters of diverse racial backgrounds and gender performances, the focus on physical beauty and idealized femininity remains prominent in this long-criticized ‘girly’ brand” (Leader 1087).

#### PRINCESS = FEMINIST?

In 2016, the Walt Disney Company attempted to present its princesses as symbols of empowerment. One year prior to Disney’s promotion of the live-action film *Beauty and the Beast* as a more feminist take on an animated classic, the company endeavored to rebrand its princesses as relevant role models for children by beginning the “Dream Big, Princess initiative”

(“Disney Debuts #DreamBigPrincess”). An analysis of this campaign is crucial to this study because this initiative offers lessons in terms of how Disney enacts a post-feminist both/and approach. The goal of this program is “to encourage kids everywhere to dream big, with key story moments and the inspiring qualities of Disney’s Princesses showing them what’s possible.” Covering all bases, “[t]he campaign consists of various forms of multimedia including social media hashtags, photography, websites, and commercials” (Thomas 163-164). In general, Disney’s “Dream Big, Princess” campaign is an endeavor to redefine what a Disney princess represents. Rather than Disney princesses being a reflection of colonial and heteropatriarchal ideals of femininity (e.g. innocent, kind, passive, etc.), this initiative emphasizes the commendable characteristics of beloved Disney princesses, like “Cinderella’s kindness or Tiana’s perseverance” (“Disney’s Empowering #DreamBigPrincess”), as empowering traits necessary for dreams to come true. Juxtaposing Disney princesses with individuals who have attained success, Disney casts its princesses as role models:

The Dream Big, Princess content series, which runs across Disney TV and digital networks globally, brings together a host of empowered moments from beloved Disney movies with the stories of real-life young role models, who have dreamed big and achieved their goals to show kids what’s possible. (“Disney’s Empowering #DreamBigPrincess”)

Moreover, though “...each princess has her own unique and admirable qualities, what they all have in common is resilience and an ability to triumph over adversity to make their dreams come true.” Therefore, via an alignment of Disney princesses with young people who have accomplished their aspirations, Disney is promoting identification with its princesses as vital to the attainment of one’s ambitions.

Positioning the Walt Disney Company as an advocate for women's empowerment, the "Dream Big, Princess" campaign presents consumers with facets of feminist philosophy (Thomas 164; 167-183). According to Thomas, "though the term 'feminism' is not explicitly used and references to 'princess' may initially seem paradoxical to its mission, the campaign's messages ... [are] all in the spirit of women's advancement..." (164). Endeavoring to expand its audience and present Disney princesses as powerful, Disney crafted an initiative reflective of principles of feminism:

As the texts clearly adopt 'princess' as a signifier of the values and tenets of contemporary Western feminist ideology, the campaign's approach releases inspirational messages, communicating to a broad audience of girls and kids with intersectional identities. (Thomas 164)

More specifically, in a study of videos from Disney's "Dream Big, Princess" campaign, Thomas found a promotion of the perspectives of third wave feminism.<sup>16</sup> In her analysis, Thomas highlights four "ways the videos reflect the discourse and ideologies of third wave feminism" (170). The four ways in which the videos reviewed are reflective of third wave feminism are: showcasing varied identities (170-172), offering girls tactics for achieving success (172-175), presenting girls as challenging the patriarchy in their daily lives (175-176), and accepting, though also downplaying, the conflicting alignment of princesses with real-life examples of girls who have achieved success/are pursuing their passions and aspirations (176-179).

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<sup>16</sup> According to Thomas, "[t]hird wave feminism generally denotes interests of individuals born after the 1960s and 1970s" (167). Though "overlaps exist between second-wave and third-wave feminist agendas, descriptions of third-wave feminism highlight the particular qualities that tend to differentiate it from previous waves of feminism" (168). For more information on third wave feminism and its principles, see Fixmer and Wood, "The Personal is Still Political: Embodied Politics in Third Wave Feminism;" Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy*; Shugart et al., "Mediating Third-Wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice;" and Synder, "What is Third-Wave Feminism?: A New Directions Essay."

After watching promotional videos for the “Dream Big, Princess” campaign, Thomas notes the videos “feature prominently” Disney princesses of color and include “...a diverse group of adolescent, tween, or young girls...” (170-171). In addition, the author explains “even when the video features only one girl, the entire series of videos reveals a range of perspectives from ethnically diverse girls” (171). Over the years, Disney has been heavily criticized for its princess franchise featuring predominately white princesses; according to Heatwole, in terms of past Disney merchandizing, “[e]ven the pointedly ‘ethnic’ Disney princesses, Mulan and Pocahontas, rarely feature in the corporate ‘lineup’ used in marketing Disney princess products” (4; see also Kiyomi, 41; Lester 294-295; Orenstein; Sweeny 69). Therefore, it is not surprising Disney chose to emphasize diversity when attempting to cultivate an image of the company as in support of female empowerment.

Moreover, Thomas contends each video promotes “self-confidence and self-worth in young female viewers” (172). For example, juxtaposing scenes of princesses succeeding with moments of girls throwing a basketball into the basket or shooting an arrow that lands directly in the middle of the target, a belief in oneself is emphasized as key to the achievements depicted (173). More specifically, some of the featured “...display confidence nonverbally by proudly holding their heads high while performing or before making a dive and exhibiting confidence or determination in their eyes and expressions while split-leaping or running in a race” (173). In addition, encouraging individualism, the author notes “[i]n many scenes, one girl is shown at a time, stressing her individual talents, goals, or ambitions” (173-174). Therefore, while Disney princesses often are supplied with princes who swoop in and come to their rescue and “have fairies, fairy godmothers or other forms of magic to assist them, Disney uses the commercials to

reframe the narrative, reminding young girls that their own ambitions, positive thinking, and hard work are needed to achieve dreams” (174-175).

Thomas also states “[t]he commercials reflect everyday acts of resistance...” (175). The advertisements depict “girls who are doing actions that some girls do on a typical day, while other scenes may introduce girls to activities that they may pursue” (175). Showcasing girls completing “...playing or practicing sports and outdoor activities, studying, writing...[and] achieving their goals and accomplishments, like winning races or acting in socially conscious ways...” is reflective of a specific principle concerning pushing back against societal ideals in one’s daily life (175). One feature of third wave feminism is the understanding of “...any person as capable of leadership and accept[ing] activism that is an everyday form of resistance” (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz, qtd. in Thomas, 168). Moreover, according to this philosophy, “...any individual can enact feminist politics in schools, communities and other local or private sites among friends and families” (Fixmer and Wood, qtd. in Thomas, 168). Therefore, Disney featuring girls engaging in daily activities as well as pursuing endeavors they are passionate about communicates to viewers that no matter the task, girls can be leaders and challenge societal expectations by chasing their dreams. Thomas also observes at least two of the advertisements viewed present the “personal stor[ies]” of each girl featured in relation “to a Disney princess” (175). In this way, Disney encourages viewers to directly align themselves with the inspirational lives of the princesses they love. Emphasizing direct identification with one’s favorite princess, the “Dream Big, Princess” campaign advocates for girls to embrace and embody the qualities of a Disney princess.

Finally, in this initiative, Disney must strategically navigate the potential of the incorporation of its princesses to detract from the goal of encouraging children to feel

empowered. Since “‘Princess Culture’ and the ‘classic’ princesses, e.g., Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora, have been criticized for their adherence to traditional gender roles” (see footnote 12), Disney “...risk[s] substantiating feminine gender roles, heterosexual and romantic scripts, domesticity, and caretaking despite progressive images found throughout the videos” with the inclusion of “original princess images” (177). Yet, the presence of older, more classic princesses in this campaign is reflective of Disney’s marketing style; according to Davis, “the studio makes no differentiation in its marketing of the older and newer films: they are all sold under the label ‘Walt Disney Masterpieces’ and are all marketed as ‘classics’” (218). In addition, as highlighted previously, the Disney princesses have been promoted as a singular entity since 1999 (Orr 9; see also Orenstein). In order to “minimize the contradiction,” Thomas explains how the princesses themselves are primarily featured performing “activities outside any context of love” (177). Furthermore, the girls featured in the commercials are depicted “...engaging in traditionally masculine activities” (177). Ultimately, by emphasizing the more adventurous qualities of princesses and the participation of girls in pursuits conventionally geared toward boys, “Dream Big, Princess” attempts to convince audiences “girls can resist gender roles, fight limiting societal expectations, and ‘dream big’ through the embracement [*sic*] of ‘princess culture’” (179).

Overall, Disney’s “Dream Big, Princess” campaign is an effort to rebrand its princesses as icons young girls can look to for inspiration to pursue their dreams. By rebranding or relabeling traditionally feminine roles or carefully circumscribed moments of rebellion as feminist, Disney is also attempting to ensure the its princesses remain relevant. Through this campaign, Disney is attempting to convince viewers princesses are feminist because the company showcases them as such. Disney princesses are not passé, they are representative of

qualities girls need to embrace to feel empowered. Moreover, despite the overwhelmingly positive messages this initiative sends to young viewers, this campaign can be understood as an attempt to convince children to consume the Disney princess franchise; “DBP [“Dream Big, Princess”] manifests in brand loyalty and ‘sells’ all Disney Princesses as role models to young girls, which can spur an endless array of product desires, including, films, dolls, clothing and vacation spots” (Thomas 182). That being said, “...there is still no denying that the campaign exposes young girls to feminist values that will hopefully influence them now and in the future” (180). Before its promotion of the live-action film *Beauty and the Beast* as a more feminist take on a classic fairytale, Disney embarked on the process of reframing its princesses as relevant role models for children through the “Dream Big, Princess” campaign.

#### EMMA WATSON AS BELLE: A FEMINIST PLAYING A PRINCESS?

Three years ago, Disney reimagined its beloved animated tale *Beauty and the Beast*. Captivating audiences with a live-action (re)presentation of a romance between a village girl who longs for “adventure in the great wide somewhere” (Condon 00:18:22-00:18:26) and an egotistical prince turned beast, Disney strengthened its “cultural stranglehold on the fairy tale” (Zipes 21). Offering audiences an almost exact replica of the live-action film’s animated predecessor, this movie “and similar Disney productions function as paratexts that encourage viewers to recognize and canonize Disney’s ... contribution to these public domain properties and favor readings that see them as extensions (and celebrations) of ... Disney’s existing branded experiences” (Benson 43).<sup>17</sup> In other words, Disney’s retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* acts as a

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<sup>17</sup> More specifically, Benson asserts “we might best understand Disney’s recent live-action films not only as a standalone text but as paratexts in and of themselves that are deliberately designed to act as access points into a Disney controlled and Disney-centric ‘menu of intertexts’” (27).

text through which individuals are urged to understand Disney's version of the fairytale as superior, the standard which all other renditions should be compared to; moreover, audiences are pushed to acknowledge the film as not meant to supersede the company's animated movie but be an expansion of the earlier version as well as the magic Disney is known for supplying to its consumers. Reintroducing viewers to *its* interpretation of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney extended the legacy of a beloved animated feature.

While Disney produced and marketed the live-action film as a recursive extension of the animated version (leading fans back to what they already know and love), the movie was cast in such a way that Disney could also somewhat inoculate itself from the by now familiar feminist criticisms of its princess characters. The casting of Emma Watson in the lead role of Belle was symbolically efficient in this regard. As was the casting of Audra McDonald and Gugu Mbatha-Raw in significant, though more minor and, primarily, nonhuman, roles.

Before the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* was released, Disney worked to ensure viewers were prepared to interpret this film as "feminist." As "the ambassador of United Nations' HeForShe campaign" (Koushik and Reed 12), well-known for her portrayal of the strong-willed and intelligent character Hermione in the *Harry Potter* series, and bearing a distinct physical resemblance to Disney's animated creation of the character Belle, Emma Watson lends additional credibility to a feminist reading of Belle. Though there was initial skepticism surrounding her musicality, Condon explains:

"I heard it and she has a really lovely voice. So in terms of casting, she is the only person we considered for the role. She lived up to, and exceeded all of my expectations. She's the secret sauce to making this new movie work." (qtd. in Yip, 2017, para. 12)

According to film critic Sagafi (2017), “Emma Watson’s Belle is exactly what we expect: bookish, intelligent, innovative, strong and kind” (para. 5). Moreover, “having the ambassador of United Nations’ HeForShe campaign, Emma Watson, play Belle” (Koushik & Reed, 2018, p. 12), bolsters the performance; though Belle is already perceived (by some) as an empowered and progressive character (Downey; Henke et al.), Watson’s identity as a feminist enables viewers to understand Belle as reflective of the person depicting her. Emma Watson brings with her a following and potentially untapped market that will see the film simply because she is playing the main heroine. As a result of her reputation as an actress, Disney is not required to emphasize this film as feminist because the casting of Emma Watson communicates to audiences that this motion picture must be feminist because Emma Watson is playing Belle.<sup>18</sup>

The live-action *Beauty and the Beast* endeavors to fulfill a need for Disney princesses to be empowered women.<sup>19</sup> Belle is (re)presented to viewers as a woman who *chooses* how her story will unfold—that is, once she finds herself imprisoned against her will. Released only four years ago in 2017, the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* has not been frequently adopted as the subject of academic research. Primarily replicating the plot of its animated predecessor, this live-action motion picture features Emma Watson as Belle, Dan Stevens as the Beast, and Luke Evans as Gaston. Attracting principally favorable reviews from critics, this live-action spectacle presents audiences with a strikingly similar, though more visually stunning or, as Lavery states, “incredibly beautiful” (24), narrative about an ambitious young woman, Belle, living in a small town and searching for “adventure in the great wide somewhere” (Condon 00:18:22-00:18:26)

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<sup>18</sup> Here, an enthymeme is present; the premise left unstated, Emma Watson is a feminist, is transferred to the character and film.

<sup>19</sup> I employ the term “empowered” here in reference to the postfeminist portrayal of women as confident, “autonomous agents [seemingly] no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 153).

who finds herself in the presence of, and inevitably charmed by, a self-centered and resentful prince-turned-beast who is sure no one can ever possibly fall in love with a creature like himself and thereby release him from the curse that was placed upon him. Disney strategically alters small, yet poignant, facets of the plot in ways that attempt to amplify the feminist qualities Belle possessed in the animated version or Disney “original.” For example, rather than simply being an avid reader, Belle is also an inventor. In the movie, Belle is even shown “working on an invention, testing a prototype, and ... [bringing to life] a washing machine run by the power of a mule” (Koushik and Reed 11). Addressing this new characteristic in an interview, Emma Watson explains how Belle’s invention allows her to pursue pastimes beyond those traditionally designated for women:

I just wanted to make sure that we stayed true to the original. So, when Kevin Kline was gonna make Maurice less kind of like the inventor, and he wasn’t gonna have that as his story anymore, I was like well could we use that for Belle? And so we made Belle this inventor who invents this washing machine, so that she can sit and read while its doing her washing. (“Emma Watson Plays with Kittens” 00:01:04-00:01:24)

As Koushik and Reed note, this minor character adjustment led to “[t]he 2017 version of *Beauty and the Beast* [being] heralded as feminist” (p. 11). It ignores the actual history of what advances in domestic technologies meant for women’s lives and their time. As Ruth Schwartz Cowan has argued in her book, *More Work for Mother*, cultural expectations regarding the cleanliness of domestic space, presentation of family members, and food preparation all increased with technological advancements offsetting (and then some) any gains in efficiency.

In another interview, Emma Watson highlights how Belle is not only an inventor in this film but she also desires to empower the other women in her village through teaching:

We wanted to make sure that... We know she [Belle] loves reading she loves to travel, but we also wanted to give her this element of being quite industrious and quite practical and very inventive ... It's actually Belle [and not Maurice] who is really forging forward and innovating and coming up with new ways of doing things. Belle also does some teaching in this film. She wants to not only does she love reading for herself but she actually loves sharing her love of books and she loves sharing the things that she finds special and interesting and I loved that too. Yeah, that she loved to share. ("Beauty and the Beast" 00:01:04-00:01:53)

Belle is understood as the driving force of this film. Now, with the casting of Emma Watson and her consistent promotion of Belle as this female who is independent and desires to empower other women, fans are invited to understand this film as feminist because the film features a powerful, female heroine named Belle.

Emma Watson is an example of how a Disney princess can cling to one's identity as a child and influence the choices one makes in adulthood in a never-ending attempt to be a princess. In response to a comment concerning herself as a supporter of "girl power" ("Interview Dan Stevens and Emma Watson" 00:02:49) both on and off screen, Emma Watson explains how she is grateful to portray a character she has admired since she was a girl:

Yeah, I mean I I just feel so lucky to play someone that I to be offered roles that I really genuinely believe in and it's so special for me to play one of my own childhood heroines and actually I've been able to do that a few times in my career and I just I just feel so lucky.... (00:02:50-00:03:09)

For aspiring actresses, Emma Watson has presented girls with yet another opportunity to become a Disney princess. Overall, Disney's savvy promotion of its princesses enables the corporation to

“capture” girls; situating them as reflections of the princesses onscreen as children and offering them the opportunity to live out their childhood dreams ensures women remain indoctrinated in the princess ideal, as adults.

In this chapter, I have detailed how Disney attempts to ensure fans old and new are satisfied with the media it is producing. In its theme parks, Disney provides guests with a comfortable, picturesque depiction of America; one that is simultaneously cut off from reality yet offers an experience that feels very real. On the other hand, in regards to its princess franchise, Disney is continuously working to reposition its princesses as symbols of empowerment. Through the “Dream Big, Princess” campaign and the casting of Emma Watson as Belle in a live-action rendition of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney emphasizes the heroic qualities of its princesses whilst ensuring the princesses viewers have fallen in love with remain primarily unchanged. It is clear Disney is a company communicating contradictory messages to the public. As a corporation with significant power, Disney is making an effort to advocate for women’s empowerment. However, unwilling to isolate more conservative fan bases, Disney continues to ensure these audiences are fed soothing depictions of an America that never was. Ultimately, in order to have an in-depth understanding of Walt Disney, we need to consider the company as a complex entity. The Walt Disney Company has global influence, and considering Disney’s contradictions in relation to feminism provides space for Disney and its fans to be viewed not simply as supporters of colonialism and heteropatriarchy but as potential advocates of equity.

## Chapter 2: The Making of a *Disney Classic*

In chapter 1, I introduced Disney's commitment to ensuring that children and adults like identify with Disney princesses. Positioning consumer gendered identifications with Disney princesses in the context of the Disney corporation's branding practices and corporate discourses, I show how customers are encouraged to consistently invest in Disney princess merchandise to remain fully immersed in the realm of princesses even when one is not at a Disney theme park. Providing an overview of the princess canon, I demonstrate how Disney has tried to revise its princesses to be more relevant. After all, it is no secret that Disney princesses have long been criticized for their promotion of heteropatriarchal and colonialist ideals. Therefore, through the launch of the "Dream Big, Princess" campaign in 2016 and the release of a more "feminist" live-action adaptation of "Beauty and the Beast" in 2017, the Walt Disney Company engaged in postfeminist attempts to position itself as in support of women's liberation. More specifically, in terms of the film, I reviewed how casting Emma Watson as Belle allows for Disney to indirectly code Belle as feminist and capitalize on Watson's reputation as an actress adamant that women should be empowered.<sup>20</sup> However, careful not to push more conservative audiences away, who cling to Disney's status as crafter of worlds that are innocent and comfortable, the company ensured its re-envisioning of the still beloved animated *Beauty and the Beast* did not stray far from the corporation's original masterpiece.

Disney strives to retain old audiences, even as it engages new audiences in an ever-changing sociopolitical climate. By tweaking the plot of its animated fairytale for the live-action version, Disney attempts to position itself as a corporation that is simultaneously in favor of the liberation of women *and* an institution that can be relied upon to remain stable as cultural

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<sup>20</sup> See Downey 188, 190-208 and Henke et al. 234, 237-239, 241-242, 245-247 for assessments of Belle in Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* as a feminist.

dynamics shift. Disney's "new" Belle embodies a postfeminist sensibility. Her autonomy, new profession, and commitment to the education of other women signify her strength and independence. And yet, traces of the traditional character remain in Belle's costuming, commitment to her father, and budding romance with the Beast.

Broadly, the goal of this thesis is to assess Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* via a postfeminist lens and to problematize the notion that this fairytale can only be read as either feminist or antifeminist.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, I am interested in investigating the gender politics of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* and what Disney's most recent rendition of this narrative reveals about the priorities of the Walt Disney Company and the cultural moment during which this film was released. However, before this Disney adaptation can be appropriately analyzed, we must take a look at the versions of "Beauty and the Beast" in existence prior to Disney's adaptation of the fairytale.

In what follows, I test Disney's postfeminist claims regarding the live-action film by turning to the resources provided by folklore studies. Through a review of Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type Index, various versions of the fairytale "Beauty and the Beast" are understood in terms of a defining set of characteristics that distinguish the fairytale from so many others. The tale type classification of "Beauty and the Beast" provides the context necessary to analyze Disney's adaptation in relation to a popular story that was in circulation long before 1991. Once these elemental facets of the story have been identified, they can be used to assess assessed what significant changes Disney did or did not make to the fairytale, as well as to

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<sup>21</sup> For example, in a review of the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* titled "Beauty and the Beast: Feminist or Fraud?," the title alone suggests the movie being assessed can only either be representative of feminism or not. Though Williams gives credit to the film for "...speak[ing] a tiny bit of feminism [rather] than no feminism at all," the conclusion of this article is that despite the efforts made to produce a more feminist tale, the motion picture cannot be considered to be in support of feminism.

analyze the gender politics of those alterations. Contrary to Disney's claim that its tales became ever more progressive in terms of their gender politics, I demonstrate how Disney's adaptations of the fairytale decenter Belle, changing a narrative once focused on Beauty to one about the transformation of a beast into a civilized man at the hands of a woman.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, I contend the Walt Disney Company incorporated violence into a fairytale in which aggression was not initially present between Beauty and her Beast.<sup>23</sup>

## RELIANCE ON THE FAMILIAR: DISNEY AS THE CREATOR OF "BEAUTY AND THE BEAST"

Disney is not alone in its celebration of Belle feminist leanings. For Henke et al., in Disney's animated version of *Beauty and the Beast*, it is Belle's choices which characterize her as a feminist princess. The authors understand Belle as having the "freedom to make choices and to act on her own behalf as well as on the behalf of others; and she exercises that freedom" (238). Acting in favor of her own desires, "Belle's actions can be read as a series of complex decisions about when to act, and when to care for someone, how to administer comfort, when to take matters into her own hands, [and] when to risk her personal safety" (239). Therefore, simply in need of an update as opposed to a complete recreation of Belle to showcase itself as a corporation in support of women empowerment, Disney, as previously highlighted, only made slight tweaks to the plot of the animated film. Depicting Belle as an inventor in place of her

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<sup>22</sup> Though similar arguments have been made by academics previously (see Craven 129, 131-133; Cummins 23-27; and Jeffords 166-169) my aim is to expand upon this contention via an incorporation of tale type and a review of a greater number of written versions of "Beauty and the Beast."

<sup>23</sup> Again, scholars before me have highlighted the presence of violence in Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* (see Coates et al. 123-131 and Olson 449-454, 455-459, 462-476). However, I plan to add to this acknowledgement through a recognition of the tale type of "Beauty and the Beast" and a comparison of multiple adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" with Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

father and showing Belle teaching another girl in the village to read are two primary examples of how Disney presented audiences with a princess who can be interpreted as feminist, but not too feminist.

This practice is not unique to *Beauty and the Beast*; rather, it is a tried and true pattern of Disney's live-action adaptations of its animated features. Sticking closely to the animated motion pictures strengthens the realism of the live-action films for which the animated features serve as the "originals" or referents by which the newer versions will be judged. In other words, what makes the live-action films "realistic" or not is how closely they hew to the Disney "originals" or animated precursors. When creating its films, the Walt Disney Company has historically been committed to crafting narratives reflective of real life.<sup>24</sup> According to the Di Giovanni, "[w]hat is unique to Disney animated films is the great emphasis laid upon creating happiness through an *illusion of reality* which is deeply rooted in close observation of the real world and aims at maximum comfort for the audience" (207). More specifically, this devotion to a development of familiarity for fans is reflected in Disney's re-presentation of animated films as live-action motion pictures. For illustration, Benson highlights how "[c]asting choices" for the live-action *The Jungle Book* "attempted to remain true to Disney's interpretation of the story's characters..." (32). Choosing the actor Neel Sethi, who closely resembles the animated character rendered by Disney, to portray Mowgli and "voice actors ... seem[ingly] chosen to perfectly match either the personality or voice of the Disney [animated] movie as close as possible," Disney attempted to (re)construct the most recognizable version of a fairytale for audiences. Furthermore, by presenting "images and scenes that were framed in ways that recalled the original film, ... audiences familiar with the cartoon [were provided] a sense of familiarity with the world" (33).

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<sup>24</sup> I am using "real life" here not to signify life as it actually occurs but in reference to mimicry of aspects of reality such as bodily movements and constructions of characters in heteronormative terms.

Ultimately, “[t]he decision to make the film resemble the Disney animated version closely in terms of tone, characterization, and narrative elements functioned to ... [reify] the latent cultural nostalgia many audience members likely have for Disney’s interpretation of the story” (35).<sup>25</sup> Encouraging fans to stick with what they know, Disney assures viewers will be comforted by a well-known story faithfully presented in a new format.

The romantic dance in the Beast’s library is perhaps the most iconic, if not also the most beloved, scene from Disney’s animated version of *Beauty and the Beast*. It is not surprising, then, that Disney relied on the faithful repetition of this scene, practically shot for shot, to create a sense of continuity and familiarity for fans of the Disney “original.” Descending a grand staircase, a beautiful maiden is met halfway by a prince in disguise. Lifting her yellow ball gown, she curtsies as the prince bows. Then, offering his arm, the prince escorts his love to the ballroom for a waltz.<sup>26</sup> Holding each other close, they dance, falling even more in love with every step and twirl. Just before the couple’s romantic promenade comes to an end, a lilting voice can be heard singing “Tale as old as time/Song as old as rhyme/Beauty and the Beast” (Condon 01:26:53-01:27:04; Trousdale and Wise 00:59:23-00:59:31).

Step for step and beat for beat, the romantic ballroom dance between Belle and the Beast in Disney’s animated and live-action *Beauty and the Beast* is practically the same. As one of the most iconic scenes in the film, the dance between Belle and the Beast in Disney’s animated and live-action *Beauty and the Beast* resonates with audiences due to its romantic nature; though the Beast and Belle begin to form a connection prior to this memorable waltz, the dance itself

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<sup>25</sup> This understanding can also be applied to other live-action Disney remakes. For example, in both the live-action *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the actresses selected to portray Cinderella (Lily James) and Belle (Emma Watson), costuming, and presentation of iconic scenes (e.g. the first dance in the ballroom) is reminiscent, if not a complete replica, of images viewers would recall from Disney’s animated tales.

<sup>26</sup> In the animated feature, the dance between Belle and the Beast occurs after they have sat down for dinner.

represents a turning point in the relationship. At this moment in each film, the Beast invites Belle to dance with him as a final attempt to acquire her affection. As Belle and the Beast gaze longingly into one another's eyes, the message is clear: true love can blossom even when two individuals are seemingly worlds apart.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, Disney's commitment to continuity when adapting a once animated film to live-action may communicate to and further solidify for audiences that Disney's animated version of "Beauty and the Beast" is, in fact, the original. If unaware of the numerous oral and written adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" in existence prior to Disney's animated presentation, Disney's live-action movie appears to be tweaked from the only source material available to the company: its own animated film *Beauty and the Beast*.

In the process of adopting and adapting tales of fantasy for their commercial use, Disney has monopolized the fairytales available in the public domain. In their examination of Disney's live-action film *The Jungle Book*, Benson highlights how even other notable motion picture companies cannot compete with Disney's "stranglehold on the fairytale" (Zipes 21). According to Benson, though Warner Brothers crafted a live-action film, released two years after Disney's live-action *The Jungle Book*, more in line with Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, "the Warner Brothers-produced film was compared—largely unfavorably—to Disney's" (25). As a result, though both companies were drawing inspiration from the same source material, "the Warner

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<sup>27</sup> In the animated and live-action film, the Beast offers Belle access to his enormous library as a grand romantic gesture. Once this occurs, Belle is amazed and there is a noticeable shift in her feelings for the Beast; it is as if because a room in his castle is dedicated to Belle's favorite pastime, her love for books translates to the Beast. With access to an extensive amount of books, Belle and the Beast could spend all their time in the castle reading. Yet, despite the depiction of Belle and the Beast reading together in the live-action movie, their relationship reaches its romantic pinnacle when they dance together in the ballroom. Therefore, the library in both motion pictures functions as the location in which the Belle realizes she *can* love and *is* falling in love with the Beast. Once these burgeoning feelings of attraction are established, they remain; propelling the story forward, the development of desirability conjured in the library is catalyst for feelings of attraction that culminate in a now iconic, romantic ballroom dance.

Brothers movie landed with a thud, and Disney appeared to maintain both financial and cultural dominance over Rudyard Kipling's public domain stories" (25). Unfortunately for Warner Brothers, audiences primarily view Disney's animated version of *The Jungle Book*, rather than the stories first penned by Rudyard Kipling, as "the 'classic' version" (34).<sup>28</sup> Hence, the "authenticity" of Disney's live-action *The Jungle Book* stems from the corporation's replication of their animated version of the film and *not* the representation/incorporation of Kipling's narratives: "Disney derived their authenticity, not from Kipling, but the authorial power of the company's founder Walt Disney" (37). Situated as an extension and "reinforce[ment] [of] Walt Disney's legacy," live-action films like *The Jungle Book*, and the extra features accompanying them on DVD copies of the movie<sup>29</sup> "work as an access point into a textual matrix in which all paths lead back to Disney, both the man and the company" (37, 38). Overall, no matter which live-action film Disney produces, audiences are invited and expected to refer to Disney's animated film (of the same title) as the primary source material from which their retelling is based.

In essence, even though a multitude of iterations of "Beauty and the Beast" have been in circulation long before Disney released its animated feature, Disney exercises a position of cultural authority over fairytales. Correspondingly, characters and narratives once independent from one another can now be situated in a singular magical realm. In a study of the series *Once Upon a Time*, Heatwole highlights how this (Disney produced) television series (re)presents key aspects and markers of iconic Disney fairytales as existing together in one world. For example,

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<sup>28</sup> Instead of regarding the compilation of stories written by Rudyard Kipling as the version of *The Jungle Book* from which subsequent iterations should be judged, Disney's animated film, *The Jungle Book*, has become "classic" because this is the narrative children are most often exposed to.

<sup>29</sup> For example, a video of the director highlighting an easter egg present in the live-action movie which subtly links the motion picture to its animated predecessor.

Mulan is shown as being friends (as well as in love) with Aurora; thus, while the princesses hail from different countries, their existence as (assumed exclusive) Disney entities allows for them to be present in one, all-encompassing “kingdom.” More specifically, Heatwole notes “[s]uch citations are taken for granted as innately intersecting elements of the fairy-tale universe we all know, but one created not by the brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, but by Disney” (10). With characters from various Disney tales colliding, “[t]he assumed audience is expected to make absolutely no differentiation between Grimm, Andersen, Perrault, and Disney” (10). Furthermore, “this intertextual amalgamation also points to the way that Disney has managed to create a corporate monopoly over fairy tale storytelling to the point that the assumed audience is not expected to know where fairy tales end and Disney begins” (10). In line with Benson’s conclusion concerning the live-action films Disney has more recently begun producing, Heatwole states “[a]s Disney has made clear ... revision is both possible within the Disney-verse, and in many cases an integral part of continuing the power of any fairy tale” (17). Therefore, despite the tale “Beauty and the Beast” having been spoken and retold as well as written and rewritten, the iconic status of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* practically ensures the numerous versions of the story which came before remain unknown and unacknowledged.

#### TESTING DISNEY’S “FEMINISM”: A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

It is curious that Disney may be understood as the creators of the “original” *Beauty and the Beast*, given how long it has been in circulation and how widely it has been reproduced.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> According to Deutsch, “[t]raditional tales of a bride and her animal groom have circulated orally for centuries in Africa, Asia, Europe and India....” In 1740, “[t]he first appearance of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in print ... [was written] by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Gallon de Villeneuve” (Deutsch; see also Craven 126). It was not until “[s]ixteen years later, [that] Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont cut some of Villeneuve’s sub-plots and published an abridged version...” of the narrative. Since then, “Beaumont’s version ... [has become] the standard telling of the tale, which found its way throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century into numerous collections, often with elaborate illustrations,

As Hearne illustrates in the novel *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* and in the article “Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale: 1950-1985,” de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast” is one of many iterations of this classic fairytale. In a review of Hearne’s book, Kimmel notes Hearne includes documentation “[o]f the more than 257 items—publications, films, recordings...” of “Beauty and the Beast” “...listed in a 1984 OCLC [Online Computer Library Center] printout...” (264). Yet, when scholars such as Cummins, Olsen, and Jeffords analyze Disney’s animated film, the references to written adaptations for comparison is restricted to de Villeneuve’s and de Beaumont’s versions of the tale and general statements concerning major plot points/themes present across adaptations.<sup>31</sup> Although Disney’s presentation is “based on the fairy tale *La Belle et la a Bête* by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont...,” de Beaumont’s narrative is not the original (“Beauty and the Beast”). Moreover, Disney’s animated *Beauty and the Beast* also “...uses some ideas from the 1946 film of the same name” (“Beauty and the Beast”).<sup>32</sup> Hence, since Disney’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” is not representative of the narrative construction of one adaptation of the fairytale and de Beaumont’s tale was, at the very least, inspired by de Villeneuve’s writing, it is pertinent to not only acknowledge the story’s ATU tale type but also to review a number of versions of “Beauty and the Beast.” In so doing, I can expand upon previous explorations of how Disney’s story

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as well as in stage productions across Europe and the United States” (Deutsch; see also Craven 126; Cummins 23; Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale*, 49; Olson 451).

<sup>31</sup> That being said, Jeffords does go one step further than the other authors mentioned and includes a brief example of Beast’s behavior toward Beauty in a variation of the tale read by the author (168). In addition, though Craven goes beyond the efforts of Cummins, Olsen, and Jeffords a bit and also includes an overview of Disney’s animated *Beauty and the Beast* in relation to “the Greco-Roman myth of Cupid and Psych” (126, 130-133), the author refrains from making direct references to a variety of iterations of “Beauty and the Beast.”

<sup>32</sup> The movie being referenced was originally titled *La belle et la a bête* (“Beauty and the Beast (1946)”). The motion picture was directed by Jean Cocteau and [René Clément](#) and starred Jean Marais, Josette Day, and Mila Parély (“Beauty and the Beast (1946)”). In fact, Walt Disney had such admiration for this film that “he felt discouraged and believed [his own motion picture adaptation] wouldn’t be as good as what Jean Cocteau did” (“Beauty and the Beast (1964)”).

differs in terms of Beauty's role in the development of the narrative and the Beast's behavior toward Beauty once they meet. Offering new insights concerning the classification and variations of "Beauty and the Beast" in the "world [of] folk-literature" (Urban), this chapter will act as an expansion of research on "Beauty and the Beast" in relation to Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* conducted. Through an assessment of the categorization of "Beauty and the Beast" according to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Tale Type Index and a review of multiple written variations of the fairytale, a more comprehensive understanding of "Beauty and the Beast" outside of and in relation to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* can be achieved.

Resulting from the numerous versions of "Beauty and the Beast" in existence, I will not be conducting an exhaustive examination of every variation of the narrative created. I cannot feasibly perform an all-inclusive history of "Beauty and the Beast" because the number of adaptations of this fairytale is so substantial. Rather, I will engage with a compilation of twenty written versions of "Beauty and the Beast." The collection includes variations of "Beauty and the Beast" from multiple countries including France, England, and Germany. At the top of the webpage, it is noted that the "Beauty and the Beast" adaptations provided are "folktales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 425C..." (Ashliman). 425C is the ATU Tale Type "Beauty and the Beast." Therefore, I selected this grouping of different written versions of "Beauty and the Beast" due to the acknowledgement that the narratives given are representative of the ATU Tale Type for "Beauty and the Beast" and that adaptations from around the world are included. Moreover, my choice of this particular collection of written tales of "Beauty and the Beast" was influenced by the credibility of the individual responsible for the compilation; each narrative was "...translated and/or edited by D. L. Ashliman" (Ashliman), a former professor at the University

of Pittsburgh who conducted research in folklore (“Professor D. L. Ashliman”).<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this study, this resource provides a foundational compilation of varying versions of “Beauty and the Beast” in relation to the gender politics of Disney’s presentation of the narrative.

The tale type of “Beauty and the Beast” will act as a base from which I will draw to analyze the changes Disney made when crafting the narrative into an animated motion picture. In the study of folklore, folktales have been categorized, based on persistent patterns of storytelling. According to Urban, the “...recurring, self-sufficient plots or motif groupings” are known as tale types. More specifically, “motifs are persistent indivisible and defining narrative elements or story details.” Therefore, tale types represent general, yet repetitive, characteristics of fairytales that align one story with another. For example, “Little Red Riding Hood” (333) and “Rapunzel” (310) are situated under the ATU (Aarne-Thompson-Uther) category Tales of Magic (300-749) and, more specifically, Supernatural Adversaries (300-399) because each narrative includes a magical opponent (e.g. a talking wolf and a witch) (Urban).

In order to review the tale type of which “Beauty and the Beast” is representative, we must look to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. As explained by the *World Heritage Encyclopedia*, “[t]he **Aarne-Thompson tale type index** is a multivolume listing designed to identify recurring plot patterns in the narrative structures of traditional folktales, so that folklorists can organize, classify, and analyze the folktales they research” (emphasis in original). In general, “[t]he Aarne-Thompson [AT] tale type index organizes folktales into broad categories like *Animal Tales*, *Fairy Tales*, *Religious Tales*, etc.” Then, “[w]ithin each category, folktale types are further subdivided by motif patterns until individual types are listed.” Though

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<sup>33</sup> Professor Ashliman has written a number of articles included in *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, edited by Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, in which there are three volumes edited by Donald Haase (“Professor D. L. Ashliman”).

each fairytale exemplifies its own type, “[c]losely related folktales are often grouped within a type.” The *World Heritage Encyclopedia* provides the following illustration of narratives that exist within the same type grouping: “[f]or example, Persecuted Heroine (501) has 510A, Cinderella, and 510B, Catskin, and the Quest for a Lost Bride (400) has the subtype 401, the Swan Maiden.” In 2004, “[t]he AT-number system was updated and expanded ... by Hans-Jörg Uther.” Unsatisfied with the AT-number system in its current state, “Uther ... further revise[d] and update[d] the system, and rename[d] poorly titled categories” (Hannah). Prior to its expansion, Dundes proclaimed “the Aarne-Thompson tale type index ... [is one of] two of the most valuable tools in the professional folklorist’s arsenal of aides for analysis” (195). Currently, “[t]he ATU Tale Type Index ... is an essential guide for those ... trying to find different versions of the fairytales we already know, or discover tales and types of fairy tales we...” are unaware of (Hannah). Overall, “[s]ince the tale type index concerns the motif structures of folktales, it focuses more on the morphology of folktales than on the details of their characters’ actions” (*World Heritage Encyclopedia*). Therefore, the ATU Tale Type of “Beauty and the Beast” will function as a foundation from which I can analyze the alterations made by Disney when reimagining the fairytale for the big screen.

## “BEAUTY AND THE BEAST”: WHEN THE TALE OF BEAUTY BECOMES THE STORY OF A BEAST

In this section, I argue Disney changed a fairytale centered upon Beauty to a narrative focused on the undoing of the Beast’s curse. Furthermore, I contend Disney injected violence into a story in which aggression was not initially present. The arguments I intend to make are not new. Researchers have made claims concerning the Beast as the dominant, driving force of

Disney's story and detailed the presence of intimate partner violence in Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* (see footnotes 1 and 2). However, few scholars have drawn a comparison between Disney's tale and the oral and written versions of "Beauty and the Beast" which preceded it. In general, even when a written version of "Beauty and the Beast" is referenced by a scholar for comparison, the tale penned by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont is the primary adaptation referenced.

Of the twenty written adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" I am using for this study, each presents the reader with a similar storyline. In general, aside from minor plot changes such as the character of the beast being depicted as a dog, horse, or snake, or the father existing as a man of wealth, the twenty versions of "Beauty and the Beast" I am working with present readers with, essentially, the same fairytale.<sup>34</sup> In each narrative reviewed, Beauty is depicted as the youngest daughter of a merchant typically struggling to ensure financial security for his family. Losing his way after failing to secure the funds he desperately desired, the merchant stumbles upon an enchanted castle. Outside the palace, the merchant recalls his youngest daughter's request for a rose to be brought back to her as a souvenir from her father's journey and picks one for her. In so doing, the merchant causes the beast who resides in the castle to become enraged. As consequence for the merchant's stealing, the creature demands the companionship of one of his daughters. In every story I read, the youngest daughter, Beauty, is the one who goes to live

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<sup>34</sup> The only variation that strays from the basic plot structure I describe is a version from Austria titled "The Singing Rose" (Ashliman). As translated by Ashliman, in this story, to choose who will take the place of the king as queen, the king instructs his three daughters to locate a singing rose and return it to him in exchange for the throne. To obtain the singing rose, the youngest daughter of the king agrees that in "seven years" time the old man who lives in the castle would retrieve the maiden to live with him. After the time had elapsed, the princess went with the old man to live in his castle. Although the girl had "things in great abundance," she was miserable without the presence of her loved ones. In the end, the young girl slices off the head of the old man and is granted a key in return. The key enables her to unlock "all the chests and doors in the entire castle." Ultimately, the treasures the princess gained access to allowed her to be "rich and free forever." Unlike the basic plot of the other nineteen adaptations given on the website, the princess does not interact with an animal beast and no transformation of a beast into a human occurs.

with the beast.<sup>35</sup> As she spends her time with him, Beauty begins to grow fond of the beast. Yet, she longs to visit and care for her father who is ill. Acknowledging Beauty's yearning, the beast allows Beauty to return home. However, missing the beast, Beauty returns to him just before he dies. Realizing the beast is about to pass on, Beauty admits she is in love with him or agrees to be his wife. Due to her declaration, the beast changes back into a human and the two are married.<sup>36</sup>

"Beauty and the Beast" is designated ATU tale type 425C. In the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Tale Type Index, "Beauty and the Beast" can be found under the general category of "TALES OF MAGIC" (300-749) (Urban). Upon reviewing multiple variations of the fairytale, it seems as though the magical through line is the occurrence of a transformation from animal to human. More specifically, the changing of a beast into a prince. Out of twenty versions of "Beauty and the Beast," only one adaptation, "The Singing Rose," does not include the altering of a character's form from a physically beastly animal to lovely prince. Before any beast can transform, however, the maiden must commit herself to him. For example, in "Beauty and the Beast" (European), once Bella admits her love for Beast, he changes into a prince:

'Oh, Beast, Beast, why did you die? I was getting to love you so much.'

No sooner had she said this than the hide of the beast split in two and out came the most handsome young prince who told her that he had been enchanted by a magician and that he could not recover his natural form unless a maiden should, of her own accord, declare that she loved him. (Ashliman)

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<sup>35</sup> In some adaptations, the beast learns the rose is intended as a gift for the merchant's youngest daughter. In this case, the creature requests Beauty be the daughter who becomes the beast's companion (Craven 125).

<sup>36</sup> Similar summaries of "Beauty and the Beast" are given by Craven (125), Hearne ("Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale: 1950-1985" 74-76), and Jeffords (166).

Much like Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, a prince is typically placed under some form of enchantment which is broken once a young lady willingly pledges herself to remain by the creature's side despite appearances.

In contrast to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, however, the fairytale does not expose the spell placed upon the Beast until the end of the narrative. In an effort to garner audience sympathy for the Beast, I argue, Disney shifts a story once about Beauty to one about a beast. Yet, simply because the adaptations I read possess plots that present Beauty as the central character of the narrative does not mean these versions of the fairytale are in no way representative of heteropatriarchal values. Ultimately, Beauty is the woman in an exchange between two men. A classic patriarchal plot, Beauty is protected by her father until she becomes the property of her future romantic partner (i.e. the beast).<sup>37</sup> Therefore, I am in no way arguing earlier iterations of "Beauty and the Beast" are not perpetuating heteropatriarchal ideals, my contention is that Disney's shifting of the central focus of the narrative from Beauty to the Beast presents audiences with a more sexist telling of this fairytale.

Across the board, each of the twenty adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" begin with an introduction to the father of Beauty. Setting the scene, an explanation is provided concerning how the father of three daughters finds himself in a predicament in which his youngest daughter must agree to live out her life with a beast. Yet, almost immediately, the young maiden is established as the central focus of this tale; for even though the father must first be caught by the beast for stealing a flower, it is known that the gift is for his youngest daughter. For example, in

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<sup>37</sup> Trites acknowledges this type of transfer occurs in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (150-151). After all, Ariel is unable to be with Prince Eric until her father, King Triton, allows her to marry him by transforming her from mermaid into human. More specifically, according to Trites, "Triton does not grant Ariel human form simply because Ariel is interested in humans and wants to explore their culture; the king only 'frees' Ariel ... so that she may live under Eric's power" (151; see also O'Brien 173).

“The Enchanted Tsarévich” (Russia), Beauty is the reason her father “must give” her to a snake “for all eternity:”

Once upon a time there was a merchant who had three daughters. It so happened he had one day to go to strange countries to buy wares, and so he asked his daughters, ‘What shall I bring you from beyond the seas?’

The eldest asked for a new coat, and the next one also asked for a new coat; but the youngest one only took a sheet of paper and sketched a flower on it. ‘Bring me, *bátyushka* [father], a flower like this!’

So the merchant went and made a long journey to foreign kingdoms, but he could never see such a flower. So he came back home, and he saw on his way a splendid lofty palace with watchtowers, turrets, and a garden. He went a walk [*sic*] in the garden, and you cannot imagine how many trees he saw and flowers, every flower fairer than the other flowers. And then he looked and saw a single one like the one which his daughter had sketched.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I will tear off and bring this to my beloved daughter...’” (Ashliman)

From the outset, Beauty is established as the character around which the narrative revolves.

In general, each written version of “Beauty and the Beast” presents readers with a story about Beauty. Although the adaptations of “Beauty and the Beast” reviewed employ a common patriarchal plot, Beauty’s journey is catalogued: from humble daughter whose simple request for a rose leads to her eventual sharing of a life with a beast. Even though Beauty overwhelmingly either admits her love for the Beast or agrees to marry him and, in so doing, enables the creature to return to his human form, no mention of the Beast once being human is made until the tale

concludes. For illustration, in the “Beauty and the Horse” (Denmark), the story begins with an explanation of how a merchant who was once wealthy discovers “the failure of one of his connections” (Ashliman). In need of funds, the merchant travels in the hope of procuring money for his himself and his three daughters. Yet, when the merchant arrives to his destination, he is attacked and injured. On his trip home, the merchant loses his way. Eventually, the merchant stumbles upon a shelter with food provided. Just before the merchant was about to return home, he wandered the property. Finding a garden, he decides to pick some flowers to take to Beauty as a gift. Suddenly, a horse appears and reprimands the merchant for stealing from him after having been given nourishment and a place to stay. As reparation for his wrongdoing, the horse demands Beauty. After some time spent with the horse, Beauty “gradually came to look at him more and more kindly.” Returning to the palace after having been permitted to visit her ill father, Beauty discovers the horse is sick; “...fearing that he might die ... [Beauty states] she ... [will] always stay with him and never leave him.” As soon as Beauty agrees to be the horse’s lifelong companion, the horse transforms into a human:

As soon as she had made this promise, the horse vanished, and a beautiful young prince stood before her ... He now told her that both he and the whole land had been enchanted by a wicked stepmother, who had converted him into a horse, and told him that only when a beautiful young girl would promise to stay with him, in his altered shape, would the enchantment be over. He wanted to marry Beauty, and live in the palace which belonged to him. (Ashliman)

For readers, this transformation comes as a surprise. Unlike in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, it is not revealed the prince has been placed under a spell until after he transforms back into a human. By not disclosing to the reader upfront that the prince has been cursed, the beast is likely

to be viewed as Beauty's captor and not a character deserving of sympathy because it is known that if the spell is not broken, the prince will remain a beast for the rest of his life.

A similar scenario occurs in "The Snake-Prince" (Greece). In this narrative, again, the reader has no idea the snake was once human until the conclusion of the story. It is only once Rosa agrees to wed the snake that the spell placed upon him is revealed:

And after dinner, when coffee was served, and he [the snake] lay in her lap as before and asked, 'Wilt thou take me for thy husband?' she replied, 'Yea, I will take thee!'

When she had said these words the snake's skin fell off him, and he became a handsome prince. ... Then Rosa asked what manner of man he was, and how he had become a snake. And he told her how that he had fallen under the spell of an enchantress who had changed him into a snake, and had doomed him to retain that shape until he should find a maiden who would consent to marry him. (Ashliman)

In nineteen of twenty adaptations, the reader remains unaware that the creature was ever a human until he turns back into a human at the end of the fairytale. A test of how true Beauty's love is for the beast, it can only be revealed that the prince has been placed under a spell to ensure Beauty's love is not superficial.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the reader is not likely to empathize with the beast because they are unaware that the creature is in need of a young maiden who agrees to marry him or expresses her love for him to change back into a human. Moreover, since the reader is unaware of the beast's predicament, Beauty becomes the central focus of the story; as the daughter who must spend her time with a physically beastly creature, Beauty is situated as the victim. Earning the empathy of the reader, Beauty is not understood as the key to freeing the beast from a curse;

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<sup>38</sup> Though in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle is not aware of the curse placed upon the Beast and must also fall in love with the Beast for who he is, the audience is more willing to forgive the Beast's aggressive behavior toward Belle and root for her to be attracted to him so he can become human again.

rather, she is the lifelong prisoner of a beast who overreacts and demands a life in exchange for the stealing of a flower.

Yet, when reimagining “Beauty and the Beast” as an animated film, Disney ensured the story told was that of the Beast. Unlike written versions of “Beauty and the Beast,” Disney immediately introduces the audience to the prince and the curse that has been placed upon him. In Disney’s animated and live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, a narrator explains how a selfish prince is punished for refusing to allow an elderly woman to stay in his castle despite a winter storm raging outside. Once dismissed, the woman transforms into an enchantress and, understanding the prince is incapable of compassion, turns him into a beast and his servants into household objects; shifting the focus of the narrative, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* is more about the Beast’s lack of virtue than a test of whether Belle can look beyond physical appearance and become attracted to a beast. Just before Belle is introduced, it is made clear to listeners that the only way for those in the castle to become human again is “[i]f he [the Beast] could learn to love another and earn their/her love in return...” (Condon 00:04:04-00:04:06; Trousdale and Wise 00:02:44-00:02:49). In so doing, Disney effectively positions the Beast as the character with whom the audience ought to empathize.<sup>39</sup> Although the Beast was punished for his arrogance, by explaining that the Beast was once a prince and can be one again, viewers look to Belle as the solution to the Beast’s predicament rather than a victim of a man’s cruel behavior.

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<sup>39</sup> In Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, this emphatic stance is modeled for viewers by the servants in the Beast’s castle. As Coates et al. acknowledge, “...in the film, the servants appear to be motivated [to help the Beast break the spell] by fondness for the Beast and Belle rather than a desire to be free of the curse” (125). Though also placed under a curse, “[w]e do not see the servants as pimp-like beings who are willing to sacrifice a young woman for their own self-gain. Instead, they come across as knowing friends or mentors of the Beast, who know the truth about the situation and the Beast himself” (125). As a result, the audience is encouraged to replicate the sympathetic and forgiving nature of the servants who remain loyal to the Beast despite his acts of aggression towards them.

Within the Disney film, Belle is simply a plot device, positioned within the narrative only as a means for telling the Beast's love story (Cummins 24-27; Jeffords 166-172). Belle is utilized for her physical beauty and the fact that she is a woman (Cummins 24; Swan 360, 362-366). The prince's "predicament" is the true focus of the narrative, and Belle is the girl designed to save the Beast from the curse (Cummins 24-27; Jeffords 166-172). Cummins claims that Belle's initial "interest in education and exploration, have no meaning except in terms of how they can be manipulated into a romance to benefit the Beast and the bewitched servants" (24).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Belle's beauty ultimately objectifies her (Sumera 44). For example, Gaston only desires to marry Belle because everyone in the village believes she typifies beauty (Sumera 44). In addition, when Gaston and the Beast are fighting over Belle, she is reduced "to a mere trophy" (Swan 360). Despite Belle's initial intellect, strength, and inquisitiveness being the focus of the film, those attributes fade into the background as Belle's beauty takes on its own role.

While both film commentators and spectators broadly understood Belle in stark contrast to the helpless heroines Disney was known for portraying on screen, academics have predominantly read Disney's retelling as retrograde insofar as they emphasize the narrative's romantic facets and (re)position Belle's character in ways that are necessary for the advancement of the (Beast's) plot (Cummins 24; Jeffords 166). Although, as Cummins acknowledges, the fairytale genre in general may include romance, "Disney magnifies the romantic element of ... the tales [*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*]" (23). Consequently, the transformation of 'Beauty and the Beast' into a fully-fledged romance shifts the focus of the

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<sup>40</sup> Again, the Beast gifts Belle access to the library as a grand, romantic gesture. In the animated film, the Beast enticed by the fact that Belle enjoys reading; he shows her the library in the hopes that she will gain feelings of affection for him. In the live-action motion picture, though the Beast seems to admire Belle for her love of reading and spends time reading with her, the library still acts as a location in which the Beast becomes more attractive to Belle because he has access to a plethora of something she already loves: books.

story from Beauty (Belle) to the Beast; rather than exercising control over her relationship with the Beast, Belle is reduced to “the mechanism for solving the Beast’s ‘dilemma’” (Jeffords 167).<sup>41</sup> In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle is the beautiful woman who is the key to undoing the curse placed upon the Beast. Furthermore, Jeffords, Olson, and Craven each perceive Belle as an educator of civilized behavior for the Beast. Although Belle is positioned as the character who is to learn from the Beast how to love him despite his unconventionally attractive appearance, instead, she commits herself to molding the Beast into a respectable gentleman, teaching the Beast “to adopt the codes of white-western maledom” (Craven 133; see also Jeffords 168-169; Olson 470). Craven explains “it is [in fact] Beast who is advertised to be the possessor of ‘beauty’ and Belle must learn its nature, and Beast (actually the student of Belle’s improving influence) is positioned as moral instructor; Belle’s fate is his” (133). Ultimately, as Jeffords concludes, “the quality and continuity of *everyone’s* life ... depends upon ... white men” (172) and, for Belle, that white man is a beast. In general, intellectuals perceive Belle not as an empowered, feminist woman, but as a contributor to the sustainment of a society crafted by (and for) white, heterosexual, upper/middle-class men.

#### DISNEY’S BEAST: A VIOLENTLY, AGGRESSIVE, YET EMPATHETIC CREATURE

As tale type 425C, “Beauty and the Beast” is classified as folktale type “425: The Search for the Lost Husband” (Urban). More specifically, “further subdivided by [its] motif pattern...” (*The World Heritage Encyclopedia*) the letter “C” indicates the narrative includes “[a] girl [who]

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<sup>41</sup> This positioning of Belle in relation to the Beast is representative of a “pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 11). The “split between active/male and passive/female” (11) is presented to audiences; Belle is just a woman who is necessary to transform the Beast back into a man. Representing “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (11), Belle’s beauty usurps her intelligence and positions her as the perfect woman to release a prince from the spell he has been placed under.

promises herself as bride to the monster” (Urban). The grammar used by the ATU Tale Type Classification System reflects the centrality and narrative agency of Beauty across the fairytales surveyed: *she* searches for a lost husband, *she* promises herself as bride to a monster. In addition to shifting the narrative agency away from Belle and to the Beast, Disney’s adaptation also injects violence into the story in a manner that eroticizes Belle’s captivity and romanticizes the Beast’s brutality toward her. Injecting violence into a story with little to none initially present, Disney altered a tale once about a young maiden who falls for a kind and caring creature to one in which a girl named Belle becomes romantically involved with a Beast who, at first, is anything but nice to her.

It is necessary to reiterate, I am not claiming the written versions of “Beauty and the Beast” I read for this study are not heteropatriarchal. In the majority of the adaptations reviewed, Beauty is promised to be given to the beast by her father or, if he refuses/attempts to hide her, the beast appears at the house to retrieve her. In general, Beauty has no say in the matter, it is her father who chooses to supply her to the beast in exchange for his life.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Beauty is presented as a prisoner of the beast; she is forced to live with him and can only leave his palace if permitted by the beast. However, when living with the beast, he is nothing but kind to her. Often, the beast provides her with everything she could ever desire. Therefore, while Beauty is, essentially, imprisoned by a beast in most of the written versions reviewed, Disney’s Beast is initially violent towards Belle, isolates her from her father, and denies her of her basic needs, making him an actual monster in comparison to the beasts with which Beauty is forced to interact across the versions of the fairytale that I studied.

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<sup>42</sup> On occasion, Beauty is depicted as agreeing to be with the beast in order to save her father’s life (e.g. “Beauty and the Beast” (European) and “Rose” (Irish-American)). However, Beauty still does not exercise much choice in the matter, either her father dies or she sacrifices herself to ensure his safety.

In its transformation of the literary tale *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney stripped Beauty of her worth, situating her as a prisoner unworthy of being treated with respect. It is almost as if she can only be made into a sympathetic character through the Beast's cruel treatment of her. Though both Beauty and Belle agree to remain in the Beast's castle for the sake of their father, in the fairytale written by Madame Leprince de Beaumont, Beauty is treated with the utmost respect when living in the palace with the Beast. For illustration, the night after her father bid her farewell, Beauty sits down to eat dinner and Beast asks her if she would allow him to join her, assuring Beauty "you alone are mistress here; you need only bid me be gone, if my presence is troublesome, and I will immediately withdraw" (Leprince de Beaumont 9). Ensuring Beauty remains content and situating her as his equal, Beast states "...endeavor to amuse yourself in your palace; for everything here is yours, and I should be very uneasy if you were not happy" (Leprince de Beaumont 9). As a result of the care, kindness, and respect Beauty receives from Beast, she commits to marrying Beast. Hence, although initially obligated to remain with the Beast so her father would be pardoned for stealing a rose for her, Beauty ultimately chooses Beast as her lifelong companion because he has shown her nothing but gentleness and politeness.

Similar actions on the part of the beast occur in other written adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" as well. In nineteen of the twenty "Beauty and the Beast" tales I have reviewed, the beast treats the young maiden forced to live with him with the utmost respect, longing to win her affection through expressions of kindness and compassion. For example, in "Rose" (Irish-American), when Rose chooses to leave her father to ensure the lion whom he stole a rose from will spare his life,<sup>43</sup> the lion welcomes Rose with open arms and enables her to visit her father whenever she desires:

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned previously, in the majority of the written tales read, Rose does not have the option to save her father's life. Predominately, the father agrees to allow Rose to live with the beast. However, that being said, Rose

So she went to the palace. As she entered it seemed to her that everything which her eyes fell on seemed to say, 'Welcome, Beauty, here!' Even on her cup and saucer, and on every piece of furniture in her chamber were the words, 'Welcome, Beauty, here!'

She went out to find the lion, and said that she had come to ask him to forgive her father, and that the rose [he had taken] was for her. But the lion said he would not do it unless she would promise to be his wife. Her father was very dear to her, yet she did not like to marry a lion.

The lion gave her a beautiful gold ring, and told her that whenever she wanted to see her father she was to lay the ring on her table before going to sleep, and wish to see her father, and she would be at home in the morning. Her father was now getting old, and she grieved for him. At night she laid her ring on the table, at the same time making a wish that she would like to see her father. The next morning she found herself with her father, whom she found much changed. His hair had turned white from grief at the thought of losing his Rose, or having her marry the lion.

That night she laid her ring on the table, and wished herself back at the palace. The palace was more beautiful than before, and the table all ready. On every plate were the words, 'Welcome, Beauty, here!'

On the first morning she went out into the garden. The poor lion was lying very sick, and she looked at him. "Oh, I cannot bear to see my poor lion die; what am I to do?"

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still does not really have a choice: she can either let her father die or sacrifice her freedom to ensure her father lives. So, in order to save a father whom she loves, Rose elects to stay in the palace with the lion.

Finally, she said that she could not bear it any longer, and she called out, "I will be your wife."<sup>44</sup> (Ashliman)

In this case, the lion in no way holds the stealing of a rose committed by her father against Rose. Instead of blaming her for her father's actions, the lion ensures the environment Rose is entering is inviting and expresses his desire for her to be living with him. Moreover, understanding her need to visit her father, the lion provides Rose with a form of transportation to her father that can be utilized whenever Rose experiences the need to see him. Thus, not only does the lion ensure Rose feels wanted but also he acknowledges her needs. Ultimately, however, the lion is an example of a model husband in a patriarchal society; Rose is a woman provided with material comfort in exchange for marriage with the beast.

In a similar vein, the beast in "The Summer and Winter Garden" (Germany) endeavors to please the merchant's youngest daughter. Though the "large black beast" kidnaps the youngest daughter from her home, he ensures she is well taken care of:

The black beast carried the beautiful maiden to his castle where everything was beautiful and wonderful. Musicians were playing there, and below there was the garden, half summer and half winter, and the beast did everything to make her happy, fulfilling even her unspoken desires. They ate together, and she had to scoop up his food for him, for otherwise he would not have eaten. She was dear to the beast, and finally she grew very fond of him. (Ashliman)

Again, I am in no way condoning the actions of the beasts in these stories who would take away a person's freedom as retribution for the picking of a rose. Yet, it is important to highlight that

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<sup>44</sup> After having been given an ultimatum by the lion, the forgiveness of her father's wrongdoing in exchange for Rose's hand in marriage, Rose then experiences tension between loss and grief for her father and bereavement and sadness for a coercive suitor who allowed her to visit her ill father.

the captors in the written variations of “Beauty and the Beast” are able to earn the love of/agreement to marriage from the young maidens who find themselves living with them because they are not mean but welcoming, a characteristic which Disney chose to alter in favor of aggression. In each fairytale, while imprisoned by a beast, the affection of Beauty is gained through gentleness and consideration for the needs of another.

In stark contrast to Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s narrative and additional adaptations of “Beauty and the Beast,” Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* casts the Beast as a violent creature who must be tamed. In Disney’s animated retelling, from the outset, Beast is presented as a vain and selfish prince. The Beast’s cruel and disrespectful behavior is depicted in the beginnings of his relationship with Belle. For example, denying Belle of her basic human needs, Beast refuses to allow Belle to eat unless she dines *with* him and, while Beauty was given a mirror through which she could be shown her family, Belle is not provided with any form of connection to the outside world; instead, the Beast uses the enchanted mirror to surveil Belle when she is locked in her room. Moreover, Belle’s movement throughout the castle is restricted and, when she disobeys the Beast’s orders and explores the West Wing, the Beast reprimands her in a manner so frightening she runs away. Regrettably, Disney transformed the creature into an egotistical, hostile monster.

Undeniably entangled with romance, the Beast’s violent behavior toward Belle can be understood in terms of the erotic; presented as living happily ever after at the conclusion of the film, the female captive is clearly “swept off her feet” by the individual responsible for her imprisonment.<sup>45</sup> According to Franiuk and Scherr, “romance novels portray heterosexual

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<sup>45</sup> Though in the written versions of “Beauty and the Beast” read Beauty does either admit her love for the beast or agree to marry/commit the rest of her life to be spent by his side, the notion of a romance developing between Beauty and the beast is not emphasized. Beauty becomes attracted to the beast by sharing conversations with him and/or being provided an abundance of lovely material objects, not by being enticed with access to a grand library

romantic relationships as involving turmoil and conflict before the couple can live their happily ever-after” (16). Functioning in the same vein, in the animated *Beauty and the Beast*, a loving bond does not form between Belle and the Beast until after multiple instances of aggression are directed at Belle by the Beast for her “noncompliance.” However, the Beast’s violent behavior towards Belle is linked to his desire to woo the beautiful woman who has the potential to release the prince from the curse if he can “earn her love” (Trousdale & Wise 00:02:48-00:02:49). For example, before the Beast’s ferocious outburst in response to Belle’s refusal to dine with him, the Beast is shown attempting to, as instructed by Cogsworth (a servant to the Beast), “to be a gentleman” (Coates et al. 128; Trousdale & Wise 00:35:14-00:35:15). In this moment, “...the Beast responds well. He listens to these instructions rather than asserting his power” (Coates et al. 128). As a result, “the Beast’s violent behavior gets reformulated to merely uncouth or unknowing behaviour” (128). Furthermore, “the Beast [transforms] from threatening and frightening to romantic and enchanting” (128) because the root of his anger is his aspiration to garner Belle’s affection. Ultimately, though the Beast consistently engages in hostile conduct with, spies on, and prevents the free movement of Belle. Belle’s ultimate return to the castle to care for the Beast reifies an understanding of the Beast’s prior aggressiveness as an expression of his love, even though “love” is a euphemism for the instrumental function of Belle’s affection: to release him from the curse.

Unfortunately, as Olson proclaims, this insertion of aggression communicates differing levels of approval, as opposed to condemnation, of hostile behavior:

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and dancing with him in a luxurious ballroom. Moreover, the love that surfaces between Beauty and the beast in written versions of the narrative is never stated to be romantic, Beauty could simply care for the beast as a friend. However, in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, the love that develops between Beauty and the Beast is clearly depicted as “true,” romantic love.

[V]iolence in *Beauty and the Beast* codes heroes and villains and creates a hierarchy of social acceptability for violence ... [and, as a result,] problematic adult relationships are made meaningful and less threatening for inter-generational audiences, educating immature community members and reassuring adults that troubled romantic partnerships have meaning and merit the hope inspired by traditional, idealized romantic beliefs. (459-460)

Regrettably, this inclusion of aggressive conduct “in popular entertainment ... often performs a socially constructed function, by reiterating established power and positional relationships” (459). Therefore, Belle’s union with the Beast, who expresses antagonism toward her at first has the potential to communicate to younger viewers that the Beast exhibited acceptable behavior even when angry by the film’s end. Young and impressionable viewers may be persuaded to believe that a man can, and will, alter his conduct for true love. Ultimately, the message received is troubling because if children grow up with this understanding of romantic relationships in mind, it is difficult for them to (re)learn what a healthy partnership should look and feel like (Olson 476). In a broader sense, if one’s narrative repertoire predominately consists of fairytales, they may understand all (and only) men as prince charmings, even when their behavior is abusive and anything but enchanting.

## CONCLUSION

Reviewing the tale type along with various written versions of “Beauty and the Beast” allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the fairytale. Expanding upon the work of academics on Disney’s animated *Beauty and the Beast*, a feminist investigation into the patterns evident in a wider and older selection of versions of “Beauty and the Beast” provides the context

necessary to test Disney's claims that the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* the studio recently created is progressive. Regrettably, considering the live-action film is practically an exact replica of the animated movie, Disney's assertions fall short. Ultimately, the company decentered Beauty, presenting audiences with a narrative about the transformation of a beast into a man. Moreover, Walt Disney added a dose of violence to the relationship between Beauty and the Beast that is not present in multiple written adaptations of the fairytale, even as it presented him as a sympathetic character from the story's opening. Based on the regressive qualities of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* in comparison to earlier adaptations of the story, it is clear Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is not as progressive as Disney would like its audiences to believe.

### Chapter 3: Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, a Feminist and Not-So-Feminist Fairytale

As I sat in a movie theatre four years ago (a luxury we find ourselves separated from in the midst of a global pandemic) and watched the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* for the first of many times, I was both enchanted and enthralled all over again by the latest remake. I was floored by the subtle alterations to the “original” storyline, which I would come to track carefully. I walked away from the screening feeling that the film represented a modern day, progressive, all-inclusive feminism. The experience of watching the movie was a revelation for me: I could be a feminist *and* continue to adore Disney. Offering viewers an “updated” narrative, I and many other (post)feminist spectators could have their cake and eat it too.

In this chapter, I argue Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* should be recognized as a contradictory narrative of female empowerment entangled with colonial and patriarchal ideologies. Understanding this film as possessing both feminist *and* antifeminist aspects, I assess Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* through an ambivalent postfeminist lens. As a burgeoning feminist scholar, who grew up immersed in Disney fan culture, I use autoethnography to demonstrate how my perspective of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* has shifted from one of admiration to one of skepticism. Adopting a posture of critical reflexivity vis-à-vis my relationship to Disney allows me to emphasize the multifaceted character of popular culture texts, rather than frame *Beauty and the Beast* in terms of an either/or in relation to feminism.

Currently, existing academic assessments of the Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* position the film and Belle, in particular, as either primarily feminist or antifeminist. However, I believe there is value in allowing a motion picture to be understood as complex and contradictory in its cultural politics. According to Gill, “engaging with the contradictions of

media culture is an important part of being a feminist media scholar” (“Post-Postfeminism?” 622). Moreover, the author explains, “[o]ne of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions” (622). According to Banet-Weiser, feminist media critics can use the concept of postfeminism “*empirically* as a way of analysing popular culture ... call[ing] attention to postfeminism as a circulating set of ideas, images, and meanings” (Banet-Weiser et al. 5).

In chapter 2, I detailed the designated ATU tale type of the fairytale “Beauty and the Beast.” Utilizing the ATU tale type as context for my analysis, I contended that Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* shifts the focus of the narrative from Belle to the Beast. Furthermore, comparing Disney’s formula to that of twenty written variations as well as Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast,” I highlight how Disney introduced violence into a narrative that initially presented the beast as a creature who, though a captor, used kindness to win the heart of Beauty. In general, though Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* and multiple written adaptations of the tale are representative of the function of women as commodities traded from father to mate in a patriarchal society, Disney enhanced the sexism present. Via the positioning of the Beast as the victim of a cruel curse, viewers are encouraged to empathize with him. Regrettably, this conjured sympathy leads audiences to dismiss the Beast’s aggressive outbursts toward Belle and his servants and an understanding of Belle as not a prisoner but the woman needed to civilize and release the Beast from the spell placed upon him. With this foundation in place, I can now illustrate how the Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast* can be interpreted as both in support of feminist aspirations and in opposition to the goals of feminism.

## ONCE UPON A DISNEY FANDOM...

As a member of the Disney fan community, I occupy a unique position; immersed in Disney fandom, I possess a genuine understanding of what it means to be a fan of Disney. When I was a child, Disney princesses meant the world to me. I would watch Disney princess films, wide-eyed, witnessing each and every one meet a handsome prince, fall in love, and ride off into the sunset. I desired more than anything to be as beautiful as them and to fall in love with a handsome, male suitor who would inevitably sweep me off of my feet.

As a child, Disney princess wallpaper and decals adorned my bedroom walls. The comforter and sheets on my bed featured images of multiple Disney princesses and iconic objects from their films (e.g. Cinderella's glass slipper, the enchanted rose from *Beauty and the Beast*, etc.). I watched programming on a pink and purple princess television. I had costumes that resembled what was worn by the Disney princesses themselves in which I would play dress-up. As a child with pale, white skin, I could easily align myself with most of the princesses Disney crafted. Moreover, my naturally red hair led to the frequent comparison by those around me to the princess Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. Consistently positioned in relation to Disney princesses as a child vis-à-vis consumption, simulated embodiment, and comparison, my identity as a cis-woman remains forever tethered to the image of the Disney princess.

Saving money each year, my parents ensured my sister and I experienced a family vacation every summer. Resulting from my parents love for all things Disney, we traveled to Walt Disney World practically every summer for our annual getaway. Consequently, having visited Walt Disney World approximately fifteen times, I am acutely aware of the feelings associated with being encapsulated in this fantastical and enchanting *world*. Without fail, as my family approaches the entrance to Walt Disney World, we eagerly anticipate the experience of

existing inside the bubble. When employed in reference to Walt Disney World, the term “bubble” signifies a space that is separate from reality. More specifically, as detailed on the Disney blog *Living a Disney Life: Empty Nesting with Pixie Dust*, **“the Disney Bubble is the total immersion in the magic of Disney upon arrival at Walt Disney World”**

(greenlisa9989@yahoo.com; emphasis in original). According to the author, once one enters Walt Disney World, it is as if they are arriving at the one place in which the burdens of life do not (and cannot) exist:

You enter the Bubble and everything changes – the worries, the stresses, and cares of everything outside the Bubble disappear. The weight of adult responsibilities – mortgage, bills, car repairs, office politics, home maintenance, kids’ homework, activity schedules, and so on just lifts away. Once that weight is gone, you feel better, younger, lighter, and happier.

My family and I can attest to this. As our car crosses under the words “Walt Disney World” adorned to an archway that stretches across four lanes of roadway, we are welcomed by Mickey and Minnie Mouse; positioned on each side with arms outstretched and grinning from ear to ear, these mascots greet all who enter and remind visitors that only happiness exists here.

Traveling to Walt Disney World every other year and, eventually, every year from the time I was three years old combined with watching Disney films throughout the year, one could argue that I have been living within a Disney bubble crafted just for me (and my mom, dad, and sister).

For fans of Disney, Walt Disney World represents a euphoric utopia. Featuring its own hotels, shops, dining experiences, and theme parks, once guests enter into the bubble, there is no reason for them to ever leave the property. If one were to view a map of Walt Disney World,

they would see an almost circular stretch of land with prominent symbols such as the famous Epcot ball (i.e. Spaceship Earth) or the Tree of Life. However, while Epcot, Animal Kingdom, and Hollywood Studios are located fairly close to one another, there is one park that resides at the very top edge of Walt Disney World. Situated behind a manmade lagoon, the Magic Kingdom represents the most iconic and escapist recreation complex in Walt Disney World. Home to the renowned Cinderella Castle, as guests "...enter the park ... [they] follow a pathway of red-coloured bricks, like a red carpet" (Allen 34). Mimicking the environment of "a movie set," theme park goers find themselves in "a fantasy environment" (34). Although in the back of our minds we know this idyllic setting is not "real," it is the combination of dream and potential reality that reels us in; "[t]he Disney park does not simulate the 'real'; rather, it celebrates the *art of simulation*, the ability to construct fantasy worlds *as if* they are 'real'" (Allen 34). Allen notes that "[a]s visitors, we feel as if we *could* be in a 'real' place; but we are also aware that it is, after all, a fantasy" (34). In general, Disney relies on "that strange sense of being both bound up in and yet fully aware of the illusion being fashioned, of becoming, as it were, *hyperreal ourselves*" (Telotte 138)<sup>46</sup>. As soon as we step foot into this realm of magic and wonder, we are immediately entranced not by what is, but what could be.

The moment one steps foot into the Magic Kingdom, it is as if they are transported back in time. As you stroll down the middle of Main Street U.S.A., "[t]he 'toylike' charm of the

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<sup>46</sup> Jean Baudrillard is credited for "the concept of hyperreality" (Mambrol). For Baudrillard, "[t]he hyperreal is 'more than real': something fake and artificial comes to be more definitive of the real than the reality itself" ("Jean Baudrillard"). More specifically, "Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is closely linked to his idea of Simulacrum, which he defines as something which replaces reality with its representations" (Mambrol). Hence, "Baudrillard observes that the contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been replaced by false images, to such an extent that one cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal." Ultimately, the theme parks of Walt Disney World and Disneyland are textbook representations of hyperreality. According to Wallis, "...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal..." (qtd. in "Jean Baudrillard"). As an expanded version of Disneyland, this understanding of the theme park can easily be applied to Walt Disney World as well.

buildings ... combine[s] with their very real physical presence, as well as realistic period detail” (Allen 35). Though it can be acknowledged that a street such as this one only exists in the movies, that is precisely the point; here, film and reality merge into one (Salamone and Salamone 86). Since “most American children have their childhood shaped by Disney,” whether in the form of being taken to the actual theme parks or to a movie theater for a screening of a Disney movie, “Main Street U.S.A. transports us back to those early memories” (Salamone and Salamone 86). More importantly, however, Main Street U.S.A. engages in a whitewashing of the past. Fabricated to represent “small-town life at the end of the nineteenth century” (Allen 34), we become reminiscent of a time that never existed; “[f]rom the City Hall ... to the Ice Cream Shoppe and the City Square, everything is the way we wish we remembered it” (Salamone and Salamone 86). In a section of “a little handbook [created] for new [Disney] hires” reproduced by Korkis, a Disney Imagineer named John Hench explicates “the philosophy behind a Disney theme park”:

“What we create is a ‘Disney Realism,’ sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all of the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements. In fact we even go beyond realism in some cases to make a better show. Don’t forget, people are coming here to be entertained...it is a show, you know. We create a world they can escape to...to enjoy for a few brief moments...a world that is the way they would like to think it would be.”

In many ways, Main Street U.S.A. functions to ensure that the imagery “of a cleaner, more innocent, and better America is continually reinforced” (Salamone and Salamone 86). Salamone and Salamone note “[e]ach building, business, and square inch [of Main Street U.S.A.] is carefully planned to evoke sanitized memories of an America that never was but that many wish

would be again” (86). Therefore, the lore of the Magic Kingdom and Main Street U.S.A. is the physical presence of an American history that is free “of the messiness of real life” (86), and it is precisely this absence of reality that makes this place so magical.

Yet, simply because Walt Disney World offers an enclosed sphere within which an escape from our struggles and hardships is offered, this does not mean that the joyous experiences to be had there are fake. On the contrary, through the careful crafting of and companywide commitment to maintaining a fairytale world, park goers create memories that are not only dreamlike but also very real. When a parent takes a ride on Dumbo for the first time with their child and witnesses the joy on their face, the excitement a child experiences when meeting their favorite princess, or the butterflies felt while holding hands with a loved one as you watch fireworks explode just above Cinderella Castle, though the ride, princess, and fireworks each play a key role in the illusory nature of the theme park, the pleasurable emotions we have during these moments are ones that stick with us. For example, in a study conducted by McCarthy investigating the connection those living in Southern California have to Disneyland, it was discovered “[d]uring participant observation and interviews, [that] many recalled park trips to Disneyland as a child with siblings, parents and grandparents that instilled an attachment to Disneyland” (594). More specifically, the author notes “[c]ertain locations in the park hold individualized meaning, such as a bench that one woman reflects upon as the last place she laughed and smiled with her then cancer-stricken mother” (594). Resulting from the deeply personal ties that can arise from experiences had in Disney theme parks, these spaces exude magic because the meticulously crafted, blissful encounters ensure guests create lasting memories of happiness.

## KEEPING THE MAGIC ALIVE THROUGH CONSUMPTION AND AN ASSURANCE OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

Although a vacation to Walt Disney World and the intense feelings of delight the location evokes are fleeting, the sensations felt when present at the parks can be captured and preserved in the form of souvenirs. Whether in the form of a Mickey Mouse stuffed animal, a snow globe featuring three Hitchhiking Ghosts, or a mug with characters from the film *Alice in Wonderland*, these mementos are physical representations of one's love for and connection to the remarkable world that is Walt Disney. In a study concerning the online media consumption/engagement of fans, Sandvoss and Kearns notice that while fans have access to a broad spectrum of texts in relation to their particular fandom, fans pick and choose the texts which most align with their perspectives:

Strictly speaking, the personal, affective bond between fan and fan object is thus underscored by the construction of the fan object as a process of personalization as fans select between different texts to create fan objects that correspond with their expectations and experiences.

For Disney fans, in particular, the theme parks are reflective of aspects of films they adore watching come to life. McCarthy states “[m]any fans noted a greater identification and fondness for Disneyland the place, than Disney the media company, as a living and tangible manifestation of not only famous Disney film texts but also stories endogenous to the park” (594). Thus, via the act of selecting souvenirs reflective of one's unique, individual tastes, it is possible for fans to take pieces of their favorite fairytales home.

Capitalizing on American longing to be soothed, Disney has established itself as an entity capturing, bottling, and selling childhood innocence. In so doing, Disney can be understood as

contributing to “the kitschification of cultural memory in American culture” (Sturken 18). The term “kitsch” most often refers to “cheap things ... [made] without any cultural refinement or taste [and mass produced]” (19). According to Sturken, “[k]itsch was ... initially associated with a set of social factors that accompanied modernity: the rise of mass culture, the sense of alienation that accompanied the shift to industrialization and urbanization, and the widespread commodification of daily life” (19). With many Americans desiring an attainable diversion from their reality, a “sense of easy formulas and predictable emotional registers which form a kind of escapism is essential to ... [defining] kitsch” (19). More specifically, when understood in terms of tourism, “[m]emory kitsch ... [such as] Eiffel Tower key chains, Mount Rushmore spoon rests, and Tower of London dessert plates...” ensures we will never forget how we felt when traveling to an environment separate from our normal, everyday lives (20). As someone who owns various pieces of Disney memorabilia<sup>47</sup>, I can attest to the sentimental value tied to such objects; when you look at, feel, or use them, you are supplied with a moment of happiness because you are transported back/to, however fleetingly, a place that exists outside of the mundane. More importantly, however, Sturken notes how “[m]ost kitsch conveys a kind of deliberate and highly constructed innocence, one that dictates particular kinds of sentimental responses and emotional registers” (21). As Giroux and Pollock note “Disney’s theme parks function as important pedagogical sites for rendering a version of public memory ... and for articulating strategies of escapism and consumerism that reinforce an infantilized and utterly privatized notion of citizenship” (35). By extension, the souvenirs one leaves these magical

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<sup>47</sup> Some of the souvenirs I own and witness most people purchasing at Walt Disney World include Mickey/Minnie Mouse ears, stuffed animals, and T-shirts/sweatshirts featuring Disney’s Cinderella Castle or the Fab Five (i.e. Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto).

locations with ensure visions of America remain pleasurable, happy, and, above all, saturated in innocence.

Disneyland and Walt Disney World are physical manifestations of dreams. Each ride and themed land present feels as if it was plucked from fairytales that are all too familiar. However, no Disney theme park would be in existence today if it were not for the imagination and determination of a man named Walt Disney. On Main Street U.S.A., positioned just in front of Cinderella Castle, there is a statue of Walt Disney. With one hand outstretched, seemingly greeting guests as they enter and make their way toward Cinderella Castle, and the other intertwined with the one and only Mickey Mouse, this statue is a reminder to all who enter that the thrills you are experiencing would not be a reality if it were not for “One Man’s Dream.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as the Walt Disney Company stresses, Walt’s presence on Main Street U.S.A. emphasizes its “authenticity;” according to Philips, “in ... Disney promotional publications ... it is repeatedly claimed that Main Street, USA is based on Walt Disney’s boyhood memories of his home town Marceline” (31). However, despite these claims, the author acknowledges that “[t]he mellow glow of Main Street is ... rather more than Walt’s nostalgic memories of Marceline; its *mise-en-scène* is a mediation of a version of community that was already established in the popular American memory” (31). Dedicated to ensuring consumer comfort and upholding America’s “self-perception,” Main Street U.S.A. presents visitors with a “[s]anitized reality ... [an] image of America [as] being basic, wholesome” (Salamone and Salamone 87). Yet, “[t]hough the Disney Main Street ... is not the continuation of any recognizable geography or history but rather an idealized construction of a small-town America that never was” (Philips

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<sup>48</sup> Located in Hollywood Studios at Walt Disney World, there is a museum dedicated to Walt Disney called “Walt Disney: One Man’s Dream.” In this “gallery showcase[ing] ... [Walt Disney’s] life story from small-town America to Hollywood,” guests can “[e]xplore a treasure trove of one-of-a-kind sketches, photos, models, costumes, artwork and more” (“Walt Disney Presents”).

32), Walt Disney's presence on Main Street U.S.A. can be understood as a marker that enhances the reality of one's experience of the theme park. As a father who longed for a place which provided him with the opportunity to enjoy amusements with his children, Walt Disney transformed his dream into a reality. As a result, Walt Disney's presence reminds all who enter that not only within but also beyond this magical place, aspirations can come to fruition in a country understood as pure and wholesome.

#### DISNEY PRINCESSES: A GIRL'S FIRST TEACHERS

As previously highlight, when I was a child, Disney princesses meant the world to me. Therefore, whenever we traveled to Disney and I was able to meet the princesses or, rather, individuals playing the part of the princesses, in person, I became even more enamored with them. For me, princesses were one of my first teachers of how to practice femininity. Learning how to be "appropriately" feminine, I was educated by these ideal (in the patriarchal understanding) female characters on the importance of true (heterosexual) love, beauty, and silence. According to Griffin et al., "the ... depiction of women as somehow inferior and powerless ... has effects in the world outside of cinema" (870). Though when we are consuming films we may be oblivious to the direct impacts these depictions have on our expressions of self, "[m]ovies ... have a capacity to shape and influence the world ... in subtle and complex ways" (872). Hence, as Griffin et al. explain "[b]y representing versions of gendered practices films inevitably contribute to the circulation of gendered norms: this continued representation of women as silenced and inferior is therefore deeply problematic" (870).

For example, although seemingly headstrong and rebellious, "Ariel's voice is silenced and she sacrifices her curiosity to gain the love of a man" (Henke et al. 237). According to

O'Brien, released in 1989 during the Reagan administration, *The Little Mermaid* reflects a promotion of "conservatism and materialism in the 1980s" (170). The author notes Ariel is an embodiment of women's shifting views regarding their place in an "increasingly conservative society" (170). Initially desiring knowledge beyond her prescribed societal role, Ariel disobeys her father and gathers information about the off-limits human world (O'Brien 170). However, once in love with Prince Eric, Ariel assumes "a more traditional female role" (171). Giving her voice to Ursula in exchange for legs, Ariel is silenced and must use her physical appearance to gain Eric's affection. Ariel's legs reflect her acquiescence with the human standard of beauty; she transforms into "'woman as man wants her to be' rather than 'woman for herself'" (Sells 180). Embracing the conventional role of a woman, Ariel attempts to convince Eric to marry her by emphasizing her physical attributes (O'Brien 171). Murphy posits it is unnecessary for women to speak with men when forming relationships, they need only "seduce and serenade them into a male-female cultural order" (133). For women, possessing a voice is hazardous due to its contradiction of behaviors associated with "the 'perfect girl' or the true woman" (Henke et al. 237). According to Sells, Ariel's rejection of autonomy and selfhood combined with her silence perpetuates the notion that women can only achieve upward mobility in an androcentric, male dominant system if they forego selfhood and hold their tongue (180-181). Deliberately linking sexuality and love (Trites 147), Disney promotes physical appearances and silence as keys to accessing a man's heart. O'Brien states that "[o]nly after she embraces patriarchy does she secure Eric's love" (171). Living happily ever after, Ariel promotes retreating from intellectual ambitions in favor of silencing oneself in pursuit of marriage and the fulfillment of a conventional, heteropatriarchal role for women.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This paragraph is a combination of material I previously wrote in a paper during my undergraduate career entitled *Part of His World: A Feminist Examination of Hierarchy and Masculinity in The Little Mermaid*.

Throughout my life, I was provided with various access points to Disney culture and, more specifically, the princess subset of this fan community. From childhood on, I was provided with the means to closely identify with the princesses I saw on the television and movie screens before me and annually offered the chance to interact with those characters in real life on my family's vacations to Walt Disney World.

### *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*: THE REMEDY FOR A FEMINIST, DISNEY PRINCESS LOVER?

At the time Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* was released, I was a sophomore in college. Within my world at the time, the hype surrounding this motion picture was impossible to ignore. A remake of a fairytale popularized by Disney and starring Emma Watson—an actress well-known for promoting feminist principles both on-and-off the screen? Sign me up. I remember a classmate of mine, who was an older, nontraditional student, questioning why individuals of my generation were so anxious to see this film. Another student and I referenced nostalgia when addressing her inquiry. As Braun explains, “[a] sentimental yearning for some happy time from the past is what we call nostalgia.” Pierro et al. posit “nostalgic memories [in particular] carry an overall positive affective signature” (653). Moreover, linking “memory and consumption,” Dickinson notes “[b]oth ... are located in the places of everyday behavior ... [and] [t]hese places call on complex, intertextual relationships to trigger resources of memory, foster consumption and provide places for the bodily enactment of identity” (5). Hence, “memories and memory places are not just comforting responses to the fragmentation of postmodern consumer culture, they are an integral part of contemporary performances of identity” (5). For us, the animated *Beauty and the Beast* was attached to our childhood and linked

to a time of carefree spirit we longed to reclaim as young adults. For us, Disney was offering a change to recover the magic by (re)watching a “[t]ale as old as time” (Condon 01:24:51-01:24:54; Trousdale and Wise 00:57:56-00:57:58).

Yet, the significance of the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* is rooted in more than nostalgia. At least for myself, it is also inextricably tied to a feeling that I would describe as “feminist longing” or, a yearning for a beloved, outdated artefact to be (re)conceptualized as a progressive text<sup>50</sup>. Since the release of the animated *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991, Belle has been understood as a Disney princess who is a departure from the more typical, damsel-in-distress Disney princesses (Downey 188; Henke et al. 234, 238). Belle, unlike Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Ariel, has a choice in her destiny;<sup>51</sup> her conduct represents “a series of complex decisions about when to act, and when to care for someone, how to administer comfort, when to take matters into her own hands, [and] when to risk her personal safety” (Henke et al. 239). Stemming from this reputation and the strategic casting of Emma Watson as Belle, I understand the live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast* as a response to the demands of some Disney fans for a more progressive or even feminist heroine, who would also still stoke viewer nostalgia for the animated version.

As I entered into my junior year of undergrad, the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* acted as a crutch for me to lean on; this motion picture provided me with a sense of comfort at a time when I felt I was losing my true identity. Having no idea of the type of occupation I desired to

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<sup>50</sup> For me, a feminist is someone who advocates for justice for *all* people, especially members of the Black and Indigenous People of Color community and acknowledges and (attempts to) dismantle patriarchal, colonial societal systems and practices.

<sup>51</sup> In dominant understandings of postfeminism, as Gill explains, “female autonomy, agency and choice” are stressed as representations of equality (Banet-Weiser et al. 5). Rooted in “[a] grammar of individualism ... [t]he notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses” (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 153).

take part when it was time for me to attend college, I opted to begin my college career at a community college. I declared my major as Liberal Arts/Spanish. I chose this major because I had done well in and enjoyed participating in Spanish language learning courses throughout high school. However, after two years, I realized remaining dedicated to memorizing a language I did not speak would be difficult unless I was truly passionate about the career path continuing with this major would lead me on. Therefore, when I transferred to Rowan University, I changed my major to Communication Studies.

My choice to become a Communication Studies major was one of the best choices I have ever made. Growing up as a white, able-bodied, presumed heterosexual, Christian, and cisgender individual in an upper/middle class household, I lived an extremely sheltered life. As a result, I did not see the world for what it was. Gazing upon society with rose-colored glasses, I was completely unaware of the colonial and heteropatriarchal structures our society remains bound up in. Once I began my career as a Communication Studies major, I was introduced to the ideologies guiding dominant societal behaviors and enactments. The subject matter which intrigued me the most was gender. In my junior year of college, I was taught about gender. I was taught gender is a social construct; created and maintained via language and enactment, that it functions to categorize and control people.

Though I remain grateful for the information I received in college, once this occurred, essentially, my world flipped upside down; it was as if everything I that had been communicated (or left unstated) to me concerning identity and available avenues of self-expression was wrong or, at the very least, misguided. At this point in time, I began to seriously question who I was and what I stood for. Most specifically, I questioned my attachment to Disney. How could I possibly claim to be a supporter of women's rights *and* harbor a love for a company that has historically

and continually presented women in sexist ways? Nevertheless, simply because I gained this new outlook did not mean I could erase all of the Disney fandom instilled in and embraced by me prior to my revelation.

My junior year of college is when panic began to set in. I was losing myself and felt disconnected from an aspect of my life that had played a major role in the formation of my identity. At that time, I knew there was no way to completely erase Disney from my life. So, to combat my now conflicted feelings toward a company and my belief in its fantasy world, I focused my research efforts on Disney. I wrote a critique of Disney's depiction of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Hardman, "Part of His World"). Then, a friend and I created an Instagram account and blog as a project for a class in which we wrote evaluations of Disney princess films, primarily focusing on the traditional gender politics at play in each. However, I still remained conflicted about my relationship with Disney. Yes, I was utilizing my new found critical faculties to highlight the patriarchal tendencies of Disney princess films, but I was still unable to fully disconnect from the content with which I grew up. I was struggling because I wanted to be a feminist, but I could not surrender my love of Disney, no matter how unsupportive of women's rights they were.

In the second semester of my junior year, Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* promised to help me with my identity crisis. It would provide justification for my ongoing love and support of Walt Disney, even as I began to identify as a feminist. During the spring semester of 2018, I was enrolled in the courses Rhetorical Criticism and Images of Gender in Popular Culture. For Rhetorical Criticism, we were tasked with a semester long project to be completed in segments. This paper, composed of a Review of the Literature, Problem Statement, and Rhetorical Critique, acted as an introduction to crafting a comprehensive assessment of an

artifact of our choosing. Always searching for an excuse to research and analyze Disney texts, I chose to complete my project on Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. Though I had not entirely thought about what my main argument regarding the film would be, I knew I wanted to investigate the gender politics at play.

After submitting a literature review to my professor, he emailed me his comments on my work. I distinctly remember him questioning in his response to me whether I would discover through my analysis if the movie can be interpreted as emancipatory or constraining. Though my professor was in no way forcing me to assess the film as either feminist or antifeminist, I believe he was just attempting to help me see where this project could be taken in terms of research and analysis, his query influenced me to pick a side; again, reifying the notion that the motion picture I was planning on reviewing could only be representative of liberation or restraint. However, before I could decide for myself how I felt about this film, unanticipated circumstances occurred and our professor was forced to stop teaching our course. As a result, we were given a similar though different assignment to complete in order to pass the course. However, all was not lost. I was able to take this paper topic and expand upon it for the final paper assignment of Images of Gender in Popular Culture. For our final critical analysis paper, we were tasked with selecting an artifact in which the representations of gender presented could be assessed. Clinging to Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, I composed a piece claiming "...this version of *Beauty and the Beast* presents romance as emancipatory for women, challenging the notion that feminist women must be resigned to either embracing or rejecting conventional femininity" (Hardman, "His Beast, Her Feminist 1). Opting to focus on Belle and Disney's presentation of her as a truly feminist character, I read Belle just as Disney asked its viewers to understand Emma Watson's portrayal.

Below, I have included a semi-shortened version of the paper I wrote as an undergraduate assessing Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as feminist. Though written by me three years ago, I feel this paper is necessary to include because it is reflective of how I once interpreted and how others may understand Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as an empowering tale for women. Moreover, my undergraduate paper is a concrete example of the straightforward conclusions that are often arrived at when a text is assessed as either feminist or antifeminist. Unfortunately, it is these types of analyzes that ignore the contradictions apparent within the not only the text itself but also, potentially, the analysis as well. Staking claim in an either/or scenario can lead to opposing arguments and incongruities to be ignored. Therefore, in an effort to illustrate both how the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* can be interpreted as depicting a princess who is relevant *and* how sticking so closely to one side of an argument can lead to an unrecognition of the contradictions present within one's own argument as well as the text being analyzed:

#### Her Beast, His Feminist

Based upon Belle's physical appearance alone, her rejection of traditional femininity is clear. Although naturally beautiful, possessing delicate facial features, natural, long brown hair, and a lithe body, Belle does not attempt to enhance her appearance for the attraction of males. Unlike most of the women in the village, with curls piled on top of their heads and their faces made-up, Belle wears a minimal amount of makeup and styles her hair in a manner similar to the males, tied into a ponytail. Lacking a full, layered skirt and corset, Belle's light-weight skirt and simple bodice do not hinder her movement. Rejecting the constraints of hegemonic femininity, Belle's unrestrictive clothing reflects her desire to be physically active and her lack of aspiration

to alter the shape of her body for the male eye. Seemingly made of denim, Belle's bodice and skirt represent a toughness not associated with women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Especially when contrasted with the bright, pink, full dresses the village lasses, who are Belle's age, wear, the durable, yet wearable, denim fabric combined with varying shades of blue emphasizes Belle's presentation of qualities deemed masculine. Pushing even further beyond accepted standards of femininity, Belle's skirt is tucked at her waist, showcasing the bloomers she wears underneath. According to costume designer Jacqueline Durran, wearing bloomers is as close as a woman could get to wearing trousers in this time period without being deemed socially unacceptable (qtd. in Soo Hoo). In addition, Belle's skirt features pockets on the outside. Only visible on the clothing worn by males, Durran states that while it was common for women's dresses to contain pockets, the pockets were hidden underneath the dress (qtd. in Soo Hoo). According to Durran, resembling "a tool belt" (qtd. in Soo Hoo), Belle's pockets enable her to remain hands-free as she travels through the marketplace. In addition, Belle wears a form of work boot reminiscent of the shoes worn by young males. As the boys in the village are showcased marching up the staircase to the school, the camera zooms in on their brown, thick-soled, leather shoes. Immediately following, the camera zooms in on Belle's shoes, which are strikingly similar. This juxtaposition emphasizes Belle's adherence to an active "male" lifestyle. By choosing to reject the social construction of beauty placed upon females through her physical appearance, it is clear Belle's life does not revolve around the acquisition of attraction from the male population.

Simultaneously conforming to and rejecting aspects of femininity, Belle creates her own form of feminine empowerment. Admired for her natural beauty, Belle embodies the standard of beauty the women in the village, namely the village lasses, are taught to strive for. In their assessment of *The Hunger Games*, Dubrofsky and Ryalls "argue that Katniss's performance of

not-performing is what situates her as authentic and true (not willful or guileful) and, therefore, heroic.” According to the authors, resulting from the presentation of Katniss’s features as natural, individuals who attempt to change the characteristics of their body are understood as a departure from the accepted standard:

The value of not-performing and behaving in a natural-seeming manner is transposed onto the body in the film: altered bodies—bodies marked as surgically transformed or adorned with makeup and ornate clothing—are constructed as deviant, in opposition to Katniss’s natural, unaltered white femininity, dangerously entrenching notions of naturalized embodied feminine whiteness.

In Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle can also be identified as envied for “not performing” (Dubrofsky and Ryalls). For example, in the live-action motion picture, when Belle is making her way through town near the beginning of the movie, three women who appear to be Belle’s age are shown watching her. However, unlike Belle, these women are wearing large hats, nice dresses, and makeup covering their faces. Furthermore, an older woman who is standing with the young maidens gazes longingly at Belle and sings “Now it’s no wonder/That her name means ‘beauty’/Her looks have got no parallel” (Condon 00:07:43-00:07:49). Even Gaston claims when Le Fou notes the three maidens all dolled up desire him, unlike Belle, “A great hunter doesn’t waste his time on rabbits” (Condon 00:36:30-00:36:32). Similar to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, by not altering her features, Belle is understood as the epitome of white femininity.

However, even though the men, and women, perceive Belle’s beauty to be her most noteworthy asset, Belle rejects this notion. Unwilling to be defined by her appearance, Belle showcases her intelligence. Despite being marginalized for reading, rather than acting on their criticism and embracing her beauty over her intellect, Belle chooses to read in public for all of

the villagers to see. In addition, although Belle's favorite genre of book is romance, Belle's aspirations stretch far beyond marriage. Furthermore, Belle is an inventor; she does not allow her prescribed domestic role within the household to hinder her from pursuits rarely engaged in by women of that time. Although she accepts the responsibility placed upon females of doing the laundry, Belle reinvents this task. Unlike the other women in the village, shown washing each individual piece of clothing one by one, Belle uses her ingenuity to create a type of washing machine. Freeing herself to accomplish other tasks, Belle limits the constraints domestic labor has on her life.

Concerned for the well-being of the young women throughout her village, Belle begins teaching one young girl to read. Combining her intelligence and "innate" motherly instincts to empower another woman, Belle's embrace of feminine and masculine qualities threatens the entire village. Appalled by Belle's actions, the Headmaster and fellow villagers disassemble Belle's invention and dump her laundry onto the ground. Gaston, fearing a loss of control, is not only determined to negate Belle's embodiment of masculine qualities but also unwavering about forcing Belle into her "proper" feminine role through marriage. Claiming "the only children you [Belle] should concern yourself with are your own" (Condon 00:16:41-00:16:44) and insinuating if she does not marry him, Belle will ultimately become poor once her father passes away because no man will be there to take care of her, Gaston reinforces the notion that women should desire nothing more than to marry and bear children. Even though Belle enjoys losing herself in the romance narratives of her favorite books, she does not dream of marriage. Explicitly rejecting Gaston, Belle expresses her dreams of finding adventure and how "And for once it might be grand/To have someone understand/I want so much more/Than they've got planned" (Condon 00:18:32-00:18:49). Longing for a companion, Belle desires someone who loves her for who she

is. Although Belle wants to find a person with whom she can relate, she is unwilling to submit to male dominance and marry a man simply because others tell her that is what she is supposed to do. Combining aspects of masculinity and femininity, Belle represents a form of empowerment not typically associated with Disney princesses.

Throughout Belle and the Beast's relationship, Belle consistently exercises power over the Beast. Refusing to allow the Beast to force his will upon her, Belle does not submit to the Beast's aggressive behavior. When the Beast yells for her, pounding on Belle's door and demanding she join him for dinner, Belle claims, "I'd starve before I ever ate with you" (Condon 00:45:03-00:45:05). Although angering the Beast, Belle's assertiveness renders the Beast's dominance ineffectual. Ultimately, Belle is allowed to stay in her room and is later provided dinner without the Beast's presence. Finding Belle in the forbidden West Wing of the castle, the Beast screams at her for disobeying his orders. However, Belle will not allow the Beast to dictate her movements throughout the castle and promptly flees. Refusing to be treated disrespectfully, time and again Belle defies the Beast and he is powerless to stop her. Deciding that she is no longer willing to ensure the Beast's wrath, Belle flees the castle only to be attacked by wolves. The Beast taps into his beastly aspect in order to fight off the wolves and eventually drive them away. Although now suddenly able to leave unhindered by wolves or the Beast, who is now injured, Belle chooses to help the Beast back to the castle and tend to his wounds. Once back at the castle, the Beast attempts to blame Belle for his injuries, claiming he would not have had to protect Belle from wolves if she had not run from the castle. Yet, reminding the Beast that he is the reason she fled the castle because he yelled at her for being in the West Wing, Belle throws the blame directly back onto the Beast claiming "Well, you should learn to control your temper!" (Condon 01:03:35-1:03:37). Reduced to silence, the Beast is forced to accept the blame and take

responsibility for his actions. Even when Belle begins falling in love with the Beast, she continues to maintain her autonomy and independence. Only allowing the Beast to become close to her once he begins respecting her, Belle remains in control of the relationship. As the Beast and Belle are shown spending more and more time together, it is as if Belle is playing the masculine part to the Beast's feminine role. Even after the Beast tells Belle to leave and go save her father, Belle returns to the castle. Throughout the entire relationship, Belle chooses to either embrace or reject the Beast based on his respect for her. In the end, she chooses to love him, she could have easily left the castle and never returned, but her love for him, his companionship, and his acceptance of her are something of which Belle has dreamed.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, Gaston emerges as the true beast of this fairytale (Cummins 27; Jeffords 169-170; Olson 449, 453-454, 462-464, 475-476). He routinely uses violence and intimidation in his attempts to secure Belle as his bride. Egotistical, overly confident, assertive, muscular, and traditionally handsome, Gaston epitomizes hypermasculinity. Revered as a "manly man," Gaston wields an unquestionable power over the villagers; the men want to be him and the women want to be with him. Referring to women as "prey" (Condon 00:10:42), Gaston is unable to control his "innate" desire to hunt for a traditionally beautiful woman. Asserting "Belle is the most beautiful girl in the village. That makes her the best" (Condon 00:08:12-00:08-16), Gaston claims Belle as his ultimate prize. Viewing his acceptance of the village lasses, who are not as attractive as Belle but who pine for Gaston, as an insult to his "manliness", Gaston pursues Belle with an aggressive vigor. Acknowledging Belle's rejection to marriage, Gaston pretends to believe in the existence

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<sup>52</sup> Earlier in the film, Belle expresses her longing for a companion who comprehends that she desires a life filled with more than being reduced to a woman expected to not embrace her intelligence and bear children when she sings "And for once it might be grand/To have someone understand//I want so much more/Than they've got planned" (Condon 00:18:32-00:18:49). For Belle, the Beast becomes this person; he is someone who does not attempt to stifle her love for reading and, now, respects her for who she is.

of a beast in order to gain Maurice's, Belle's father's, blessing. However, when Maurice states "You [Gaston] will never marry my daughter" (Condon 01:02:42-01:02:45), Gaston removes Maurice from the equation. Tying Maurice, who he punched unconscious, to a tree in the woods, Gaston leaves Maurice to be eaten alive by wolves. Asserting his "manliness", Gaston proves he is more than willing to enact any means necessary in the pursuit of his "true love". Even though Maurice is saved and attempts to convince the villagers Gaston tried to have him killed, Gaston's intimidating presence causes Le Fou, the only witness of the event, to reluctantly back Gaston's word against Maurice's claim of wrongdoing. Fearing the consequences he will receive if he admits Gaston's barbarism, Le Fou reinforces the power Gaston holds over the entire village by succumbing to his authority. When Belle returns from the castle, she proves to the villagers that the Beast is real, emphasizing that he is kind and gentle. Realizing Belle has feelings for the Beast, Gaston claims that the Beast is a horrible creature who must be killed. Storming the castle as though he is hunting a literal animal, Gaston finds the Beast and shoots him in the back three times. Depicted as bestial, Gaston's determination to force Belle's submission reflects a masculine desire to dominate. Attempting to kill the two people Belle loves, similar to how a stalker isolates their victim, Gaston could not achieve a truly "macho" status unless the most physically attractive woman in his village was on his arm. Ultimately positioning Gaston as the real monster, this version of the fairytale communicates toxic masculinity is detrimental to society. (This is the end of the undergraduate student paper included).

As a junior in college, I longed to convince myself that Disney could be trusted and had the potential to improve upon the depictions of women in the stories it tells. For me, feminism was alive and well in Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. Presenting audiences with Emma Watson as Belle and adjusting the plot in minor, though significant, ways, Disney

convinced me it had finally given viewers a tale featuring a woman who was free from patriarchal, societal constraints.

Yet, taking a moment to reflect on the paper I wrote, having written this analysis as an undergraduate, I was unaware of the deeper meanings revealed by my assessments. For example, in the second to last paragraph, I highlight how in the film “Belle ... exercises power over the Beast” (92; Hardman, “Her Beast, His Feminist” 5). However, in the scenes that I provide in support of this argument, it is apparent an assertive heterosexual woman is presented to viewers as a woman who learns how to benefit from a man’s beastly character but also demands that he keep it in check. As a result, traditional feminine and masculine roles are being reinforced. That being said, however, I expect only individuals who possess an in-depth knowledge of conventional forms of femininity and masculinity would come to this conclusion. I feel it is safe to presume, the majority of viewers would interpret this moment as one in which the Beast risks his life to save Belle and, though Belle is appreciative of his choice of action, she is unwilling to allow him to remain blameless for not treating her with respect, screaming at her and causing her to flee the castle. Therefore, though this moment in the film is ultimately a reification of traditional masculine and feminine roles, for audiences such as myself as an undergraduate who are unaware of the intricacies of heteropatriarchal constructions of femininity and masculinity, there is room for Belle’s actions to be understood as a form of empowerment.

Now, I am not endorsing the analysis included from my time as an undergraduate as a thorough, end-all-be-all assessment of Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. I recognize how I discussed masculinity and femininity in strictly binary terms and, on at least one occasion as detailed above, the example I give of Belle asserting herself ultimately supports an understanding of the Beast and Belle as representing conventional feminine and masculine roles.

However, the inclusion of my earlier profeminist analysis of this film is meant to emphasize that, depending on the knowledge one possesses concerning a specific topic (e.g. feminism, patriarchy, etc.), a motion picture can be interpreted in a variety of complex ways. After all, no single definition of feminism exists. Therefore, a text considered to be in support of women's empowerment for some may be understood as a rejection of women's liberation for others. Even within my own writing, there exists a contradiction between how I interpreted a scene in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* and the underlying message it may actually be communicating. Yet, the recognition that this motion picture was initially interpreted by myself as feminist lays the foundation necessary to demonstrate that as one learns and grows, prior assessments can change to reflect a new understanding of a subject matter. Hence, the acknowledgement of a text as either/or in terms of feminism is reductionist because texts are complex manifestations that are continually evolving along with the audiences who consume them.

When dealing with a company as powerful and influential as Disney, the good has to be considered alongside the bad. Though the primary messages of this company's creations may be sending to consumers are supportive of heteropatriarchy, Disney is so deeply integrated within society that it is likely never going to disappear. Over the years, Disney has attempted to produce content that is more inclusive of people of color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community along with allowing its characters to have identities that move beyond the characteristics of a strict masculine/feminine binary. However, the corporation will not continue to push the boundaries unless encouraged and/or pressured to do so because, in so doing, the company risks losing an entire conservative fan base. Therefore, to ensure Disney and large corporations like it continue to make moves to reject the patriarchy, its attempts to curate content in support of

women's empowerment needs to be acknowledged along with the fact that Disney still has a long way to go before it can be completely understood as an advocate of women's liberation.

### *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: A WHITESTREAM FEMINIST'S DREAM?*

Before entering graduate school, I relied on a naive conception of feminism. In my undergraduate career, I was primarily taught about the white women who have been pioneers of the feminist movement throughout history (e.g. Alice Paul, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, etc.). It was not until I enrolled in a graduate course entitled Feminist Theories that I was taught about feminism from a women of color perspective. As I engaged with the work of academics like Arvin et al. and their article "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy" and the Combahee River Collective, reading "A Black Feminist Statement," I slowly began to realize my conception of feminism was flawed. Everything I knew about feminism was based on the principles of whitemstream feminism. Therefore, when the time in the semester came to craft a final research paper for the course, I decided to take a different approach when analyzing Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. This time, rather than claiming the film presents Belle as a liberated woman, I argued the "reimagining" of this motion picture presents a new generation of viewers with colonial ideals disguised as feminist principles:

#### *Beauty and the Beast: An Age-old Tale of Settler Colonialism, Heteropatriarchy, and Whitemstream Feminism*

It is important to recognize that the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* did not simply represent the same film to audiences. On the contrary, altering the plot and previous

characterizations ever so slightly, Disney offers viewers a contemporary “feminist” interpretation of an animated motion picture judged as promoting (post)feminist values. Casting Emma Watson as Belle, selecting Audra McDonald and Gugu Mbatha-Raw to be Madame de Garderobe and Plumette, “depicting” Lefou as gay, and ensuring Belle serves as an exemplary model of a princess who challenges hegemonic, heteronormative notions of femininity and encourages those around her to do so as well, Disney draws on the already formed conception of Belle as a feminist princess and appears to expand upon it. Furthermore, choosing women of color to play roles initially voiced by and depicted as white people and alluding to Le Fou’s “divergent” sexuality, Disney leads viewers to perceive the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as diverse and inclusive.

Though on the surface the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* seems to be promoting a society in which women, Black and Indigenous People of Color, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community are visible and valued, beneath the CGI and behind the dazzling costumes and breathtaking scenery lies a narrative that upholds colonial, patriarchal conceptions of the Black female body and female empowerment and re-marginalizes gay identity through the co-optation and deliberate indirect acknowledgement of it. A representation “of mainstream, or ‘whitestream’ feminism” (Grande, qtd. in Arvin et al. 10), the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* situates Belle’s liberated persona as the result of her continued choice to defy the expectations of and (eventual) control over her actions. Moreover, while Audra McDonald and Gugu Mbatha-Raw were each given prominent roles in the film, the characters they play are presented to viewers as objects for the majority of the movie. Reducing the bodies of the only prominent women of color in the film to literal objects, the settler colonial understanding of the Black body as needing to be controlled by and in service to the “superior” and “civilized” white body is

reinforced. Ultimately, despite the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* being presented and framed as a feminist film which is diverse and inclusive, this Disney motion picture reifies settler colonial, heteropatriarchal, and heteropaternalist conceptions of whiteness, the Black female body, gender, and sexuality.<sup>53</sup>

Servants bound to a castle ruled by a “selfish and unkind” (Condon 00:00:56-00:00:58) prince, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are representative of the Black female slave in Disney’s live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast*. In an attempt to diversify one of its most beloved fairytales, Disney cast Gugu Mbatha-Raw, the daughter of a Black father and Caucasian mother (“Gugu Mbatha-Raw Biography”), and Audra McDonald, a Black woman, to portray two characters in the film initially voiced by white women. Though Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are fairly prominent characters in the live-action motion picture, each acts as a servant to the white bourgeoisie. When the prince is transformed into a beast by an enchantress for his selfishness, everyone residing in the castle was also placed under the curse. Turned into objects reflective of their roles in service to the prince, Plumette is depicted as a feather duster and Madame de Garderobe is shown as a wardrobe for the majority of the film. Reduced to household items, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are *literal* possessions of the prince; their flesh rendered as commodities, they are responsible for serving the “Master” (Condon 00:00:58-00:01:00) of a grand palace. A master, it is important to note, whom is feared due to his ferocious outbursts. For illustration, once Belle is imprisoned in the castle, the Beast demands she vacate her room and have dinner with him. However, when Belle rejects his offer, Beast immediately becomes very angry. Hiding behind Lumière, Plumette remarks “Uh-oh. He’s

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<sup>53</sup> Though this film is set in France, I am strictly discussing the presentations in the film in relation to structures which function to support the superiority of white people in the United States. I am not familiar with the history of France in relation to settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, etc. Therefore, any claims made in this essay are in reference to notable facets of society in the United States.

losing it” (Condon 00:44:48-00:44:50). The swiftness of Plumette’s movement combined with her acknowledgment that the Beast’s composure is vanishing, in conjunction with the reactions of other characters to the Beast throughout the movie (e.g. Cogsworth is consistently frightened the Beast will think he is the cause of something he is unhappy with), indicates the Beast is more than willing to unleash his rage on those he deems inferior.

Comparable to a ruthless white slave owner, the Beast is positioned as the patriarch whom all are expected to obey. After Belle refuses to dine with Beast, he turns to his servants and declares “If she doesn’t eat with me...then she doesn’t eat at all” (Condon 00:45:11-00:45:14). Then, as the Beast storms off, he yells “Idiots!” (Condon 00:45:15) in reference to his servants who believed Beast could attempt to enchant Belle by having dinner with her since he must acquire the love of another (and fall in love with them in return) if the spell is to be broken. If the Beast is willing to allow a white woman to go without food, it seems fair to assume, if one of his servants disobeyed him, he would not hesitate to ensure they were punished for their disobedience. Thus, working on a large estate for a rich, white male, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are trapped in “[t]he dark side of the [modern/colonial] gender system” (Lugones 206). Situated in a patriarchal configuration, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are very much like slaves; their bodies Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Audra McDonald are portraying colonized women of color.

Though the other servant objects, who are portrayed by white actors, could be argued to be in the exact same position as Plumette and Madame de Garderobe, the difference between their positionings lies in the tasks they are responsible for completing. As a feather duster and wardrobe, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe perform more manual labor than Cogsworth, Lumière, Mrs. Potts, Chip, and Cadenza. In the film, Plumette is depicted cleaning entire rooms

by herself. First, when Belle is given a bedroom in the castle, it is clear by the amount of dust in the room it has not been occupied in quite a long time. However, swooping in and immediately beginning to dust the room, Plumette states, “Don’t worry. I’ll have this place spotless in no time” (Condon 00:33:57-00:34:00). Second, later on in the movie, when Belle and the Beast are beginning to fall in love with one another, a group of feather dusters are shown cleaning the entire ballroom on their own. Cogsworth, Lumière, Mrs. Potts, Chip, and Cadenza are never depicted participating in any form of strenuous manual labor. Primarily shown singing, dancing, or speaking with Belle, encouraging her to get to know the Beast, Plumette seems to be primarily (aside from the other feather dusters who appear in one scene) responsible for the cleaning of the castle.

Responsible for providing Belle with clothing throughout her stay in the castle, Madame de Garderobe does not have a particularly easy job either when it comes to serving Beast. Once Belle arrives, Madame de Garderobe is expected to be responsible for dressing her.<sup>54</sup> When Belle enters her bedroom and is introduced to Madame de Garderobe, she instantly pulls fabric from her drawers and crafts a ball gown for Belle to wear. Moreover, Belle changes outfits throughout the film while she is living in the Beast’s castle. Therefore, based on Madame de Garderobe’s initial crafting of a dress for Belle, the impression is given that she is from then on responsible for creating outfits for Belle to wear. Near the end of the movie, Madame de Garderobe takes the time to design and construct a beautiful yellow ball gown for Belle to wear for her iconic dance with the Beast. While Cogsworth, Lumière, Mrs. Potts, and Chip are shown helping the Beast

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<sup>54</sup> Similar to in *Gone with the Wind*, Madame de Garderobe is playing the role of the mammy. According to West, the depiction of the “[m]ammy, one of the most pervasive images of Black women, originated in the South during slavery” (459). More specifically, “[h]er primary role was domestic service, characterized by long hours of work with little or no financial compensation” (459). Though it is unclear as to whether the servants who work for the Beast are paid, Madame de Garderobe is consistently present and, though depicted as having trouble staying awake, there to dress Belle in the room Belle stays in while in the Beast’s castle.

prepare for his dance with Belle, they are presented as having constructed the outfit the Beast wears to dance in. The sewing of clothing is a difficult task to accomplish, and Madame de Garderobe is shown as bearing the sole responsibility for ensuring Belle has clothes to wear. In addition, Madame de Garderobe must ensure the clothing Belle wears will help to entice the Beast to fall in love with her.

Expected to complete the majority of the cleaning, guaranteeing the castle is an inviting environment for Belle and anticipated to craft a number of outfits from scratch for Belle to wear, assuring Belle's natural beauty is complimented, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are not understood as "fragile or weak" (Lugones 203). On the contrary, echoing the characterization of "nonwhite, colonized women ... as strong enough to do any sort of labor" (203), Plumette and Madame de Garderobe are required to complete tasks the white servants are not demanded to partake in. Only responsible for serving tea, giving advice, and providing entertainment, Cogsworth, Lumière, Mrs. Potts, and Chip reside firmly on "'the light side' of the colonial/modern gender system" (195). However, tasked with cleaning and sewing, Plumette and Madame de Garderobe reside on "[t]he dark side" (206); located "outside the scope of white bourgeois femininity" (204), Plumette and Madame de Garderobe, as women of color, are expected to perform difficult tasks Belle (and Mrs. Potts) are not.

Electing to "present" the character LeFou as gay, Disney appeared to be expanding upon its proclivity for characters to be heterosexual. Yet, while the decision to "challenge" heteropatriarchy seems representative of inclusivity, the portrayal of LeFou's sexuality aligns with the ideals of "'the light side' of the colonial/modern gender system" (Lugones 195). Hidden from view, the fact that LeFou is gay is practically undetectable. Though LeFou can be read as having a "more-or-less romantic infatuation" toward Gaston ("LeFou"), unless the viewer is

aware of Disney's choice to depict LeFou as gay and actively looking for subtle actions which allude to his sexuality,<sup>55</sup> there is only one moment in the film in which LeFou's attraction to men is blatant. At the end of the movie, many of the characters are shown gathered in the castle in celebration of the Beast and Belle's union. Dancing in the ballroom, LeFou is shown initially dancing with a partner who is a woman. However, in a scene, as Josh Gad, the actor who plays LeFou, notes, "*only three seconds*" long, LeFou switches dance partners and is depicted dancing with another man (Lawrence). A scene so brief it can easily be missed, Disney allows for the viewer to choose whether to acknowledge LeFou's apparent diversion from heterosexuality. If desired, those watching have room to interpret the scene as an "accidental" mis-partnering or ignore the scene and its implications altogether. Even Josh Gad himself notes in reference to the scene, "*We never put a spotlight on it. We never meant to put a spotlight on it*" (Lawrence). In addition, occurring in an instant in which the main, *heterosexual* romance of Belle and the Beast is being rejoiced, this scene is easily overshadowed. Yet, though the scene is a mere fleeting moment, it inevitably provoked controversy, "with some theatres even refusing to screen the film as a result" (Lawrence).<sup>56</sup> As Lawrence asserts, "the central narrative of the rest of the film is about a woman and a ... beast-man falling in love. [But] I guess if it's performatively heteronormative it's okay!" Ultimately, the lack of explicit presentations in the movie of LeFou as gay ensures traits and actions which stray from heterosexuality remain primarily invisible.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For example, when staring at his reflection in a mirror, before Gaston leaves to go speak with Belle, he comments to his reflection, "I'm not done with you yet" (Condon 00:16:19-00:16:20). Immediately following Gaston's statement, LeFou looks into the mirror and proclaims, "Me, neither" (Condon 00:16:23-00:16:24). Though brief, LeFou's remark can be interpreted as an indication of his romantic feelings for Gaston because, despite Gaston's infatuation with Belle, LeFou will continue to try to capture Gaston's attention.

<sup>56</sup> See an article written by Ashley Lee entitled "Alabama Theater Won't Screen 'Beauty and the Beast' Due to Josh Gad's Gay Character" from *The Hollywood Reporter*: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/alabama-theater-won-t-screen-beauty-beast-due-gay-character-982963>.

<sup>57</sup> Though in the animated *Beauty and the Beast*, "LeFou (which translates to 'the fool' in French) ... is Gaston's snide, accident-prone sidekick," in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, LeFou "...is much more intelligent, gentle, and down-to-earth..." ("LeFou"). However, in Disney's live-action feature, LeFou still functions as somewhat of a

Upholding heteropatriarchy, Disney's short "inclusive" moment in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* functions to (re)marginalize members of the LGBTQIA+ community by presenting a moment in which a man is dancing with another man that is easily overlooked and eclipsed by the camera redirecting the viewer's focus quickly to Belle and Beast.

At the conclusion of the film, Belle is portrayed as a white savior. Having fallen in love with the Beast, Belle played a major role in breaking the curse that had ensnared everyone in the castle. From the moment Belle wanders into the palace searching for her father, Lumière enthusiastically remarks, "But what if she is the one? The one who'll break the spell?" (Condon 00:27:34-00:27:37). From this moment on, Belle is understood by all who reside in the castle as the key to returning them to their human form. Throughout the film, it is made clear that all the servants, who have been transformed into objects, desire is to be human again. Despite catering to an ungrateful "master," the servants make no mention of longing to leave the castle or Beast. In fact, they blame themselves for his violent behavior; explaining to Belle that when Beast was a child and his mother passed away they did not intervene when "his cruel father took that sweet, innocent lad...and twisted him up to be just like him..." (Condon 01:04:09-01:04:15), the servants not only allow the Beast to treat them ruthlessly but also pity him, ashamed of themselves for what they "allowed" to happen.

Forever in debt to Beast, the servants encourage Belle to fall in love with a monster. However, as Beast begins to experience romantic feelings for Belle, his demeanor magically changes. Seemingly no longer engaging in aggressive behavior, his only desire is to earn Belle's

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comic foil to Gaston (though, the actions of/scenarios involving LeFou meant to be comedic from the animated movie are very much toned down in the live-action motion picture). Considering LeFou's role in the animated *Beauty and the Beast*, the fact that Disney claims LeFou is gay in the live-action movie could be reflective of media stereotypes of gay people as silly, superficial, comic, etc. For example, as Cooper notes, "...network television programs in recent years that have featured homosexual characters are typically predicated on their lighthearted travails in a heterosexual world" (513).

affection. Therefore, when Belle declares her love for Beast and causes the spell to be broken, she is praised for giving the objects back their status as humans *and* converting the Beast from self-centered and hostile to caring and respectful. Curtseying to Belle and commenting, “You saved our lives, *mademoiselle*” (Condon 01:56:40-01:56:41), Plumette explicitly thanks Belle for her “good deed.”

However, while Belle may have enabled the servants to become human again, this was not entirely to their benefit. After all, though they did not become household items permanently, they remain servants in a castle to a wealthy white man and, now, a wealthy white woman as well. Echoing the “freeing” of Black slaves in America, the servants are free from continuing to go through life as objects but they remain reliant on the Beast and his resources to live. Belle even states when asked by Beast if she could ever be content living in the castle with him, “Can anybody be happy if they aren’t free?” (Condon 01:28:14-01:28:16). Thus, while the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* has been “praised” (Benson 9) for “go[ing] to great lengths to demonstrate Belle’s agency in every part of the story...” (Gray), her pushback against patriarchal ideals of femininity (in terms of her intelligence and desire for other girls in her village to be educated) and choice to take care of and return to Beast after *he* permits her to leave the castle to confess her love to him and ultimately break the curse do not reflect an upliftment of all the women featured in the film. In fact, the “freedom” enjoyed by the romantic leads is premised on the unfreedom of their servants. Plumette and Madame de Garderobe, in particular, are not free. Yet, they can be interpreted as free because they are (seemingly) no longer forced to be of service to a patriarch who is cruel. Presenting Belle as responsible for “saving” the servants of the castle, she is understood as worthy of being praised for her denouncement of heteropatriarchy; but, an actual reflection of whitestream feminism, Belle’s actions combined with the appreciation she

receives at the end of the film promote a feminism ideally suited for “‘the light side’ of the colonial/modern gender system” (Lugones 195), one that allows white women to (somewhat) push back against heteropatriarchy as long as the well-to-do white woman ends up with the wealthy white man and the women of color remain forever indebted to and in service of their white superiors.

Unfortunately, though this film “was heralded as feminist” (Benson 11), it is not representative of a feminism that seeks to assure justice for anyone besides the white woman. Despite casting women of color to play characters originally voiced by white actresses, situating LeFou as a gay character, and altering the plot in ways that construct Belle as a self-governing princess who resists heteropatriarchal conceptions of (white) femininity and desires to uplift other women, this film falls short of accomplishing anything truly feminist. Reifying aspects of heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and whitestream feminism, the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* does more harm than good. Ultimately, if we are to move away from the structures which continue to oppress and objectify and stereotype Black and Indigenous People of Color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, we need to begin by questioning the media we are consuming and interpreting popular narratives for what they are as opposed to what white people long for them to be. Though it can be understood as diverse and inclusive, the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* is *not* a rejection of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy and *is* an example of whitestream feminist media.

Raised by parents who are obsessed with Disney, I was (unknowingly) exposed early on to the patriarchal ideals the company continuously aims to uphold. However, I realize now that the classification of Disney as simply patriarchal ignores the colonial roots from which the hegemonic standards of gender and class presented in films produced by the company stem. For

example, Cinderella is predominantly understood as the epitome of femininity; she is kindhearted and docile, has a slim figure, and is shown cleaning and attending to the demands of her stepmother and stepsisters. Yet, though Cinderella, and (white) princesses like her, have been criticized for embodying and portraying a version of femaleness constructed by (white) males, these presentations of femininity are rarely situated within an historical, racialized context and condemned for upholding and reifying colonial standards restricted to wealthy white women. Conforming to the thought processes of white feminism, assessments of (white) Disney Princesses have, though not explicitly, focused on the detriment these presentations of femininity can have on white women who choose to abide by them. But, if we were to present white Disney Princesses and the idealistic characteristics they promote as the result of colonizers positioning white women in opposition to women of color, we would be able to showcase how race intertwines with gender and how Disney reinforces a system that was forced upon and drastically altered the perceptions and “place of gender in precolonial societies” (Lugones, 2007, p. 202). (This is the end of the graduate paper included).

#### *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: AN EXAMPLE OF A COMPLEX, CONTRADICTIONARY TEXT*

As I have shown, throughout my career as an academic, my perspective of Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast* has shifted. Initially, I praised Disney for crafting a film that presented audiences with a powerful, feminist princess. Then, after having entered graduate school and being exposed to perspectives of feminism not focused on only the needs of white women, I understood the motion picture in a new light. Just last fall, I wrote a paper critiquing the whitemainstream feminism and colonial ideologies present in Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast*.

Yet, despite my more recent analysis of the movie, I still believe there is merit in acknowledging that Belle is a strong female protagonist. Though this film remains rooted in colonialism and much of Belle's feminism is rooted in her independence, Belle can still act as a viable role model for children. For me, it is not enough to claim a text is either feminist *or* antifeminist. In classifying texts as one or the other, contradictions and complexities are ignored.

My intentions with this analysis are not to give Disney a pass. It is true that the company needs to continue to work to improve upon its depiction of women in its films. However, being able to acknowledge the bad and the good presented in films like the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* enables viewers to both highlight the benefits of viewing a motion picture and acknowledge how the movie can be improved upon in terms of representation. Ultimately, texts, and humans, are contradictory. Rather than completely denying or advocating for a text or person depending on their depictions/behaviors, we should be willing to recognize the good in something or someone and allow that good to fuel a hope for potential change in areas that need to be amended. Overall, we are not seeing the whole text if we simplify it to this or that. In order to appreciate something for what it is worth, we need to embrace it for all of its contradictions and complexities. What is more, my story demonstrates how popular texts can be appealing and pleasurable, even as one engages with them critically. Perhaps this is what continuing to be a fan of Disney requires—not giving the corporation a pass or abandoning or disavowing one's childhood loves and identifications altogether—but rather, a willingness to critically consider, parse, discuss with other fans, and learn from a collective, dialogic practice of fandom as never settled.

### **Conclusion: Popular Cultural Texts As Both/And**

In this thesis, I have argued Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* cannot be strictly understood as a feminist or antifeminist text. Assessing an entity in this either/or manner fails to acknowledge the contradictions that may be at play. As previously stated, thus far, Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast* has both been hailed as presenting audiences with an empowered princess (Downey 188, 190-208; Henke et al. 234, 237-239, 241-242, 245-247) and criticized for the Beast's aggressive behavior (Coates et al. 123-131; Olson 449-454, 455-459, 462-476) and the positioning of Belle as a woman meant to propel the Beast's story forward (Craven 129, 131-133; Cummins 23-27; Jeffords 166-169). Therefore, to problematize the tendency to classify texts as either entirely feminist or utterly antifeminist, over the course of three chapters, I 1) introduced the Disney princess franchise and assessed how Disney encourages identification amongst consumers with its princesses through the purchasing of merchandise and an encouragement to embody in one's real life the characteristics of Disney princesses; 2) reviewed the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type classification and twenty written adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" to test the Disney corporation's branding of itself as providing a progressive version of an old tale, and, expanding on the work of scholars before me, determined Disney's shifting of the story's focus from Belle to the Beast (see Craven 129, 131-133; Cummins 23-27; and Jeffords 166-169) and the company's insertion of violence into a tale which aggression was practically nonexistent (see Coates et al. 123-131 and Olson 449-454, 455-459, 462-476) is in no way a more liberal take on "Beauty and the Beast"; and 3) demonstrated Disney's live action *Beauty and the Beast* can be understood as possessing both feminist and antifeminist qualities through an autoethnography highlighting my own shifting interpretations of the film since its release.

As a whole, this thesis provided an in-depth analysis of the gender politics of Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* to address the importance of acknowledging that popular culture texts are complex and cannot be reduced to an either/or binary opposition between progressive and retrograde. To consider a film such as Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast* as purely feminist or strictly antifeminist disregards the potential for contradictory messages to be communicated. Again, it is in the contradictory messages communicated by popular texts that we gain access to cultural contests over gender ideologies and values as those are unfolding in particular historical contexts. Moreover, an either/or framework reifies the notion that there is a universally agreed upon version of feminism, and it supports a narrow interpretive practice that discards those popular cultural texts that do not faithfully represent its purportedly universal criteria for what counts as feminist. Ultimately, The Walt Disney Company has global influence, and considering Disney's contradictions in relation to feminism provides space for Disney and its fans to be viewed not simply as supporters of colonialism and heteropatriarchy but as potential advocates of equity.

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