

The Feminine Hero: Does she exist?

An analysis of gender performance in Disney princess films.

In 1985 Christopher Vogler wrote the seven page memo *A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, which as the title suggests, condensed down Campbell's ideas into a simplified hero's journey, while working as a story consultant for Walt Disney Picture's. In this memo, Vogler suggested there is a distinct twelve-step formula for the journey a character must take in order to be considered the hero and for their story to be compelling, triggering Disney's Renaissance Period (1989-1999), as each film followed this formula and resulted in a huge increase in success of Disney's films, especially in their already popular animated princess adaptations. This essay will be focusing on these Princess adaptations; *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Beauty and The Beast* (1991), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016). The twelve steps to Vogler's hero's journey are:

'The hero is introduced in his ORDINARY WORLD where he receives the CALL. He reaches the INNERMOST CAVE where he endures the SUPREME ORDEAL. He SEIZES THE SWORD or the treasure and is pursued on the ROAD BACK to his world. He is RESURRECTED and transformed by his experience. He RETURNS to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or ELIXIR to benefit his world.' (Vogler, 1985:p7).

What imminently stands out upon first reading, is Vogler's use of only male pronouns, insinuating the hero in any story has to be male, making the hero's journey a masculine act. However, it is apparent that not all heroes in every story are male, the feminised word *heroine* is an obvious indicator of

this. When using the formula to determine the hero from each Disney princess film this essay is exploring, surprisingly the hero was always the female protagonist, with the exception of *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* in which no character follows the formula. Therefore, one could conclude Vogler's clear idea of what a hero is, implies that a hero needs to be masculine, possess masculine traits, or carry out masculine acts in order to be heroic, despite their gender. This theory is somewhat supported by Jack Halberstam (formerly Judith Halberstam) in his book *Female Masculinity*. Halberstam argues that 'heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies' (Halberstam, 2006:p1) using the example 'In *Goldeye* it is M who most convincingly performs masculinity, and she does so partly by exposing the sham of Bond's own performance' (Halberstam, 2006:p3). This suggests the character M would not have this dominance over Bond if she did not possess any masculine traits, leading to the conclusion that masculinity is associated with power, dominance, and heroism, whereas femininity is weak and submissive. Using this theory, a heroic character must have masculine traits in order to be able to carry out Vogler's hero's journey. To continue we must clearly outline what are masculine and what are feminine traits. In his essay *The Power of Femininity*, Yuka Mastagu suggests that within his modern Japanese culture 'If a language has gender variations, "women's language" is said to show speakers' softness, weakness, powerlessness, and politeness, while "men's language" is said to show speakers' assertiveness, strength, power, and directness' (Jones and Ono, 2008:p187). This idea of what is exclusively masculine and exclusively feminine traits is not foreign to a western culture and flows into male and female characters within western cinema. This universal description of what

it means to be feminine and what it means to be masculine will be used as reference throughout this essay to conclude when a character is being inherently feminine or inherently masculine.

When determining what strengths our female heroes from each of these films have, in order to commit their heroic act between the stages of 'supreme ordeal' to them 'seize[ing] the sword' (Vogler, 1985:p7), it was clear the one thing they all have in common is their ability to love being the main power source to their actions. At first thought, the assumption would be this love is primarily for their romantic interests, thus their main motivation being securing a husband or romantic partner, or eros love. However, Belle's love for Beast (*Beauty and The Beast*) is the only romantic arc. Belle's love for her father drives her to offer to take his place as Beast's prisoner; Anna's love for her sister, Elsa, (*Frozen*) drives her to jump in front of Hans' sword to protect Elsa, also saving herself as this true act of love thaws Anna's frozen heart; and Moana's love for her village (*Moana*) drives her to return the heart of Tefiti despite the dangers of the sea, which are all examples of phillia love. Srećko Horvat discusses the role of love in a hypersexualised world in his book *The Radicality of Love* arguing that 'It shouldn't surprise us so much that love is missing in the hypersexualised universe of the West, what is striking is that it has no real place' (Horvat, 2016:p8). However, one may disagree as love is commonly the driving force of these Disney princess films and the female protagonists' main motivation, whether it be love for a partner, love for family, or love for a Kingdom, thus has no hypersexualised undertones. Upon further inspection, all these heroic acts of love are self-sacrificial. Søren Kierkegaard explores Christian

concepts of love in *Works of Love*, originally published in 1847, arguing 'this is the highest that can be said of any human being: one is sacrificed' (Kierkegaard, 1946:p310-11), clearly relating back to the self-sacrifices Jesus made, or *agape* love, which is described as by The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (TIEP) as 'the paternal love of God for man and of man for God but is extended to include a brotherly love for all humanity...it seeks a perfect kind of love that is at once a fondness, a transcending of the particular, and a passion without the necessity of reciprocity.' (Philosophy of Love, 2020). A sacrificial act is a *powerful* act of love by Kierkegaard's theory, as it circles back to a deity and therefore is a more *powerful* type of love than *eros*, or even *philia*. However, can these acts of love be seen as feminine if this is where it can originate to? In Vogler's male dominated hero's journey the second stage *Call to Adventure*, is where the hero's motivation or end goal is established, as he is 'presented with a problem, a challenge, or adventure' (Vogler, 1985:p4). This has little implication of any type of love being a driving force for the hero to undertake these challenges, thus must have something else motivating him. There is brief mention of a romantic interest in the ninth step of *Seizing the Sword*. Vogler explains that 'the hero may also be reconciled with a woman. Often she is the treasure he's come to win or rescue, and there is often a love scene or sacred marriage at this point.' (Vogler, 1985:p6). In this masculine hero's journey the female love interest is primarily the side mission if present at all. Thus, love does not play as important of a role in the masculine hero arc and is seen more as a trophy or reward of completing the journey successfully, thus aligns with Hovart's theory of a hypersexualised world. Whereas our feminine Disney princess heroes are all motivated by

love, which one could conclude, alongside the lack of love being present in the masculine hero, that an act of love is inherently feminine, thus feminine traits can make a character *strong* and *powerful*. However, when the motivation and only goal for our female protagonist is to find eros love, despite love being their universal strength, their character becomes weak and passive, relating to the feminine traits of *softness* and *powerlessness*. Snow White's only motivation was to find a husband and be motherly to the Dwarfs and woodland creatures. One could argue she as a character has no redeemable qualities and needs someone to save her, which will be further discussed later in this essay.

There is a certain trope that comes to mind when one thinks of these Disney princess films, and that is the act of falling in love happening extremely quickly. In *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* our introduction to our Princess protagonist is her singing that she is 'wishing for love', when coincidentally a Prince shows up and sings to her 'One heart tenderly beating, one love that has possessed me' (*Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, 1937), after seemingly falling in love with her upon first glance, and the feeling being clearly mutual as the next time they meet at the end of the film she graciously falls into his arms as he carries her back to his castle. This type of love could be a form of eros. TIEP defines this as 'The term *eros* is used to refer to that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something; it is often referred to as a sexual desire, hence the modern notion of "erotic"' (Philosophy of Love, 2020). It is clear both The Prince and Snow White have this passion and desire for each other, as they fall in love at first glance, thus this love they have for each other may be true, despite

happening instantly, as it has been validated by many philosophical thinkers. However, Horvat somewhat argues against this by describing the act of falling in love, explaining 'This is the true meaning of "falling in love." We take the risk, whatever the consequences might be. Even if we are aware that this fatal encounter will change the very coordinates of our daily lives, we insist on it precisely because of that. What else is there to be done?' (Horvat, 2016:p13). This implies when one truly falls in love, it's far more than a superficial eros love and a risk needs to be taken in order to prove an agape or philla love. Snow White takes no risks in order to be acquainted with her Prince, and the change to her daily life is in consequence of running away from her wicked stepmother, therefore this love both the Prince and Snow White feel cannot be seen as a motivation for a heroic act. However, this hastiness to fall in love and find a husband has been parodied and even mocked in more current versions of these films, as the idea of what a princess is and what their purpose is has progressed from marrying being the only goal, to objections with much higher stakes. Hans and Anna in the film *Frozen* (2013) meet for the first time, sing a love song, and get engaged all in the same evening. As previous examples would suggest, this notion of falling in love very quickly is almost cannon with these films, however when she asks her sister and new Queen, Elsa, for her blessing, she refuses as she believes it can not be true love if they have only just met, as well as other characters scoffing at their fast engagement. The negative impact of this comes to light when Anna needs to be saved by an act of true love to thaw her frozen heart, and thus save her life. Obviously, Anna's first thought is for Hans to kiss her as an act of eros love, which is when the big twist of the film is revealed and Hans' plan to take over the Kingdom by originally marrying

Anna, which has now changed to just allowing both sisters to die so he can take over by force or allowing the traditional patriarchy to take over. However, when Hans takes out his sword to finish off Elsa, as she collapses to the floor distraught believing Anna, her sister, has died, Anna jumps in front of Elsa to block the sword. This is not only a self-sacrificial act of agape love, as Kierkegaard suggests, but also taking a risk with possibility fatal flaws as Horvat theorises. This one act leads to thawing her heart, saving Elsa from Hans' sword, and saving the kingdom from an eternal winter, proving how *powerful* this one feminine act of love is. Being sisters and heirs to their Kingdom, Anna and Elsa have known and each other their entire lives, therefore had *philia* love for each other and their Kingdom. TIEP defines *philia* as 'a fondness and appreciation of the other. For the Greeks, the term *philia* incorporated not just friendship, but also loyalties to family and *polis*-one's political community, job, or discipline' (Philosophy of Love, 2020), thus this love is far stronger than any eros love. Cordelia Fine argues in her book *Delusions of Gender* that 'The princess genre offers lessons in how to achieve what old-school feminists refer to in tight-lipped fashion as the traditional feminine ideal, that is, how to be pretty, caring and catch a husband' (Fine, 2011:p220), which certainly is true for Disney's earlier princess films, such as Snow White, whom are passive characters, rarely making decisions for themselves and main goals are finding a husband who they love and who loves them. However, during the Renaissance Period and with the more modern films, these princesses have main goals which have much more importance or higher stakes, with the finding of the husband happening as a coincidence of the hero's journey. *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2016) prove this outdated trope with Anna and Hans' relationship

constantly being questioned, and Moana and Elsa having no romantic interest at all.

If we take Mastagu's ideas of what is the feminine, the first Disney princess that comes to mind, is the first, Snow White from *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Despite being our protagonist, Snow White is *powerless* as she is passive throughout the film, everything happens to her and she accepts all these misfortunes, instead of taking action against them. This is clear from the very start of the film, before we even meet our protagonist she is described as 'the lovely little princess' (*Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, 1937), this use of these rather patronising descriptors already make Snow White appear as vulnerable, and gives her a *softness*, highlighting her as a very feminine character. She does not even find the Dwarf's house herself; she is lead to it by the woodland creatures she encounters after crying helplessly on the forest floor she was forced to hide in. When attempting to find a redeemable quality to Snow White's femininity, one could argue that she has an inherited motherly quality, tending to the Dwarf's domestic needs as if they were her children, and nurturing animals throughout the film. In her book *Delusions of Gender*, Cordelia Fine argues 'It is an empirical fact that children are born into an environment in which it is overwhelmingly women to service the child's - and family's - needs. Rare indeed are the children who see their father do more domestic labour than their mother' (Fine, 2011:p217). This is clearly reflected in all of these films, each of these princesses are seen as motherly in various ways at least once per film by nurturing animals or people even more vulnerable than them, despite never having children of their own. Snow White's only strength is her

status as a domestic Goddess, cleaning, cooking soups and pies for the Dwarf's, despite them being adults it is still a woman's responsibility to look after their domestic needs, as well as be pleasing to look at as a bonus. This could be considered Snow White's main, possibly only, strength allowing her femininity to be a strong, positive trait. However, this motherly nature and need to nurture makes Snow White naive to the dangers around her. When Snow White is alone while the Dwarfs are out digging for gems at their manual labour job, her wicked stepmother disguises herself as an old crone to give her the poisoned apple. Even the woodland creatures Snow White has been mothering can sense the danger in the crone and attack her to protect Snow White, which she is simply incapable of doing herself and nurtures the crone after her request to 'take me into the house, let me rest, a glass of water, please' (Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs, 1937). Snow White needing to take shelter in someone else's house, being tricked so easily by her stepmother, and needing to be saved by a Prince's kiss who is absent throughout nearly the entire film, is proof she cannot defend for herself and needs to be saved by a man. The huntsman saves her from the stepmother's plan to kill her, the Dwarfs save her from the forest and kill the stepmother, and the prince saves her from her own death. All Snow White's character traits are inherently feminine, she is *soft* and *polite*, her only strengths are emotionally and domestically caring for others. However, she is a weak, passive character, which does imply that femininity, when it is the only form of gender performance in a character, is weak and thus a hero in a story cannot be completely feminine as they become a character without strength. However, this film was created in 1937, just before the second feminist movement. The *soft*, *polite*, *weak* characteristics of Snow White

would have been seen as a *strong* woman as it was still implemented heavily in society that a man is the breadwinner and the woman is the home-maker. This idea is even reflected in the way the film was made as depicted in Disney's own documentary *How Walt Disney Cartoons are Made* in which only men are ever seen working on the film, except when 'hundreds of pretty girls in a comfortable building all on their own well lighted air conditioned throughout, colour the drawings' (How Walt Disney Cartoons are Made, 1938). The men are the people who worked on all the creative aspects, from scripting to drawing the frames, and the women are left to do the busy work of colouring in, while being depicted in a rather patronising way, showing that the men have them well looked after as surely they would not be able to cope with uncomfortable furniture and humid conditions. The way women are expected to perform and be treated in this time period would arguably make Snow White a strong character for the time, as she is the embodiment of the perfect feminine woman, thus would have been a desirable and strong character, despite being inherently weak. The documentary later praises the film by the number of celebrities attending the premier, which included Marlene Dietrich a singer and actor famous for bending gender norms. Even a strong feminist figure like Dietrich supporting this film is a clear indicator of what gender norms were like in 1937, and how Snow White's weak femininity may not have had negative implications.

Another way gender is expressed in these films are elements of the sublime, what has the power to compel and destroy, and the beautiful, what we find to be aesthetically pleasing. Edmund Burke's deep exploration in these differences in the book *A Philosophical Enquiry into The Sublime and The*

Beautiful (originally written in 1757) clearly separates these ideas into the beautiful being inherently feminine, and the sublime masculine. Burke suggests 'There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, clearly being the former' (Burke and Phillips, 1992:p103) which agrees with the idea of the capability to love being a feminine trait as it correlates with the beautiful. If we relate this back to the hero's journey, each film 'shows [her] in [her] mundane ordinary world' (Vogler, 1985:p5) which are usually idyllic landscapes, reflecting in Burke's idea's of the beautiful which are 'First to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but fourthly to have those part not to be angular, but melted as it were into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. So they have its colours clear and bright; but not very strong and glaring colour' (Burke and Phillips: 1992:p107). This *softness* to all that creates the beautiful is a feminine trait, but also makes these landscapes vulnerable, passive, and therefore weak and susceptible to harm. This again relates to Mastugu's ideas of men's and women's language, if the beautiful is without *strength*, and has to have *softness* then it is clear this aligns with the beautiful being feminine, and the sublime being masculine. When the hero reaches 'the special world, a world that is new and alien' (Vogler, 1985:p5), the part of the journey where most of the action takes place, or just their heroic act, they are usually sublime, being the opposite of Burke's idea's of the beautiful. Using block, bold, dark colours and angular structures to create a landscape that communicates with the accidence that our female protagonist is in danger. The sublime *special world* therefore has *strength* and *power* to it as it has the ability to compel our hero to enter it, but also

the ability to cause harm, making it an inherently masculine landscape. Clearly there is a strong separation between the sublime and the beautiful, which Burke confirms himself, as he states 'the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect the other upon the passions' (Burke and Phillips, 1992:p103). However, in the film *Frozen* (2013) Elsa's powers of creating and being able to control ice and snow are both sublime and beautiful. At first, when Elsa cannot control her powers she creates sharp spikes of ice and puts the Kingdom in a constant winter, babies start to cry as the residents around her back away in fear and call her a 'witch who has cursed this land' (Frozen, 2013). Elsa is able to create huge beasts who fight off Hans and his Kings men when they try to capture her in self defence. However, her powers can also create beautiful figures, as highlighted in the song *Let it Go*, where she creates a palace full of beautiful structures and scenery. Although all the residences are scarred of Elsa at first, the final scene of the film is her freezing the ground and everyone skates on it, the screams and cries have turned into laughter, despite this being a similar act to what was previously seen as terrifying. Therefore, the character of Elsa transgresses Burke's theory that the sublime and the beautiful are very separate ideas, as her powers possess both of them simultaneously, and it is up to the eye of the beholder how they interpret her actions. This is also evident in *Moana* (2016) as it is relived in the film's climax that Tefiti, the beautiful mother nature God, and Te Ka, the sublime fire demon, are the same deity when Tefiti is missing her heart. As well as in *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) when the snowy, dark landscape surrounding Beast's castle

becomes bright, and soft, when Belle becomes more comfortable around him, turning the snow from something that has the ability to harm into something that can be enjoyed and played in.

The idea of strength and heroism in masculinity becomes almost paradoxical when a character becomes so masculine, with no feminine traits, that they become weak, villainous, and consequently the embodiment of toxic masculinity. This is evident from the character Gaston in *Beauty and The Beast* (1991). Gaston has an entire song dedicated to him sung mainly by other characters, with lyrics such as 'There's no man in town as admired as you...for there's no one as burly and brawny...who's a man among men' (*Beauty and The Beast*, 1991), clearly highlighting how masculine and therefore desirable and admired Gaston is by everyone in the town. Gaston is an entirely new character in the Disney adaptation, in the text this film is based on *La Belle et Le Bete*, (1740) by Jenne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont, there is no character alike Gaston present in the story. The addition of the character adds a clear villain to the story, instead of the only conflict from the original being Beast keeping Belle as a prisoner, in order for the audience to acknowledge Beast as a sympathetic character in the film despite his appearance. Although Gaston is not immediately presented as our villain, his blatant toxic masculinity is used as a vehicle to make him an unlikeable character from the start. Gaston is first introduced in the film by hunting animals, a male dominated sport and an act of *strength* and *power*, as well as being an immediate juxtaposition to Belle, our protagonist and hero, reading to and caring for sheep a few seconds before. During this scene Gaston says, 'She's the one, the lucky girl I'm going to marry' (*Beauty*

and *The Beast*, 1991) in reference to Belle. His choice of language, even in this short line, is *direct* and *assertive*, all being masculine traits but also making his character come across as arrogant, an unlikeable trait, as to him Belle either has no choice or he has no doubt she will accept his marriage proposal. However, despite Gaston being adamant '[he's] going to make Belle [his] wife' (*Beauty and The Beast*, 1991), at no point during the entire film does he say he loves or is in love with Belle. The only time a feeling of love towards Belle is hinted at by Gaston is in his line during his first scene, 'Right from the moment when I met her, saw her, I said she's gorgeous and I fell' (*Beauty and The Beast*, 1991), which reflects Horvat's ideas on the action of falling in love. Horvat suggests 'The first stage of love is called hawa. Literally hawa means to fall, i.e. the falling of love or any kind of passion into the heart' (Horvat, 2016:p14). Gaston's use of the word *fell* therefore does suggest a possibility of a loving feeling towards Belle. This can be further supported by Horvat's idea of 'the true meaning of "falling in love." We take the risk, whatever the consequences might be. Even if we are aware that this fatal encounter will change the very coordinates of our daily lives, we insist on it precisely because of that.' (Horvat, 2016:p13). In the film's climax, Gaston leads an angry mob of villagers to Beast's house, with the intent to kill Beast, which in theory is Gaston taking a risk, with a fatal encounter, as he has *fallen* in love with Belle and can not bear the idea of Belle being in love with Beast. However, this is clearly a case of his ego being shattered by Belle's rejection towards him and her affection towards Beast, which is motivating his actions, and not a consequence of any feelings of love towards Belle. Horvat continues to suggest 'A man falls in love for three reasons: 1, seeing; 2, hearing; and 3, bounties received from the Beloved.

The strongest cause of hawa is seeing, since this does not change upon meeting the Beloved' (Horvat, 2016:p14). It is true Gaston has hawa for Belle and therefore has eros love for her, alike Snow White, as he constantly talks about how she's 'The most beautiful girl in town' (Beauty and The Beast, 1991). However, this is where his affections end, as he only talks about Belle's beauty and not her intelligence or any other features or traits that make her stand out in this provincial town, meaning his attraction is only physical and therefore superficial. In fact, Gaston is dismissive of Belle intelligence, stating 'it's not right for a woman to read, soon she starts getting idea's and thinking' (Beauty and The Beast, 1991), proving he is only interested in her looks. However, it is Belle's intelligence that allows her to see past Gaston's good looks and realise that he is a terrible person, which the rest of the town is unable to notice. This allows Gaston's rejection and death to be more satisfying for the audience, as it is his own *strength*, *directness*, and arrogance that causes his demise, as he loses his balance after stabbing Beast, leading to Gaston falling to his death.

In conclusion, it is near impossible to create a redeemable character who possess only masculine or only feminine traits. This is evident in the character Gaston who has so much 'assertiveness, strength, power, and directness' (Jones and Ono, 2008:p187) that he becomes a villain the audience is fully against, and Snow White who has so much 'softness, weakness, powerlessness, and politeness' (Jones and Ono, 2008:p187) that she cannot defend herself and needs a masculine figure to save her. Therefore, a character does need to have both femininity and masculinity in order to be a strong hero in their story. However, this does not necessarily

mean the masculine traits bring strength, despite their connotations. If it was masculinity that allowed the hero to complete their journey, as implicated by Vogler's use of only male pronouns in his memo, then acts of violence or other male dominated acts would be the main course of action to achieve their goal. Our female heroes never act in violence, unless in self defence, usually towards a male patriarchal figure. Instead, their heroic acts are motivated by the feminine power of love, which fuels their bravery and forces Anna to jump in front of the sword that will kill her sister, or for Moana to fearlessly walk towards the fire demon to return Tefiti's heart, or for Belle to replace her father as Beast's prisoner. Therefore, although usually associated with *weakness* and *powerlessness* femininity, feminine traits, and feminine acts can have strength and allow our princesses to be heroic, when used in the right way to save something they love by a self-sacrificial act relating to *agape* love, or love for their Kingdom and family relating to *philia* love, instead of only being motivated to find a husband thus only expressing *eros* love.

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