

“You may look like a bride, but you will never bring your family honor!”
Gender Roles and Gender Performativity in Disney’s Two *Mulan* Adaptations

Anja Hallamaa
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English
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
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Abstract

Disney films have a large audience to whom they convey various messages of gender. In the last decade, The Walt Disney Company has released several live-action retellings of their earlier animated films. Because they are so recent, the live-action films have not been academically studied as much as the original animated films. The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to analyze how female and male gender portrayals are represented in the Disney's animated film *Mulan* (1998) and its live-action retelling *Mulan* (2020). This thesis uses gender performativity theory as the theoretical background and qualitative content analysis as the method. The findings of the analysis indicate that the gender role portrayals of female characters in the live-action retelling have become more progressive, whereas the portrayals of male characters have either stayed the same or become more traditional. Overall, masculinity has a more prominent role in the retelling than in the original animated film.

Tiivistelmä:

Disney-elokuvilla on laaja yleisö, jolle kyseiset elokuvat antavat useanlaisia viestejä sukupuolesta. Viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana The Walt Disney Company on julkaissut useita näyteltyjä versioita, jotka perustuvat vanhoihin Disney-animaatioelokuviin, ja koska nämä elokuvat ovat vielä uusia, niitä ei ole tutkittu akateemisesti yhtä paljon kuin alkuperäisiä animaatioelokuvia, joihin ne perustuvat. Tämän kandidaatin tutkielman tavoite on analysoida, miten nais- ja mieshahmojen sukupuoliroolit kuvataan Disney-animaatioelokuvassa *Mulan* (1998) ja siihen perustuvassa näytellyssä versiossa *Mulan* (2020). Tämän tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys on sukupuolen performatiivisuusteoria, ja tutkimusmenetelmänä käytetään kvalitatiivista sisältöanalyysia. Analyysin tulokset osoittavat, että naishahmojen sukupuoliroolit ovat muuttuneet näytellyssä versiossa progressiivisiksi, kun taas mieshahmojen sukupuoliroolit ovat pysyneet joko samanlaisina tai muuttuneet perinteisemmiksi. Kaiken kaikkiaan maskuliinisuudesta on tullut merkittävämpi näytellyssä versiossa verrattuna alkuperäiseen animaatioelokuvaan.

1. Introduction

Disney films are considered cultural icons in the western world and are one of the most universally consumed entertainment media by children. Disney is most known for their animated films, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937, and to this day the company has produced animated films year after year. More recently, the company has begun to produce multiple retellings of their original animated films, with the most notable difference to the original ones being that they are either live acted or animated in a photorealistic way. In most cases, other major changes, such as plot changes or changes in the cast of characters, have been made in the live-action retellings when compared with the animated films that they are based on.

Disney films are indeed consumed by most children in the western world. For this reason, it is important to take note of what kind of messages the films convey to their large audience. This includes the assumptions and images of gender roles, femininity and masculinity that are represented through the characters in the films. For example, the earlier Disney films had very traditional portrayals of gender, giving children a very narrow image of it (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek, 2011), but more recent films give a wide range of gender portrayals to their audience (Hine, England, Lopreore, Horgan & Hartwell, 2018). This Thesis will examine two films produced by Walt Disney Pictures: the animated film *Mulan* released in 1998, and its live-action retelling of the same name released in 2020. The topic of focus in this thesis is gender roles and gender performativity and their portrayal in the two films. During the time gap of 22 years between the releases of the two films, the way the society views gender has changed. Thus, examining how this change is perceivable between the two films provides an interesting outlook on how children's media responds to societal changes. Additionally, the 2020 version of *Mulan* is still very new and so it has not been studied from the perspective of gender, unlike the older films produced by Disney, making it relevant material to study.

This thesis aims to give an answer to two research questions: 1) How are gender roles and gender portrayal represented in the two *Mulan* films? 2) How do the representations differ when compared to each other? The theoretical framework utilized in this thesis is gender performativity theory, which focuses on the construction of gender. Additionally, qualitative content analysis will be used as a research method to observe and analyze gender performativity of the characters in both films. Section 2 of this thesis will introduce the theoretical framework. It will be followed by section 3, where the previous research related to the topic will be discussed. Section 4 will introduce the research material and methods, whereas the analysis itself will be carried out in section 5. Lastly, section 6 will contain the discussion of the analysis and the conclusion of the thesis.

2. Gender studies and gender performativity theory

I will introduce my theoretical framework in this section. First, I will briefly introduce gender studies, after which I move on to explain Judith Butler's gender performativity theory.

2.1 Gender studies

Gender studies (sometimes called gender and women's studies) is an academic field that concentrates on analysing gender identity and representation of gender, with its history being rooted in trying to better the social and political position of women. As the topic of this thesis revolves around the concept of gender, an appropriate theoretical background is therefore found in gender studies.

The most fundamental question to gender studies is what is meant by the terms *sex* and *gender*. Throughout history there have been several differing theories on what these two terms mean. One of these theories understands gender as a biological 'fact' and is synonymous with a person's sex, making it pre-given and located in the physical body (Richardson & Robinson, 2015, p. 4). Another theory argues that although there are certain biological differences between females and males, women and men are social categories that are imposed on people by societies (Richardson & Robinson, 2016, p. 6). The latter theory, in other words, sees gender as something that is acquired, instead of being natural, unlike sex. More recent theories believe that sex, just like gender, is a socially constructed phenomenon, and that gender creates sex, not the other way around (Richardson & Robinson, 2015, pp. 7-8). Some postmodern theories, like Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, reason that gender is performatively enacted, that is, the performances in themselves produce gender rather than being expressions of it (Richardson & Robinson, 2015, pp.14-15).

In the following section, I will next explain the fundamentals of gender performativity theory, which Butler first introduced in an essay (Butler, 1988) and later expanded on in a book (Butler, 1999).

2.2 Gender performativity theory

According to Butler's (1988) theory, gender is "a public action and performative act", that is "not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual." (p. 526). In other words, one's gender exists in one's behavior, or in how one "performs" one's gender. This theory goes against many other theories on gender, which argue that certain kinds of acts are expressive of a gender identity; Butler considers the reality of gender existing

within these acts. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is a performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1999, p. 33).

As stated before, many gender theorists argue that gender is based on sex, which is often understood as primary sexual characteristics, something that is physically perceivable on the body. Butler, (1988) however, challenges this notion, stating that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (p. 523). Butler (1999) expands on the point by arguing that “it would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category” (, p. 11). Additionally, the system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed by dividing bodies into sexes that have so-called natural heterosexual positions toward each other (Butler, 1999, p. 524). Indeed, this means that the body, or one’s sex, exists as a part of the performative act of gender, perceived in a certain cultural context. To put it simply, Butler’s idea of gender as an act not only includes aspects such as how one speaks, walks, or interacts with other people, but also aspects that are present on the body, such as clothing and other physical features.

Butler also discusses how genders are publicly regulated in the society. The world compels people to perform their gender in a certain way, and there is a right and wrong way to perform gender (Butler, 1988, p. 528). When gender is performed right, the performer is provided with reassurance, whereas going against the regulations of what is an acceptable way to perform one’s gender “initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect” (Butler, 1988, p. 528), which makes the performing of gender socially compelled. This is done to maintain the illusion of gender within its binary frame of male and female, masculine and feminine (Butler, 1988).

It is important to note that when Butler uses the term performativity, they do not imply that the individual that performs gender is pretending or is an actor as a part of an elaborate play where one can say that what happens on stage is not real. What Butler means is that gender simply exists within the performance, and that the performance as a whole is gender itself.

3. Disney films and gender roles

This section will discuss the previous research related to gender roles in Disney films. Gender roles in Disney films, especially in the older ones, have been extensively studied before. However, it is important to note that studies comparing different adaptations of the same story have not been conducted that much, probably due to the Disney live-action retellings being a relatively recent phenomenon.

England et al. (2011) conducted a study to analyze the gender role portrayal of so-called Disney princesses and Disney princes. The study included films from 1937 to 2009. England et al. (2011) used coded content analysis to analyze the gender role portrayals of the so-called princess and prince characters based on a list of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. The results of the study showed that in earlier films like *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and the *Sleeping Beauty*, the gender roles of the characters were very traditional, whereas in the later films their portrayal became more flexible (England et al., 2011). However, the change from traditional gender portrayal to more flexible portrayal was not strictly linear, as both *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* had more traditionally masculine princes compared to earlier films (England et al., 2011). Also, England et al. (2011) claimed that the portrayals of the princesses of these said movies conveyed contradictory messages. An interesting detail to note was that a princess rarely took an active part in rescuing, and when they did, they were assisted by the prince of the film (England et al., 2011). Additionally, it was found that even though in the later films the female leads had more masculine characteristics, they were still portrayed as idealized feminine figures and had a romantic narrative with no exceptions (England et al., 2011).

A similar study to that of England et al. (2011) was conducted by Hine et al. (2018), who analyzed Disney films released between 2009 and 2016. Hine et al. (2018) used the same methods and found that both prince and princess characters' gender role portrayals were mostly androgynous, showing an equal amount of traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine characteristics. For example, the largely passive older princesses have been replaced by active and independent characters (Hine et al., 2018). A very notable point of interest regarding princesses was that some of the films, like *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2016), had princesses that completely lacked a romantic narrative (Hine et al., 2018). Prince characters, on the other hand, have become more sensitive, emotional and fearful (Hine et al., 2018). However, Hine et al. (2018) note that the portrayal of feminine characteristics by the prince characters may be motivated by the desire to demonize feminine characteristics.

Aho's (2019) bachelor's thesis on Disney's two *Beauty and the Beast* films offers one of the rarer examples of a study that compares an older animated Disney film's gender representation to its live-action retelling. Aho (2019) found that the portrayals of the three main characters of the films stayed mostly the same. However, Aho (2019) notes that the portrayal of the characters was already quite non-traditional for their time. The most major contrast between the two films' gender role portrayals were that certain characteristics of the characters were more pronounced in the live-action remake (Aho, 2019). Belle, for example, was changed to being an inventor, but she uses her skill to invent devices suitable for her role as a woman. An interesting change in the masculine behavior of Beast was that it was implied that his cold-heartedness and impatient behavior were symptoms of him being a victim of dominant masculinity (Aho, 2019). Gaston's hypermasculinity, on the other hand, was demonized in both films, but his negative attitudes were more pronounced in the remake (Aho, 2019). To conclude, previous research suggests that Disney films' portrayal of gender has become more flexible throughout the years and is likely to continue doing so in the future, though the progression will not be strictly linear from traditionality to flexibility and there might be some setbacks. Additionally, some films may convey contradictory messages about gender to their audience.

4. Research material and methods

This section introduces the research material and the methods used in the study.

4.1 The two *Mulan* films

This thesis discusses gender roles and gender performativity through a comparison of two Disney films. The first film, *Mulan*, is an animated musical released in 1998 that was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft. The second film, also called *Mulan*, is a retelling of the 1998 film. It was released in 2020 and also produced by Walt Disney Pictures, and it was directed by Niki Caro. Unlike the former, the latter is not only live-action but also more serious in tone and so it does not contain any musical numbers. For the sake of clarity, from this point on I will refer to the first film as “the animation” and to the second as “the live-action”. Next, I will explain the plot of the animated film and then quickly go through the differences when it comes to the characters between the two adaptations.

The first film begins with the imperial China of the Han Dynasty being invaded by the Huns, who are led by Shan Yu, as they breach the Great Wall. The Emperor is notified of this and he orders an army to be mobilized in order to defend China from the oncoming threat.

The scene then changes to Fa Mulan preparing for a meeting with the village matchmaker with the help of her mother and grandmother. After being deemed a disgrace by the matchmaker, Mulan returns home in shame. It is then that the Emperor’s councilman arrives at the village and orders that one man from each family is to join the imperial army. As Mulan has no brothers, it is her father’s, Fa Zhou’s duty to take his place in the army. However, Fa Zhou is a veteran afflicted with an injured leg and so Mulan pleads the councilman that her father is excused, for which she is scolded by both the councilman and her father. Determined to save her father, Mulan steals her father’s armor and draft information before leaving in the middle of the night.

Later, accompanied by Mushu the dragon, the Mulan arrives at the training camp. Mulan meets the other troops and Captain Li Shang who is instructed to train the new troops. She awkwardly introduces herself to the other troops as Ping while impersonating a man. The next morning Shang begins training the troops, who are neither skilled nor athletic, but with time they steadily improve and Mulan redeems herself by being the first soldier to conquer a task that was set to them by Shang on their first day.

After their training has ended, the troops venture through snowy mountains where they are attacked by the Huns. During the battle, Mulan shoots a cannon at the mountainside, which causes an avalanche that buries the Huns. However, she was injured during the fight and her gender is discovered when her wound is being treated. Shang is angered by her deception but spares her life. The troops leave to the Imperial City, leaving Mulan alone and miserable. It is then that she discovers that Shan Yu and some of the Huns have survived the avalanche and she rushes to the Imperial city to warn everyone.

In the Imperial City, the Huns attack and Shan Yu captures the Emperor. Mulan, Shang and a few of her fellow troops manage to rescue the Emperor and Mulan battles Shan Yu. Eventually she defeats the leader of the Huns. Afterwards the Emperor shows his deepest respect and gratitude to Mulan for her bravery and offers her a place in his council. Mulan, however, declines, and after accepting Shan Yu's sword and the Emperor's medallion as gifts she returns home to her family. Back home, Mulan presents her father with the gifts she was given but he casts them aside and embraces Mulan, telling her that having her as a daughter is the greatest honor of all. Later, Captain Shang visits Mulan and the two are implied to have romantic feelings for each other.

The story in the live-action version has very drastic changes overall, but I will not comment on them unless necessary in the analysis section. However, I will mention the differences present in the cast of characters. In this film the Huns led by Shan Yu have been replaced by the Rourans who are led by Böri Khan. Mushu the dragon, on the other hand, has been replaced by a phoenix. However, she is mostly a visual symbol of Mulan's ancestors and not a fully fledged character and thus will not be analyzed. Mulan's grandmother is replaced by a little sister character, whereas Captain Li Shang's character has been divided into two characters: Commander Tung, who acts as Mulan's mentor in the army, and Chen Honghui, a fellow recruit and so-called love interest of Mulan. Additionally, there is a completely new character, a witch named Xianniang, who at first aids the Rourans in invading China, but later helps Mulan and even sacrifices her life to save her.

4.2 Research methods

The method I will be utilizing in this thesis is qualitative content analysis that is carried out by observing how gender roles are performed by the characters in the films. Although quantitative content analysis has been mainly used in previous research when analyzing gender portrayal in Disney films, a qualitative approach was chosen so that smaller nuances can also be considered in the

analysis of the materials and also to give a deeper understanding of the portrayal of gender in the films.

The analysis was based on careful observation and making notes while watching the films. Additionally, the analysis was carried out in two steps, first by watching both films from start to end, and then separately going through the relevant scenes character by character in order to analyze each character's behavior in detail. Both will be analyzed separately and then compared with each other. It shall be noted that not only will I analyze the characters, but I will also give an idea what ideal gender roles are within the societies portrayed in the films throughout my analysis.

In my analysis I will consider several factors of the characters that contribute to how their gender is represented. These factors include aspects like appearance, personality traits and behavior. Throughout the analysis, I will additionally consider if these factors contribute to traditional femininity or traditional masculinity, and when looking at the factors together as a whole, I will consider how feminine, masculine or balanced the characters' gender roles are. A list of characteristics that are either traditionally masculine or feminine were used in an article by England et al., (2011). These characteristics were identified as traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine according to previous content analysis literature, and so they work as an adequate basis for what traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine characteristics are. For this reason, I will take them into account when observing the gender performances of the characters. The analysis, however, will not be limited to the characteristics listed below.

The traditionally feminine characteristics that England et al. (2011) listed in the article were: *tends to physical appearance*, adjusting it for the purpose of making it look better; *physically weak*, that is, not being able to succeed in something that takes physical strength; *submissive*, yields to authority, is humble; *shows emotion*, both positive and negative; *affectionate*, is loving; nurturing, caring for others; *sensitive*, in the sense of perception; *tentative*, in experimental manner; *helpful*, affording help, useful when assistance is needed; *troublesome*, causing trouble or disturbance; *fearful*, showing an instance of dread; *ashamed*, affected with shame; *collapses crying*; *described as physically attractive (feminine)*, describing the character's beauty; *asks for or accepts advice or help*; *victim*, subjected to torture by another.

The characteristics listed as traditionally masculine by England et al. (2011) were: *curious about princess*, exhibiting interest in the female lead; *wants to explore*, to search for or to investigate the unknown; *physically strong*, physical strength like hitting being shown; *assertive*, insistence upon a right or claim; *unemotional*, repression of emotion; *independent*, not depending on the authority of

another; *athletic*, physical activity like jumping or running; engaging in intellectual activity, including reading or showing the use of thought; *inspires fear*, causing someone to respond with fear; *brave*, courageous, or daring; *described as physically attractive (masculine)*, describing the character's handsomeness; *gives advice*, providing suggestions, recommendations or consultation; *leader*, one who leads or commands others.

There were two major characteristics that I noticed during the analysis that should be included in the list: a feminine characteristic of *gracefulness*, or elegant movement, and the masculine characteristic of *aggression*, or acting in a hostile or aggressive manner.

5. Analysis

In this section I will discuss how gender roles are portrayed in the two *Mulan* films. I will do this by first analyzing the films separately, covering male and female characters in separate sections. Naturally, the more prominent characters will be analyzed in greater detail than minor characters. The comparison and discussion of the findings will be presented in the next section.

5.1 Animated *Mulan* (1998)

This section contains the analysis of the original animation *Mulan* (1998). The analysis is split into two parts, starting with the analysis of the female characters which is followed by the analysis of the male characters.

5.1.1 Female characters

As one can assume from the title, Fa Mulan is the protagonist and the most prominent female character of the film. At the beginning of the film, Mulan is shown to be a clumsy teenage girl who does not seem to know how to act like a traditionally feminine woman. During the first song of the film, “Honor to Us All” the women of Mulan’s village sing about how a woman is valued in this society as they get her ready for her meeting with the matchmaker (Cook & Bancroft, 1998, at 0.05.55-0.08.44). The song mentions physical characteristics like having a tiny waist, looking soft and pale, and having a “great hairdo”, but also behavioral characteristics like being calm and obedient. Although Mulan fits the physical description of what a woman should be, she is far from being calm, obedient, or graceful. As the matchmaker later remarks, “You may look like a bride, but you will never bring your family honor!” (Bancroft & Cook, 1998, at 0.10.50-0.10.56). That is not to say that Mulan is not feminine at all. One of her strongest personality traits is how submissive she is. She feels strong shame about the fact that she cannot be the perfect daughter to her parents and is ready to risk her life for the most important male figure in her life, that is, her father. In the end, the most important reward she gets for her bravery is her father’s love and approval.

Not only does Mulan have difficulty fitting with the social norms of what a woman should be, but this is also the case when she must impersonate a man. Her “masculine” behavior comes off as comical and forced, mostly raising confused eyebrows from the other soldiers. Additionally, Mulan has no combat knowledge prior to joining the army, but through training, she learns to fight just like all the other soldiers.

Mulan seems to show a healthy balance of masculine and feminine characteristics, which the results of England et al. (2011) seem to agree on: of 208 gendered characteristics, 88 were masculine and 120 feminine. One interesting detail to note is that Mulan seems to always cause trouble when she attempts to tip the scale toward one of the extremes by pretending to be more stereotypically masculine or feminine than what comes off as natural for her. This makes her quite a diverse character, as it implies that one should not pretend to fit in with the traditional gender roles, but to be true not only to oneself, but to everyone around one.

Mulan's strength seems to be her wit: she is a problem-solver. The best example of this is her being the first soldier at the training camp who manages to achieve the seemingly impossible task of climbing on top of a wooden pole with metallic weights attached to both of her hands. She comes up with the idea of tying the weights together and uses them as a tool to climb up the pole. She also exhibits this strength of hers in the final fight with Shan Yu, where she disarms him with a fan, showing her skill and quick thinking.

It is not insignificant to note that Mulan is one of the first if not the first female Disney lead to take part in rescue behavior when she saved the Emperor from Shan Yu during the climax of the film. This was also noted by England et al. (2011): "The princes often performed the climactic rescue of the movie on their own, except in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*, in which the princess was in a position of power during the final rescue" (p. 561). However, Mulan was forced to share this triumph with the male lead, Li Shang.

The only other female characters that have names in the film are Fa Li, who is Mulan's mother, and Grandmother Fa. As both characters are only present in the very beginning and the end of the film, there is not much to say about them. Unlike Mulan, Li seems to fit in with the traditional gender role without difficulty and is upset with Mulan for not doing the same. Grandmother Fa, on the other hand, is mostly present for comic relief. She is, however, shown to be a caring person, as she prays for their ancestors to take care of Mulan, which is the only scene where her presence is not comical. Besides this, she does not seem to have other personality traits.

5.1.2 Male characters

The most prominent male character in the film is Mulan's love interest Li Shang. According to the study by England et al. (2011), of the 61 gendered behavioral characteristics depicted by Shang, 49 were coded as masculine and 12 as feminine. Unlike the other male Disney leads of the 1990's, whose masculine and feminine characteristics were balanced, Shang's masculinity clearly outweighs his femininity.

Shang is depicted as being very athletic and skilled in combat, which are both very stereotypically masculine traits. His personality also fits the masculine norms quite well: Shang is usually emotionally reserved, and apart from anger, seems to struggle with expressing emotion. This is especially evident near the end of the film, when, after saving China, Shang makes an attempt at expressing his adoration toward Mulan but ends up saying "you fight good" instead (Bancroft & Cook, 1998, at 1.14.57-1.14.59). Also, he is shown to view femininity as weakness: In the song "I'll Make a Man out of You", which seems to be the male equivalent of "Honor to Us All", he mocks the trainees for their lack of masculinity, singing: "Did they send me daughters, when I asked for sons?" (Bancroft & Cook, 0.36.12-0.39.25).

However, there is one significant aspect regarding Shang's gender performativity, and that is his implied romantic interest in Mulan while she still impersonates a man. Although it is later revealed to him that the one who he had feelings for was, in the end, a woman, the homosexual subtext from his part should still not be ignored. It is this part of his performance that breaks his perfect image of a stereotypical man.

The main antagonist of the film, Shan Yu, performs masculinity in its most dominating form: the Hun chieftain's physical appearance, with his gigantic, muscular body and glaring eyes signal to the viewer what a dangerous character he is. His actions only strengthen this image, as he is shown to be ruthless on a few occasions. An example of this is when he instructs two Chinese scouts to deliver the Emperor a message. After the two soldiers start running away, Shan Yu asks one of his archers: "How many men does it take to deliver a message?" to which the archer draws his bow and answers: "One." (Bancroft & Cook, 1998, at 0.25.43-0.25.49). Later, only one of the scouts return to the Emperor, implying that the other one was killed. Another instance of Shan Yu's ruthlessness is shown, when it is implied that he and his men have slaughtered a whole village of innocent civilians. However, in spite of all of these hypermasculine characteristics, it is implied that he sees women as equal to men. During the final confrontation between Shan Yu and the heroes, he originally battles against Li Shang. However, after Mulan arrives and reveals that it was her who caused the avalanche, which

wiped out the majority of his men, Shan Yu seemingly forgets all about Li Shang and concentrates on battling Mulan instead, acknowledging her skill and refusing to underestimate her.

Although Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, does not appear in the film except for the beginning and the end, he is still an important character as saving him from certain death is Mulan's primary motivation for joining the army. As a war veteran, he is implied to be a skilled fighter, however, due to his injured leg he has difficulty walking without a crutch. Though for the most of his screen time he is shown to be a gentle and caring father who treasures his daughter more than anything in the world, it is shown that he refuses to show weakness in the presence of people outside of his family: when he accepts his conscription from the Emperor's consul, he puts aside his crutch and walks up to him to accept it. Later, when Mulan confronts him about how he should not have to take part in the war, he lashes out to her, saying that she ought to learn her place, as he has learned his. It could be interpreted that Zhou's desire not to look weak stems from fear of being emasculated, as men showing weakness is traditionally thought to be shameful.

Yao, Ling, and Chien-Po are Mulan's fellow soldiers in the army. As the three always appear together as a group and they do not have character arcs separate of each other, it is best to analyze them as a single unit. The three characters' personalities are quite different from each other; Yao is aggressive and at the beginning antagonizes and threatens other characters, including Mulan. Ling, on the other hand, seems to be the comic relief of the group: he is physically weak and has a half-hearted personality, always having a joke ready for any situation. Finally, there is Chien-Po, who is a gentle and caring character, often trying to calm down Yao's temper. During the musical score "A Girl Worth Fighting For" (Bancroft & Cook, 1998, at X), the three men describe the kind of woman they want to marry after their service. The song shows trio's preference to traditional women: Yao's ideal is a physically attractive one, Ling's is one that appreciates traditional masculinity, and Chien-Po prefers a woman that will cook for him. However, the trio experiences character growth later in the film, when they come to respect Mulan's alternate version of womanhood, and when the trio participates in crossdressing as concubines in order to sneak into the palace to save the Emperor from the Huns. Although the crossdressing is probably meant to be comical, it also shows the trio's respect for Mulan as a woman and is a reference to how she had to spend a considerable amount of time presenting as male.

Mushu the dragon is the only non-human character that is worth analyzing because of his major part in the plot and the ability to speak. He acts as a sidekick and comic relief for Mulan for the majority of the film. His behavior is quite assertive and occasionally even aggressive, constantly pushing

Mulan to do certain things. Also, although Mulan is the one who disarms Shan Yu, it is Mushu who carries out the final blow by firing a rocket at him, which ultimately kills him. It could be interpreted that his part in the fight is only supportive, as the actual credit of disarming and defeating Shan Yu goes to Mulan. In other words, Mushu's gender portrayal is a mix of masculinity and femininity.

5.2 Live-action *Mulan* (2020)

This section contains the analysis of the live-action remake *Mulan* (2020). As was the case with the section concerning the animated film, the analysis of the male characters is preceded by the analysis of the female characters. Additionally, the order in which the characters are analyzed in this sections is the same as in the previous section.

5.2.1 Female characters

In the live-action version, a new narrative element is introduced, called *qi*, the life force that is found in all living things. Some people, including Mulan, are born with the skill of controlling *qi*, which makes them naturally skilled fighters. Additionally, in the society of the live-action, women are shunned if they have the talent for controlling *qi* and are even called witches for it. This is also the case for Mulan, whose usage of her talent as a child results in disapproval from the rest of the village. In this way, the film pronounces the gap between gender roles and explains that in this society, even if women have a natural talent for something that is thought of as masculine, women should still not utilize it.

Mulan's character has seen some major changes in the live-action. Although Mulan still struggles with not fitting in with the ideal image of what a woman should be, her masculine characteristics have been pronounced. In the army, when presenting as male, Mulan has no problems fitting in with the other soldiers. In fact, the only thing she struggles with is bathing, as this would reveal her true gender to everyone. One instance of Mulan acting in a very masculine manner is when she interacts for the first time with Chen Honghui. After falling on the ground Honghui offers her a hand, asking "need help, little man?" (Caro, 2020, at 0.29.43-0.29.44). Mulan slaps his hand away and threatens him, pointing him with her sword and says: "Touch me again and you'll taste the tip of my blade!" (Caro, 2020, at 0.29.48-0.29.51). The way she acts in this scene, being hostile and assertive of her independence, comes off as very natural, unlike in the animated version, where her masculine behavior was comical and obviously forced.

Mulan's strength being her quick wit has been completely erased in the live-action. Instead, it is replaced by her ability to control *qi*, which makes her a very agile and adept warrior from the beginning. For this reason, she does not struggle with the training after enlisting in the army. This, combined with her behavior in the army, makes her gender presentation much more masculine in comparison to the original animation.

Mulan does, however, still have some feminine characteristics. For the first half of the film, Mulan feels shame for her ability, as her father has taught her to hide it as best as she can. When she accidentally reveals her talent in controlling *qi* to the rest of the army, she panics. After everyone's reassurance, however, she becomes more confident and stops feeling ashamed.

A surprising change made in the live-action is the fact that Mulan's and Honghui's romantic feelings never reach any kind of conclusion, unlike in the animated version, where she and Shang were very heavily implied to be romantically interested in each other at the end of the film. Instead, the ending highlights her achievements and her father's pride in having her as a daughter.

An entirely new character addition to the remake is the witch Xinniangu. Similar to Mulan, Xinniangu has the innate ability to control *qi*. However, unlike Mulan, whose control of *qi* manifests in superior agility and strength, *qi* gives Xinniangu an additional ability to shapeshift into various animals. For this reason, Xinniangu is branded as a witch by the men of the film, demonizing her abilities that give her the upper hand in fights throughout the film. However, she takes insult in this term, and at one point, threatens the antagonist of the film, Böri Khan, and insists him to call her a warrior instead while gripping him from the neck. Indeed, her motivations throughout the film revolve around her desire to not be vilified for being a woman with power, and it is for this reason that she aids Böri Khan in attacking China for the most part of the film.

Later, however, Xinniangu's cold and powerful demeanor cracks, when she shows empathy towards Mulan for being in the same situation as her: Mulan, just like Xinniangu, is a woman who performs her gender wrong and is punished for it. Throughout the scene, Xinniangu's face is full of sorrow, showing that she, too, is capable of showing her vulnerable side.

An important detail in the live-action is that only female characters take the active role in rescuing other characters. Both Xinniangu and Mulan are the ones to do this, with Xinniangu sacrificing her life for Mulan by flying in front of an arrow shot by Böri Khan, and Mulan saving the Emperor by herself, without the need of a male love interest.

Aside from Mulan and Xinniang, the only other female characters in the film are Mulan's mother and sister. Mulan's mother remains largely unchanged from the animated version, whereas Mulan's sister, Hua Xiu, has been added to make a clear contrast with Mulan. Unlike Mulan, Xiu performs her gender right and is deemed so by the matchmaker, as Xiu reveals at the end of the film that she has been matched with a man. Her whole presence in the film, however, only exists to tell the viewer what Mulan should be like, but what she is not. In fact, the only moment where Xiu advances the plot in any way is when she is frightened by a spider during her and Mulan's meeting with the matchmaker. As a consequence of this, Mulan tries to rid of the spider, which leads to the meeting being a complete failure.

5.2.2 Male characters

The character of Li Shang has been divided into two separate characters that both embody one of his roles in the story. Of the two roles, the character of commander Tung takes the role of being Mulan's mentor in the army. Tung's gender performance seems to be similar to Shang's: he, like Shang, is a capable fighter and a man taking a role of leadership, as his title suggests. It is also he that advises Mulan to start using her *qi* after years of trying to hide it out of shame. However, as he is not the love interest of Mulan in this film, his most significant difference with Shang is that the implied homosexual subtext is missing. For this reason, his gender performance is even more traditional than that of Shang.

Chen Honghui's character, on the other hand, has almost nothing in common with Shang's. Whereas Shang was serious most of the time, Honghui is more light-hearted and jokes around constantly during his conversations with others. Despite the fact that he is supposed to be Mulan's love interest, his romantic interest in Mulan is much less explicit than Shang's ever was and he is not implied to have romantic interest in her before she reveals who she is, which erases the homosexual subtext that was present in the animation. The most romantic line from Honghui is right before Mulan returns to her home village, when he says: "I will see you again, Hua Mulan", (Caro, 2020, at 1.38.21-1.38.23). Apart from Honghui's interest in Mulan, the only other masculine trait he seems to have is his skill as a talented fighter. Though he lacks any traditionally feminine characteristics, that is not to say that his gender performance is very masculine, just that he lacks so much personality and has almost no relevance to the plot that his interest in the female lead and fighting capabilities are one of the only traits that he possesses overall.

Böri Khan, the live-action counterpart of Shan Yu, has seen some changes. Unlike Shan Yu, who seemed to have some level of respect towards women, Böri Khan has been made into a misogynist. There are two occasions that show this, the first being near the beginning when he calls Xinning a witch, which, within the society of the film, has been established as an insult. The other occasion is near the end, where, after Xinning has informed him that Mulan is coming to save the Emperor from him, he smirks and asks: “A girl?” (Caro, 2020, at 1.28.43-1.28.44). It is clear that he underestimates Mulan for being female, which ultimately leads to his demise.

Interestingly, even though he is portrayed in a more antagonistic way in this regard, Böri Khan’s other dominating masculine aspects have been toned down. For example, he is not nearly as ruthless as Shan Yu, as there are no instances of him being implied to slaughter innocent lives, whereas Shan Yu was implied to kill even children. His skin, however, is portrayed being full of battle scars, making him visually seem more dangerous.

Mulan’s father, just like in the animation, is mostly shown to be a gentle and caring father to his children. He even has to advise Mulan to hide her *qi* for her own safety, even as doing so visibly pains him. His love and caring are emphasized at the end of the film, when the imperial guard comes to visit Mulan. Zhou assumes that the guard has come to discipline Mulan and asserts that he will not let them do such a thing.

However, when his wife and Mulan suggest that Zhou would not take part in the war, as he is a war hero, he becomes aggressive, banging the table with his fist, and answers almost threateningly: “I am the father. It is my place to bring honor to our family on the battlefield. You are the daughter! Learn your place”, (Caro, 2020, at 0.21.08-0.21.19). Whereas in the animation this scene felt more assertive, Zhou’s behavior in this scene is much more aggressive.

As the remake has a more serious tone to it, the personalities of Yao and Ling are toned down, but the personalities of the two largely remain the same. Interestingly, Po (the remake counterpart of Chien Po) is the only one whose character has been changed radically: he is made into a more cowardly and naïve character, though his gentleness remains. A major change, however, is that the trio does not participate in crossdressing near the climax of the film, making their gender performativity more masculine than it was in the animation.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Due to the huge influence of the Walt Disney Company, it is important to take note of what kind of portrayal of gender their films have and what kind of messages of gender they convey to children. For these reasons, it was the aim of this thesis to examine how the gender portrayal in Disney films has changed in two decades through the analysis of two separate productions of the same story produced by the company.

The findings suggest that there has been a moderate shift in the gender portrayal of the female characters. The change in Mulan fitting more with traditionally masculine traits than feminine traits in the live-action version has been major, as her performance had a more balanced portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the original animation. Moreover, the inclusion of Xinniang in the remake is significant, as her presence in the film increases the amount of relevant female characters in the film from one to two, especially as she has a crucial role in the plot.

It should be considered, however, what kind of message the film gives to its young viewers, as the only two relevant female characters in the film have extraordinary abilities since birth. The film could be, whether intentionally or not, be signalling to viewers that only women and girls with extraordinary abilities are equal to men, whereas traditional and ordinary women and girls, like Mulan's sister Xiu, are not. This would mean that there is a clear contrast between the messages of the two films, as the message of the original animation was in support of gender equality, and that one's gender should not act as a barrier for what kind of things they can or cannot do.

Due to the fact that a romantic interest was only implied, Mulan's lack of explicit romantic conclusion in the story is not quite in accordance with other modern female Disney leads, such as Moana from *Moana* (2016) and Elsa from *Frozen* (2013). It is, however, notable, that the romantic subplot was de-emphasized in order to highlight how Mulan saved the whole empire and, in the end, brought honor to her family.

The gender portrayal of the male characters, on the other hand, remains largely the same or is even more traditionally masculine than what the portrayal was in the animation. For the most part, non-traditional portrayals of gender by male characters were omitted in the remake, as was the case with the erasure of homosexual subtext and crossdressing, or their masculine characteristics were more pronounced, as was the case with Mulan's father. The decision to portray Böri Khan as misogynistic when Shan Yu was not without doubt stems from the desire to make him appear more villainous to the audience, knowing that the audience might grow to dislike him more. This shows that the developers seem to understand that times have changed, and it has become more socially unacceptable

to be misogynistic in an explicit way. It is my belief that making him misogynistic while toning down his ruthlessness comes from the fact that experiencing misogyny is more relatable to the audience, and so it invokes negative emotions in the viewer.

Another matter to consider is how these kinds of films, where gender stereotypes are being challenged, usually center around women and how women can do traditionally masculine things. Men, on the other hand, are rarely shown to take part in traditionally feminine interests or behavior in children's fiction unless it is meant to be comical, as was the case with the animated *Mulan*, where Yang, Ling, and Chien-Po took part in crossdressing. One should also consider how heavily masculine the gender portrayal in the remake was and if the overall message of the film is tied in with the glorification of masculinity and the undermining of femininity. The effects of this kind of messaging could have major consequences in how children come to see gender behavior and what kind of behavior is valued more in society.

It should be noted that in the kind of analysis carried out in this thesis there is a possibility for multiple interpretations, and naturally, my own biases may remain unchecked. Also, the comparison of gender performances present in the two films at times proved to be challenging, as unlike with other live-action remakes, major plot and character changes were made to the 2020 *Mulan* adaptation. It is for these reasons that I encourage that the Disney live-action retellings be studied from the perspective of gender roles and performativity, and that both quantitative and qualitative research methods be used to get a better understanding of the phenomenon. Perhaps, it would even be beneficial to carry out a larger study regarding the live-action remakes to see if there are certain patterns in the changes in how gender is represented in comparison to the original animated films.

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