



Walt Disney's True Lo\$ v \$e

Tales of dizzying misogyny

By Marlene Wurfel

Just how passive, submissive, and insipid should young girls strive to be? If we take our cues from Disney, comatose is about right—preferably defying the laws of decomposition in a glass coffin somewhere or cataleptic with golden hair arranged just so on an enchanted pillow in an enchanted kingdom.

The brand of pap that Disney offers of what it means to be young and female is dizzyingly misogynist. The message is abundantly clear: good + beautiful + passive + virginal + comatose + white and/or self-abnegating + long-suffering = \$ a \$\$\$\$ handsome \$\$\$\$ prince \$\$\$\$\$. To be fair, Disney does offer an alternative. If you insist on being born female, you could also become active, aggressive, self-serving, artful, independent, hideously ugly, tortured, and destructive. If you chose this route, you can wear purple eyeliner and black cloaks, but no one will love you, and justly so. You will be evil.

Disney's mass marketed stories have a very obvious agenda. Disney indoctrinates young minds in a way that is compatible with the dominant norms and values of a capitalist and patriarchal society. This is in the best interest of Disney because, of course, the bottom line is money. Disney panders to who has the buck. The "little girls" market is in essence the parents of little girls market, and so the films are tailored to the sexual preferences and the conservative values of the dominant class in America.

Disney does take some pains to disguise the moral tripe served up on its gilded platters. Disney imbues its films with the idea that the stories are governed by natural laws and Disney creates the perverse impression that the tales are timeless.

Disney stories happened "once upon a time in a faraway kingdom." They run with the assumption that it isn't Disney telling the tales at all; that Disney is simply retelling a charming story that has been loved and cherished for ages because it speaks of universal truths and so has universal appeal. This is a false and a revolting assumption.

The tales that Disney portrays are not ancient and anonymous stories expressing universal truths; rather, they are the products of a specific and contemporary political agenda, the current projections of the values and norms endorsed by Walt Disney. In *Fairy Tales And The Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, a very notable scholar of the fairy tale, Jack Zipes, thoroughly debunks the myth of timelessness in regards to the Disney versions of the tales we know. Zipes provides a very redeeming and compelling history of the genre of fairy tales.

Fairy tales, in fact, come from a long and venerable folk tradition. In Europe and the world over, women have been telling stories, spinning yarns, and weaving tales. These very expressions hark back to the pre-capitalist homes of artisans and peasants, where children heard the tales from their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. For centuries upon centuries, folk tales remained a cherished, matriarchal, and an oral tradition.

The fairy tale was first written down in Europe so that a more educated class could better manage the vast oral tradition of a bourgeoisie. The folk tales were discussed amongst aristocrats who could properly separate the wheat from the chafe; the wheat being the norms and values of a "civilized" elite, the



chafe being any suggestion of class rebellion, bodily functions, or female initiative. They entered into an aristocratic discourse on mores, values, and manners so that the tales might better serve to inform children as to how to behave in a civilized manner.

At this juncture, in the 17th century, it was understood that the purpose of the tales was to indoctrinate children with culturally specific belief systems, and not simply to entertain them. Somehow, we have become insensible to this idea, and have adopted the belief that the tales are "charming," "entertaining," and in fact should not be studied or criticized at all in a socio-political context lest we detract from the "magic" of the stories. However, since they were first penned, fairy tales have been understood to have powerful consequences for young minds. They are tools that teach children the consequences of specific actions. Fairy tales assert sex roles and reward certain behavioral patterns while punishing others.

Charles Perrault, in the late 1600s, was one of the first authors to write down fairy tales in France. We can thank him for "Little Red Riding Hood." He deserves especial condemnation for his marvelously creative new ending. In the original folk version, the little girl hatches a clever escape plan to save herself from the wolf. In Perrault's version, the generous interventions of a heroic woodcutter are appended to save the girl from her own stupidity. Brutally, an ancient tale about a clever young girl was turned into a lesson on feminine vulnerability, stupidity, and helplessness. We can also thank Perrault for beginning to transform Cinderella from an active, rebellious, self-affirming character into the passive and gentrified moron we know today.

Perrault preceded the brother's Grimm, who anthropologized their tales in 19th century Germany. The Grimms sought to thoroughly sanitize and bowdlerize German and European folk tales so that they might be made appropriate for consumption by bourgeois children. The brothers Grimm understood that they were transforming entertaining tales into educational ones. They had a conscious agenda of perpetuating aristocratic norms and value systems. This is exactly why the tales which were never told by, for, or about the culturally elite came to be strewn about with castles, Kings, golden crowns, ball gowns, courtiers, and docile Princesses waiting for the salvation of a Prince on a milk white steed. Such Aristocratic paraphernalia were imposed on the fairy tale, and are not at all intrinsic to the genre.

Even given the patriarchalizing and selection process of the fairy tale throughout European history, it is a mistake to assume that Disney could only choose from the leftovers of an already perverted folkloric tradition. In fact, even Grimm's tales contain some ideas that Disney would find too "radically feminist" and "socialist." The Grimm's Cinderella, corseted and meek as she is, would still seem spirited next to Disney's weak-kneed treatment of the sanitized beauty. Fairy tales in Europe went through a Victorian bowdlerization. Even so, Walt Disney takes the cake. Disney's treatments are more prudish, misogynist, sterilized, and, in short, more "Victorian" than the Victorian versions.

Subversive alternatives to the dominant tales do exist. They have been written and are being written today. Stories by Oscar Wilde, Angela Carter, and many other contemporary and historical alternatives to Disney are extant in modern libraries. Sadly, few people know this.

Another fallacy that Disney perpetuates is that its fairy tales reveal an inevitable and natural law. Disney professes a system of rewards and punishments based on a divine hierarchy, one that cannot be thwarted. Of course Snow White is rewarded; she is good. Of course her evil stepmother is punished; she is evil. Disney takes no pains to disguise these rewards as "spiritual"; they are always monetary rewards, rewards of power and of fame. We know Cinderella will overcome her poverty and enslavement, not because she is industrious and a zealous revolutionary, but because she is so very pretty, so very self-effacing, and she suffers so very quietly.

Disney makes prominent use of the rags to riches story. Indeed, it is an inspiring one, bringing so much hope into the dismal lives of those who find themselves trapped in a classist system of inequality.

Hans Christian Andersen was an avid perpetrator of the rags to riches tale. In Andersen's delightful stories such as "The Little Mermaid" and "The Ugly Duckling," we may glean that a select few are born to rise into power. Through careful self-abnegation (the Little Mermaid trades her voice for a pair of legs), a revulsion of all that is low-class, and a divine birthright to privilege, the chosen ones will rise above the masses.

Twentieth Century Fox sought to rival Disney with their production of *Anastasia*. As far as I can tell however, the story follows exactly the Disney formula as per *Aladdin* or *The Little Mermaid*. As we are shown in *Anastasia*, some people





are innately good and noble as a result of their excellent breeding and a natural, absolutist biological order. Circumstance may neglect these chosen few presently; poor Princess Anastasia was orphaned during the Russian Revolution, which was characterized by plump and rosy cheeked dancing Bolsheviks. Despite this pesky revolution, which robbed

Anastasia of her nobility, she inevitably rose again to take her place amongst the dominant elite. Just as surely as any princess will be bothered by a pea stuck under a hundred mattresses, or Aladdin will be recognized by the talking mountain as "a diamond in the rough," the chosen few always rise to take their rightful places amongst the privileged. Thank you Disney, for harking back to the 19th century rise of eugenics and racial determinism, ideas that might otherwise be understood as outmoded and dangerous.

In *The Lion King*, Disney appropriates and speaks for the African animal "kingdom." The animals in the film are sad, because they recognize that a divinely chosen leader amongst them is absolutely necessary for their well being. They must convince the Lion King to accept his destiny as a cuddly fascist, or all mayhem will break loose, Wildebeests reeking anarchy and the like. We all know that hyenas can't possibly be in charge. They are a much too ugly and morally depraved species. No, it must be a lion, it must be a male lion.

As surely as hierarchy is part of the natural order of things, so too are sex roles "naturally" determined. Pocahontas, like so many of Disney's heroines, is a child of nature. Birds, raccoons, deer, and other wildlife seek her company. In *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, animals, which are invariably and perfectly in tune with the natural order of things, are able to sense the heroine's innate goodness. This is one proof we can use towards understanding that the passive heroine is in accordance with natural law. Little birdies tell us so, and they would know.

Disney has been criticized for being racist because of the simple and obvious fact that white is always used to represent good and black to connote evil. And so Disney is moving towards a more racially inclusive image, lest they lose the not-a-bigot-buck. Disney brings us Princess Jasmine, who is unhappy with her lot as an Arabian aristocrat. She disguises herself as a commoner to walk amongst the masses. Of course, she gets her incompetent little self into trouble and is rescued by the more street-wise Aladdin. His invariable rise to power (he is a chosen one, you see) restores her, happily, into the world of privilege, for she is a chosen one too.

In *Pocahontas* Disney sweetly re-constructs this ingratiating damsel in one of the most perverse renderings of colonial American history imaginable. Pocahontas pilots her canoe down the swift and gracious waters of "pragmatism." Pragmatism being of course, the self-abnegation of her First Nation's people and the willing indenture of herself to European colonialists. She does this for the love of a strapping Brit named John. At the end of the film, Pocahontas's life is in peril. She is gravely ill, and both the colonialists and her tribes people understand that the only medicine powerful enough to save her is European medicine. So, to prevent her untimely death among the medically incompetent American Indians, away she sails in a swift boat across the Atlantic Ocean towards her salvation.

Disney's message of inter-racial harmony is clear. It doesn't matter what color your skin is. There's no escape. What matters is that you are beautiful, good, and submissive. If you are racially other than white, you can either be a princess in "your own country," or you can conform. You can do either of these, all the while celebrating your deference to the natural order of things in song. Disney's pandering condescension to racial "otherness" is particularly sinister. Not because Disney isn't racially inclusive, not because Snow White is so very white, but because the Disney formula operates on the presumption of a deference to natural, higher law.

It has been said that fairy tales offer up "non-traditional family structures." Indeed, in every fairy tale one parent is always dead, absent, enchanted, or replaced by one wicked stepmother or another. The families of the protagonists are always fractured. Why? So that we may follow the heroine on her quest to restore it, because a proper nuclear family is the singularly most important goal. A courageous prince must rescue a submissive heroine so that the chosen ones may marry and live happily ever after in the enchanted magic castle, of course. A fantasy world of castles, fairies, necrophiliac wet dreams, and witches that aren't burned at the stake at all but who spontaneously self-destruct in deference to natural laws: almost anything is possible. Singing teapots, mice who sew, flying carpets, almost anything is possible: but nothing ever happens that is outside the boundaries of classist, racist, and sexist ideology. But it's all just kid stuff, right? It's not meant to hurt anybody, right? "Someday my prince will come," Snow White sings rapturously. Does she care if *she* ever comes? No, but this entitlement is lost on children, right?



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