



Autumn Murphy

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Need for a New Narrative

Disney & Toxic Masculinity

When talking about representation in Disney's characters, people often focus on the female characters and audience. There are many issues present for the female audience, but there might be just as many for the boys, and they could have a lasting effect on boys, just as they do for girls.

So, what are these stereotypes? Disney heroes tend to be white, tall, rich, muscular, and clean cut with light to dark brown hair. They are the ones who usually save the day and the damsel in distress. When I think of males in Disney movies, there are two that really come to mind. One is Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* and the other is Shang from *Mulan*. Gaston is considered the villain and Shang the love interest. Despite being different characters from different movies, they both represent the same thing: the "ideal" man. There are even songs about how men should be. In *Beauty and the Beast*, LeFou sings about how every man in the tavern would want to be like Gaston. His reasoning is that Gaston is big, a good shooter, a good fighter, and even good at spitting. LeFou sings it in front of a group of men who are smaller, poorer and older than Gaston. I suggest that on a subconscious level, this teaches children that real men should be young, strong and rich. If they are anything else, they should aspire to be a man like Gaston.

One might argue that Disney is making fun of this ideal since Gaston is the villain, which might be true except for the fact that the Beast shares similar qualities, and years later Disney will release another film including another another song praising the same characteristics in the good guy. The Beast is presented as being big, angry, and an equally good fighter who is just as rude to Belle as Gaston. Therefore, even if Disney is attempting to mock hypermasculine traits in the song about Gaston, they simultaneously praise it in the same movie.

While the story differs, *Mulan* also features a song about masculinity. Though *Mulan* defies the usual Disney logic in terms of a princess narrative Shang embodies the stereotypes of men in society. *Mulan* even has a song titled "I'll Make a Man out of You." Without even listening, we understand that the song will be defining what it means to be a man. The first line is, "Did they send me daughters when I asked for men?" which implies that if children are unable to do the physical work required for the army, they must be girls, thus making them inferior and less desirable. This is harmful because it sets standards: that women are weak and that men have no option but to be strong. The song continues to describe men using metaphors of different natural disasters that cause immense amounts of damage, like a typhoon and fire. This implies that men must be ready to destroy and protect, even if they do not want to. There is no other culturally sanctioned choice but to be so strong that there is no hope for anything in the way, which can ruin possible communication skills. Shang also says they must be as "mysterious as the dark side of the moon," but by being mysterious, men do not show their emotions, which means they are bottling them

up and not learning how to properly express them. Bottling emotion like that can be dangerous mentally and physically to oneself and others.

One troubling point is that *Mulan* was released seven years after *Beauty and the Beast*. Somewhere between this gap Disney decided that the hyper-masculinity portrayed by Gaston was no longer laughable but should be encouraged through the male love interest in their new movie. So, while they made an important step for little girls by showing girls can be the heroes of the story, they took a large step back for boys.

This damaging image of men and masculinity persists in other Disney movies as well. One example is *Hercules*, which reinforces the message of the first two films I have discussed that anything other than tall and buff is laughable and dangerous. *Hercules* starts the movie as a scrawny teen who is very clumsy; mocked for this, he has to go through a training montage, not unlike that of *Mulan*. By the end of the montage, he is buff and not as comical. So what is the moral here? Be tall and buff or become the comedic relief. While *Mulan* has secondary characters who are fat, short and scrawny and who are supposed to be funny in comparison to Shang, *Hercules'* physical change shows male audiences that his original state is inferior to the "real" man who has learned that particular expressions of masculinity bring rewards. Essentially, according to Disney, boys can reach the level of socially acceptable masculinity if they put in the work for it. However, if boys are not trying to improve their masculinity, the mockery they earn is justifiable.

Disney also has a habit of showing its fathers as incompetent. This happens both in live action and animation. Too often, the father is depicted as a bumbling fool who is incapable of handling his kids, who are often over the age of ten. This indicates that the fathers in Disney do not carry the same parental load as the mothers do. Most recently, viewers have seen this in the movie *Incredibles 2*. Mr. Incredible is left alone with the kids after his wife goes out and fights crime. Though at first flush it seems like this breaks gender roles, with Mrs. Incredible going out and working, Disney continues to enforce the idea that men do not do the caregiving in a family. He is a mess, unable to do anything and clearly overwhelmed even though two of his kids are old enough to do most of their care for themselves. This is a narrative repeated in almost every Disney film and series. There is at least one episode of the dad trying to care for the family himself. For example, the pilot for *Goodluck Charlie* shows a dad of four trying to tackle his wife's first day back at work after their newest baby. The problem is he is a father of four, three of whom are in middle school or older, and the mother is an established nurse. Therefore, this concept should not be new to him, yet the entire episode is a disaster.

While the list of toxic masculine traits presented in Disney are many, there is one last trope that needs to be discussed. The concept of the "dumb and underachieving brother." This trope seems to be more prevalent in live action shows, which are typically what is airing on Disney Channel. This trope can be seen in *Goodluck Charlie*, *Wizards of Waverly Place*, and *Hannah Montana*, among others All

of these shows imply that the sisters are brighter and most likely to succeed. For example, in Hannah Montana, Miley is the sister who excels at everything and is even a famous popstar. But on the other side of the coin, there is Jackson. Jackson seems to fail at everything, and his failures are the fodder of humor. At face value, this seems like just a cheap laugh. But when we really look into it, there is more at play. Young boys watching Disney will learn that their sisters will most likely be the ones who excel at school and that boys are stupid, providing an implicit message that boys aren't "good" at school and thus perhaps should not try as hard. This mindset can be devastating to boys and perpetuates a double standard that values boys and men more on bulk and muscle than on brains and intellectual aspirations. What does this all mean? It means Disney severely limits the idea of what it means to be a man. Through Disney, men are told to be so strong they can destroy anything in their path, to shield their emotions, and to risk almost anything rather than be caught acting like a "girl." They are boxed into one ideal look and learn that anything which deviates from this is supposed to be funny. All of this can be very harmful to boys. In reality, there are men who are not athletic and do not want to fight. They should not be made to think that is the only way, and in a sexist world, sadly, telling them they are feminine for it can hurt their self-esteem by making them feel inadequate. It also shames those who are either not represented or are represented as the comic relief. There are few men of color, few men with a "less desirable" who do not risk being the butt of humor, and there are no same sex relationships.

The idea that men are not caregivers can be extra harmful because it is likely many of the boys watching this will grow up thinking it is not their job to help share the childcare load with their spouse. But if they do, odds are they will be mocked as if they are not equally as capable of care as their female counterpart. Disney poses an equally damaging representation of men as it does women. Too often, representations of masculinity are overlooked in discussions of equal and proper representation. It is important to realize that creating such a small box for what is expected of anyone can be dangerous to their mental and emotional development. Without diversity in media, limited representations make it more likely that they will grow up knowing one "correct" form – and correlating that form with rewards from romantic. It is important for Disney to think about this as theirs are often some of the first movies to which children are exposed. Disney branches cross platforms and reach a wide audience, and while they have an ability to challenge gender stereotypes, they are largely failing to do so.