


Multiculturalism and the Mouse
Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment

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*For my son, Shea Thaxter Brode
A Disney fan from Day One*

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Our Bodies, Ourselves *Disney and Feminism*

I realize now I've been living in a doll's house!

—HENRIK IBSEN'S *NORA* TORVOLD, 1878

Why, it looks just like a little doll's house!

—WALT DISNEY'S *SNOW WHITE*, 1937

In 1961, while most Americans waxed euphoric over the election of John Kennedy, Parisian intellectual Simone de Beauvoir attempted to inform everyone that the latest First Lady ought to be recognized for brains as well as beauty: "The male amuses himself with free flights of thought . . . but women's reveries take a very different direction: she will think about her *personal appearance*." ¹ In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* insisted that women "are living with their feet bound in the old image of glorified femininity . . . Encouraged by the *mystique* to evade their identity crisis." ² Eventually, Germaine Greer noted that "Woman must have room and scope to devise a morality which does *not* disqualify her from excellence." ³ Hollywood filmmakers responded by removing previously unquestioned, now obviously sexist, sentiments from scripts while presenting strong images of independent women.

9 Am Woman: Bleach Me Road

The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men (1952)

Alice in Cartoonland (1924–1927)

Plane Crazy (1928)

Soon, dialogue such as the following flourished, as, in a costume film, England's ruler leaves for the Crusades:

KING RICHARD I: Don't worry, mother. Prince John will be here to take care of you.



ALTERING THE AMERICAN MOVIE ICONOGRAPHY. Previous makers of Western films depicted subdued women riding in wagons while strong men march out front as their protectors. Early in "Johnny Appleseed," Disney forever changed the visual rhetoric of Hollywood by depicting women in every possible role. (Copyright 1948 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy Buena Vista Releasing.)

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE: I raised two sons on my own after my husband died. I can take care of myself now.

This exchange, one might guess, occurs in a postfeminist revisionist film version of the Robin Hood legend. In fact, it's from Disney's 1952 version—the *only* Robin Hood movie to include the queen mother as a key character. Always, Disney's attitude toward women emphasizes strength of character in pursuit of excellence and self-fulfillment.

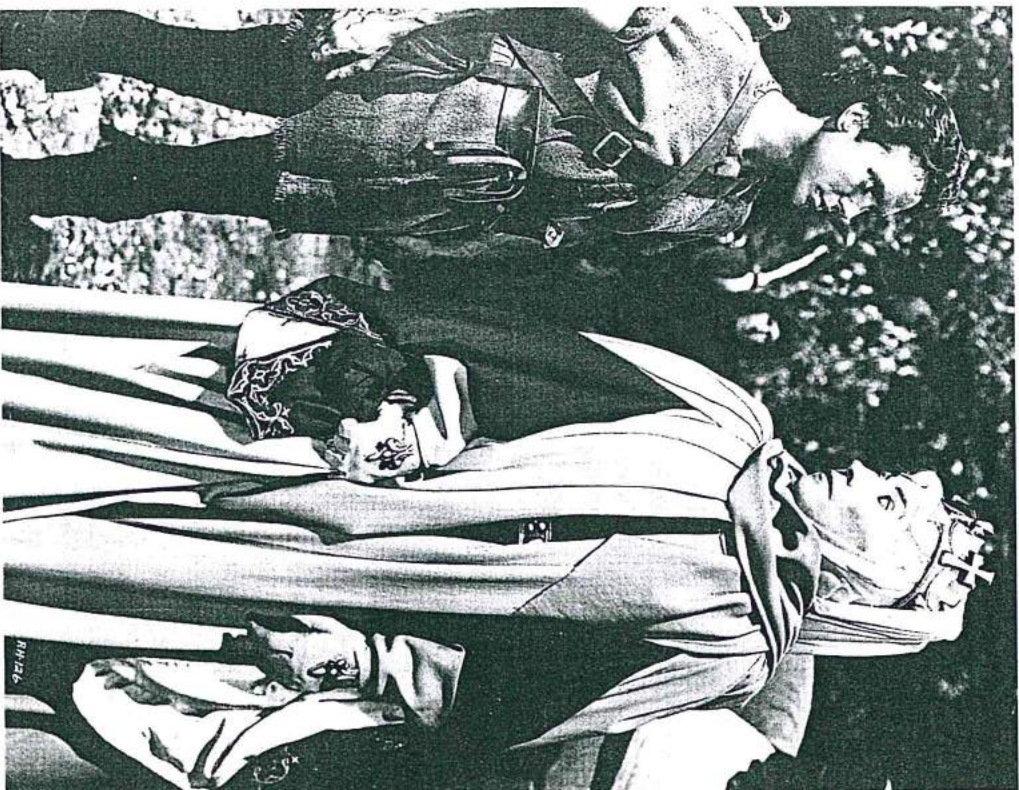
His first screen character was the live-action heroine of the *Alice* shorts. Unlike Max and Dave Fleischer's Betty Boop, always surrounded (and in due time rescued) by male characters, Disney's Alice is most often on her own. Though played by a child, Alice owns her own home and car in *Alice Rattled by Rats*, and her own business, an egg-producing farm, in *Alice's Egg Plant*. In *Alice's Orphan*, she adopts a lost cat, proving herself a worthy if diminutive mother figure. Yet she nurtures even while continuing to pursue her own personal interests.

While Alice is not uninterested in men, Disney's character differs significantly from most of her female onscreen contemporaries—animated and live—by projecting a commonsense wisdom beyond her years. At the end of *Alice Solves the Puzzle*, her constant companion, a macho tom cat, sidles up along her, flexing his muscles—a caricature of the traditional macho male. Alice notices, nods her head in mild appreciation of his physique, then asks if he has the brainpower to solve a crossword puzzle. When he fails, Alice shrugs, loses interest in him, and completes the task herself. Alice may, like Boop, always appear enticing. For Alice, though, there's no incompatibility between feminine attractiveness and feminist attitudes.

What a difference here from other films of the era, which presented women as either serious or sexy, never both. As Molly Haskell noted in 1973:

Just as the serious and political "Apollonian" side of the current women's movement seems often opposed to the hedonistic and sexual "Dionysian" side, so the "emancipated woman" of the twenties was either a suffragette or a flapper, depending on what she wanted and how she chose to get it.⁴

It's interesting to note that the only New York distributor who took any interest in the initial *Alice* short, *Alice's Day at Sea*, was a woman. Margaret Winkler responded—as a woman as well as an industry professional—to something special that she perceived in Disney's conception.



IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN. Every film of the Robin Hood legend eliminates Eleanor of Aquitaine except the live-action Disney version. Walt not only included the Queen Mother (Martita Hunt) but made her a central figure, joining with Locksley (Richard Todd) as full partner to fight fascism. (Copyright 1952 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy RKO Radio Pictures.)

In that first film, Alice visits the seashore, goes out boating, and falls asleep. When she wakes, Alice is surrounded by menacing figures: Fanged fish, an octopus, swooping birds of prey. Rather than scream out for a male hero to rescue her, *de rigueur* for screen heroines of that time, Alice handily deals with the problems herself, solving them through a combination of brain and brawn. She then makes her way back to shore on her own. Between 1924 and 1927, fifty-six Alice cartoons were produced, the originals starring Virginia Davis (with whom Walt had worked in K.C.). Margie Gay and Lois Hardwick each in turn assumed the role. Viewed in retrospect, they present a startling set of attractive possibilities for women in the brave new social landscape of post-World War I America. If the Fleischers suggested that inside every seemingly sophisticated flapper there beat the heart of an overgrown child, Disney conversely implied that inside every supposed female child, there existed in embryo an intelligent and capable woman, eager to emerge.

Alice served as a forerunner of such flapper stars as Clara Bow and Joan Crawford. Perhaps most significantly, in comparison to earlier Theda Bara vamps, obsessed with carnal knowledge, or Mary Pickford virgins, mortally terrified of it, what has been written about Bow applies equally to Alice:

She was no ordinary sex symbol—indeed, she described herself as a “tomgirl” who “doesn’t care particularly about men” [though she] knew precisely how to use her body, how much of it to expose and, more important, which portions of it to cover alluringly.⁵

Also, Disney was the first Hollywood filmmaker to condemn in his work, through dramatic illustration of the consequences, chauvinistic behavior on the part of men. Even his beloved mouse had to learn such lessons the hard way. In *Plane Crazy* (the first Mickey cartoon ever made, though third to be released), Mickey is inspired by Charles Lindbergh’s then-recent transcontinental flight to build his own plane, certain this will impress Minnie. No sooner does he get her up in the air than Mickey attempts to put the make on his innamorata, certain there is nothing she can do to stop him at such dangerous heights. Stunned to realize the venture was designed to reduce her to a sexual object, Minnie fervently rejects Mickey’s advances. She’s then inspired to use her pantaloons as a parachute, returning to earth. His attempt at seduction a failure, Mickey is reduced to a laughingstock in the last shot—the implication being that

his actions were wrong. He even laughs at himself, arcing as he rejects chauvinism.

Still, the feminist consensus has always been to dismiss Disney’s portrayals of women as superficial images of helpless princesses, subserviently trusting males to carry them off and live “happily ever after” in a retro world of postmarital bliss. Images of women in the Disney canon may, in the words of one female essayist, be seen as serving the male status quo, thanks to brainwashing females at an early age with

the illusions of romance—created to foster her obedience to the courtship system and pandered to by cheap fiction and media advertising. . . . Her reveries of falling in love, of being swept off her feet, her depictions to herself of marvelous tales whose farthest limits in her imagination were reached on a glorious triumphal wedding day.⁶

Still, a close examination of Disney’s female-oriented fairy-tale trilogy reveals something notably different. Each film appeared at or near the end of a decade during which the role of women in America had drastically altered, owing to political and cultural changes in the social fabric.

Such characters as Clever Grethel, the Goose Girl, and Rapunzel had no appeal for this filmmaker. Far from arbitrary, the selection process was determined by the degree to which any ancient fable allowed Disney to dramatize his contemporary yet highly individualistic worldview. He carefully picked from the plethora of female fairy tales in Grimm and Perrault three stories all but identical in premise: A young woman of aristocratic birth or bearing, humbled by her current *déclassé* station, fulfills a singular destiny thanks to a characteristically American approach to adversity—coupled with what, on close consideration, can only be considered a mainstream feminist outlook. This in no way negates femininity. Women can, Disney early on insisted (and Germaine Greer later reaffirmed in *The Female Eunuch*), have it both ways, though only if, like Disney’s role-model characters, they firmly believe in themselves—as individuals and as women. Since each incarnation offers a unique variation on this theme, the essential similarity implies, to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, that what we encounter is the heroine with a thousand faces. This concept lived on, long after Disney’s death, in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998).

"Ja Bleck with the Men"

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

During the twenties, a sense of liberation (albeit a superficial one) had been achieved by the country's first generation of working women, on their own in the big city. Hemlines had shortened while Victorian morality frayed. Still, as Una Stannard noted in "The Mask of Beauty":

The modern woman's liberty to expose her legs and most of her body does *not* signify women's liberation. . . . Women are "free" to start wearing padded bras at the age of nine and to spend forty-eight million dollars annually on eye make-up alone . . . Women are not free *not* to be sexy.⁷

Economic woes have a way of deflating hubris. As Fay Wray's first scene in RKO's *King Kong* (1933) revealed, yesterday's carefree flappers stood in headlines after the stock market crash of 1929—desperate for work, too proud to return to the farms and small towns they'd made a mass migration from a decade earlier.

Seemingly set in a Ruritanian kingdom from European folklore, Disney's *Snow White* immediately introduces us to just such a situation. As her beautiful stepmother stares down from a castle window, the title character—dressed in rags identical to those worn by her Steinbeckian sisters—labors below. Disney emphasizes an element only suggested in the source.⁸ Snow White is scorned by the "vain and wicked stepmother" owing to her fear that this girl's emerging beauty will someday dwarf her own. "Who is fairest of all?" the Queen demands of the magic mirror. The face of a slave in the mirror insists Snow White's *natural* good looks outshine any self-conscious attempts at beauty. "Women in our society," a feminist leaflet from 1968 proclaimed, are "enslaved by ludicrous 'beauty' standards we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously."⁹ Though considered extreme in the freewheeling hippie era, such a statement articulates the theme of Disney's *Snow White* as postulated in the film's opening iconography.

The Queen—eyebrows arched high—resembles the two reigning European imports who dominated 1930s screens, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. Such stars caused a revolution in fashion, owing to their harsh—indeed, "ludicrously" so—glamour, which became a "standard." As a result, ordinary women—including middle-class housewives—felt compelled (if they could afford it) to buy crimson lipstick and ghostly mas-

cara. Sophistication edging toward decadence emerged as haute couture. On the other hand, Snow White—in her total lack of self-consciousness about appearance—recalls the period's most popular American star, Shirley Temple. Engagingly innocent, Snow White appears in an iconographic dialectic with the beauty-as-artifice approach of the Queen. "A man's love is beauty deep," Una Stannard would complain in her early-seventies essay, adding: "Doesn't a man always say 'you're beautiful' before he says 'I love you'?"¹⁰ Often—but not always, and never in Disney films. *Snow White*, thirty years ahead of its time, can be "read" as a protofeminist cautionary fable, implicitly criticizing what in time would be attacked as "the beauty trap." "Rags cannot hide her gentle grace," the mirror's Slave informs her majesty. True beauty, Disney insists, is not applied from the outside but grows from within, and has less to do with a woman's physical appearance than her personality.

In this case, inner beauty—effectively represented within the context of a musical movie by her warm, loving, sensitive voice—is what draws the birds and other animals to Snow White, then Prince Charming as well. What served only as a plot element in Grimm was transformed into a resonant theme—introduced at the outset, then powering the film. Though much of the old fairy tale is excised, Disney retained what the brothers Grimm insist is the essence of Snow White's appeal: the colors red (lips), white (skin), and black (hair). This, not coincidentally, is the essential color combination for Disney's greatest original creation, Mickey Mouse. Similarly, his Snow White will express, in female form, the same set of values that turned a simple cartoon rodent into a populist icon.

Prince Charming's fascination with Snow White—his ability to at once see beyond the drab surface of her current existence, appreciating her greater appeal as a person—qualifies him as an early rendering of Disney's ideal male. He is enlightened in outlook and possesses total integrity. Though the most extreme (and highly verbal) radical feminists of the early 1970s would come to consider man as "the enemy" by virtue of his essential nature, others—more mainstream—adamantly argued otherwise. As, for instance, that night when radical feminist Susan Brownmiller announced on TV's *The Dick Cavett Show* that all men "oppress us as human beings." Another guest—Grace Slick of the rock group Jefferson Airplane—struck back:

Some [men] are great, some are crummy. Why do you have to form a theory? Some of them look at you as sex objects . . . [but] the ones

who like to *make music* and talk to you and go to bed with you and write, whatever you do—draw?—you do all those things with. I don't see where the problem is, because I don't see what you're talking about.¹¹

The first thing Disney's prince attempts to do is, in Slick's words, "make music" with Snow White by joining in her chorus. Far from saying anything about her looks (pleasant but unremarkable), he attempts to learn more about her *as a person*: who she is, where she comes from, etc. This approach—the one Slick called for—is, as we shall see, what makes this young man "princely," rather than any worldly kingdom, which—so significant in Grimm—does not exist in the Disney film.

Indeed, the very idea of his wandering by at this moment is noteworthy, implying a sense of destiny not present in the original. (The source's Snow-white is a mere seven years old when she first flees.) Disney's male hero appears less a conventional fairy-tale prince than a troubadour of old, or one of the twentieth century's young men in search of truth and self—what Jack Kerouac tagged as the dharma bums. Either way, he's drawn by her poetry as a total person, *not* her physicality. This enrages the Queen, observing from a tower that isolates her from life itself. Narcissism gives way to agoraphobia; she never leaves this place until transformed into an entirely other persona. The irony is that, by such self-containment, the Queen denies herself any possibility of fulfillment. According to one aspect of feminist thinking, the true tragedy is that woman is "an object not only of lust and ego but *vanity* as well—not only a conquest and a possession but needed to *be seen* as a conquest and a possession in the eyes of men."¹² The Queen's anger appears absurd, since her positioning of herself keeps the prince from ever seeing her.

As in Grimm, the huntsman assigned to murder Snow White cannot bring himself to do so. But while the Grimms' huntsman is moved only by Snow White's appearance ("she was so *lovely* the huntsman had pity on her"), Disney's burly fellow—like the slender prince—is moved by Snow White's *personality*: her innocent approach to life, her concern for others, her essence as a human being. That essence is, in a word, "natural." Aretha Franklin's 1967 soul classic, "A Natural Woman," could be added to Disney's sound track.

In Grimm, Snow-white accidentally discovers the dwarfs' home. Disney's Snow White, led there by animals who sense a oneness with this radical innocent, shares her thoughts with them. "You don't know what

I've been through," she sighs upon realizing they—and the natural world itself—constitute no threat. "And all because I was afraid," she adds. This admission is Snow White's first step on her journey toward self-realization as a woman. Like America's then-current president, she believes we have nothing to fear but fear itself—an attitude that will become both her greatest strength and near-fatal weakness.

Then follows one of the famous musical numbers, "With a Smile and a Song." However pleasing (and necessary as an interlude between the abject horror that precedes it and the warm comedy to come), the lyrics thematically express Disney's vision. "I'll get along somehow," she insists, despite the difficulty (indeed, apparent impossibility) of her current position. Her guarded optimism will eventually be rewarded. First, though, she enters the cottage and proclaims that the residents must be "seven little children." Snow White draws this conclusion after observing a general untidiness: clothing strewn everywhere, dirty dishes piled high, filth on the floor. Nothing could more directly contrast with the Grimms' description: "Everything there was very small, but as pretty and clean as possible." There stood the little table ready laid, and covered with a white cloth." Beds, adjoining the kitchen rather than upstairs as in Disney, are neatly decked "with clean white quilts." Disney's decision to reverse the Grimms' description may largely be due to plot possibilities. The subsequent cleaning sequence (Snow White, assisted by woodland animals, whistles while she works) is charming. However engaging Disney may be as mass entertainer, though, always we sense an artist's ongoing sensibility at work—his unique vision of the universe, vividly rendered in a singular style.

In the world according to Walt, men—even the best of men—are (as in films by such diverse cinema artists as Griffith, Ford, Bergman, and Fellini) naturally inclined to chaotic behavior. Women, conversely, offer an organizing principle and sharp common sense. Or, as Disney himself put it when speaking of the public's reaction to his work:

Women are the best judges of anything we turn out. Their taste is very important. . . . If the women like [a new film], to heck with the men. . . . We get advance reaction to our movies at previews and if the women's reaction is good, I feel fine. If it is adverse, I begin to worry. I feel women are more honest about [their reactions] than men.¹³

Not surprisingly, then, the world (the microcosm of this cottage, the macrocosm surrounding it) qualifies as a mess until a right-minded woman takes charge.

The mistaken notion that the residents must be children has no place in Grimm, where the dwarfs' behavior is consistently mature. Like good males in all retro drama, they protect Snow-white, who fails to heed men's wise words. Disney's Snow White, on the other hand, is essentially correct in her judgment, since these dwarfs *do* qualify as children—if not in age, then in attitude. Or, in contemporary terms:

The hatred of the youth culture for adult society is not a disinterested judgment but a terror-ridden refusal to be hooked into the, if you will, ecological chain of birthing, growing, and dying. It is the demand, in other words, to remain children.¹⁴

Not, significantly, in the best sense (Dylan's belief in remaining "forever young," at least spiritually) but in the worst: refusing to achieve maturity after reaching adulthood. This precisely describes the dwarfs—until, that is, Snow White arrives and they fall under her positive influence.

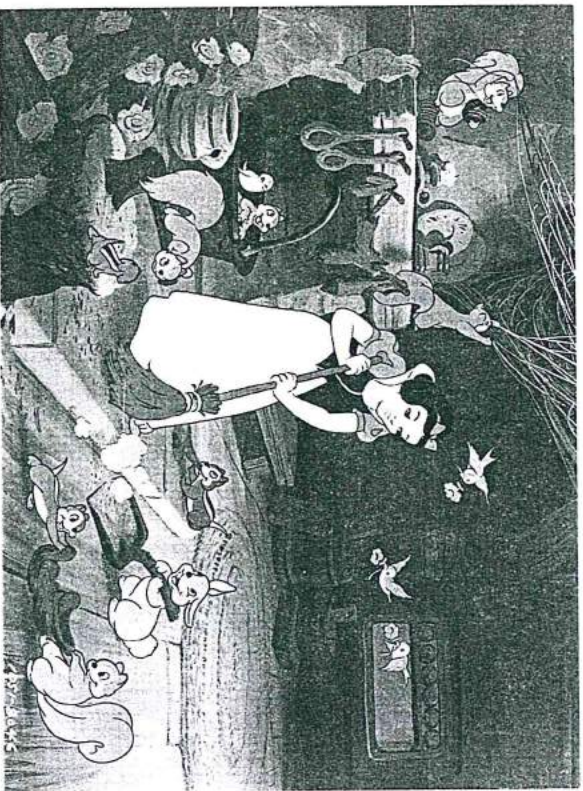
Disney consistently undermines the old tale's unquestioning acceptance of male superiority. While the child-men (particularly Grumpy) may initially resist, only by a gradual but full acceptance of a female leader do they become "men" (that is, adult persons) in the truest sense. The Grimms' dwarfs, as has often been noted, possess no distinct personalities, each a virtual clone of the next. The personalities of Disney's dwarfs—Grumpy, Sleepy, Doc, Bashful, Sneezy, Happy, Dopey—constitute caricatures of each and every type of traditional male behavior. They exist as modern equivalents of Elizabethan "humour" characters. Each serves as an archetype, some single personality trait entirely dominating everything the fellow says or does. Snow White, on the other hand, is the film's only three-dimensional character, her complex personality enhanced by the fact that she, and she alone, was closely modeled on a human being: Adriana Caselotti, who provided Snow White's singing and speaking voices.¹⁵ The impact here is to focus on a real woman's coming to terms with each limited possibility of the unenlightened male. When the Grimms' dwarfs first enter, they sound like the three bears, discovering Goldilocks: "Who has been sitting in my little chair?" Without fear, they discover Snow-white asleep. Well meaning but incurably conventional, they decide not to wake her, instead guarding the vulnerable girl all night. Disney's dwarfs, noting that their domain has been invaded, fall into fits of terror.

Compared to the Grimms' solid community of little men, the film offers seven rugged, if immature, individualists. Earlier, glimpsed working in their mine, they did not collaborate, keeping separate from one

another, each hammering away at his own diamond (gold in Grimm) pile. Now, Disney's dwarfs cringe in fear, aligning only when they force Dopey—most vulnerable (even feminine) among them—to approach the perceived "monster" sleeping across three beds (the Grimms' Snow-white, still a child, occupied but one). As Dopey cautiously approaches, we see Snow White from his point of view, struggling to sleep under sheets, she does appear to be a goblin. In fact, that is how the female principle appears to men who have not learned to accommodate themselves to a woman's presence and potential, thereby relinquishing childish male behavior for true maturity. "Let's kill it," one dwarf shouts, "before it wakes," expressing an all too typical male reaction: Eliminate, through violence, anything you don't understand. Then comes the realization that this is a girl. Though that relieves their fear, it hardly ends male anxiety, expressed by the arch-male Grumpy: "She's a *female*, and all females is *p'isin*," full of "wicked wiles."

When another dwarf, after first mindlessly agreeing, asks what "wicked wiles" are, Grumpy—ignorant as he is bigoted—replies: "I don't know, but I'm *ag'in* 'em." Grumpy represents the extreme reactionary male position. His eventual conversion to Snow White's most wholehearted fan signifies not only his arc, but—Disney apparently hopes—his audience's, or at least the male portion of it. "Why, you're little *men*," Snow White remarks upon waking. True, but so was her earlier deduction. All men are overgrown children until sanitized and sensitized, a process only a woman can manage. Snow White determines each dwarf's name by close observation, establishing her intelligence and powers of perception. Also possessing a keen sense of humor, she kids each without ever becoming patronizing or condescending—a neat trick!

At this point, the story—Grimm or Disney—moves in a direction that can only anger radical feminists. For Snow White takes on a role they condemn: That of "nurturer," attacked (at least during this period, now referred to as "First Wave Feminism") as the basis for women's "victimization" within "the domestic prison-house" in which she's expected to labor.¹⁶ Snow White will become, in the words of one prominent 1970s feminist, part of "the largely unpaid, largely female labor force that does the daily work."¹⁷ But while there may be no resolving the polarity of housework and liberation for the most extreme radicals, even during feminism's Third Wave, mainstream feminists—then and now—ought to appreciate Disney's rewriting Grimm so as to empower his heroine. Snow White proposes that she work in return for bed and board ("Let me



THE REDEMPTION OF HOUSEWORK. Mainstream feminists insist the true "enemy" is not housework but a mind-set that perceives such labor as inferior to working outside the home. Disney set the pace for this: Snow White suggests the arrangement rather than having it dictated to her by "the little men," as in Grimm. (Copyright 1938 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy RKO Radio Films.)

stay; I'll keep house for you, cook . . ."). How different from the source, in which "the dwarfs said to her, 'If *you* will keep our house for us, and cook, and wash . . . you may stay.'" There, men determine an arrangement; the woman passively agrees, the very thing mainstream feminist Greer condemned.

As James R. Petersen noted, Greer always attacked "the ancient role of the passive female."¹⁸ Disney, however, transformed his Snow White into the active character. Likewise, antifeminist Midge Decker, in *The New Chastity*, defended women's continuing (so long as it was by choice) in the role as nurturer: "As a special being, her true fulfillment lies in the exercise of her special capacity for sustaining and refining and enriching the materials of everyday existence."¹⁹ Though she performs the same work as will be done in the Disney film, the Grimms' Snow-white incarnates the retro woman, given no choice but to assume a domestic position. Walt's Snow White makes her own decisions, redeeming housework from mere

drudgery—less a description of housework itself than the proper way to define housework if it is imposed on the person doing it.

Clearly, Disney would agree with those members of the National Organization for Women who stand in

opposition to the idea that men are the enemy. They do not seek to sever relations with men . . . only to alter them. They do not . . . seek to liberate women [from men and/or marriage to men] but to liberate men *and* women from [an unbalanced] system . . . that does danger to both.²⁰

What must be acknowledged by the man (or, in this unique case, men) in a woman's life is that housework is equal in value to any labor performed "in the world"—that, in fact, the home *is* a part of that world, and the work done there equal in validity to anything achieved in an office.

Though Snow White does indeed cook, she's anything but their servant. Hands on hips, she is a take-charge woman who unrelentingly insists they wash (thereby eliminating dirtiness, a key vestige of the immature male) before sitting down. Grumpy's reaction is precisely what we expect: "Women!" In no way, though, does Disney defend this, or any of Grumpy's other proclamations. He is the only dwarf we laugh *at* rather than *with*. The redneck male who must be won over, Grumpy does possess an essential goodness that ultimately allows him to overcome a lifetime of narrow thinking. In due time, he will come to see a woman in charge is not necessarily a bad thing. It all depends on the individual woman who holds that position.

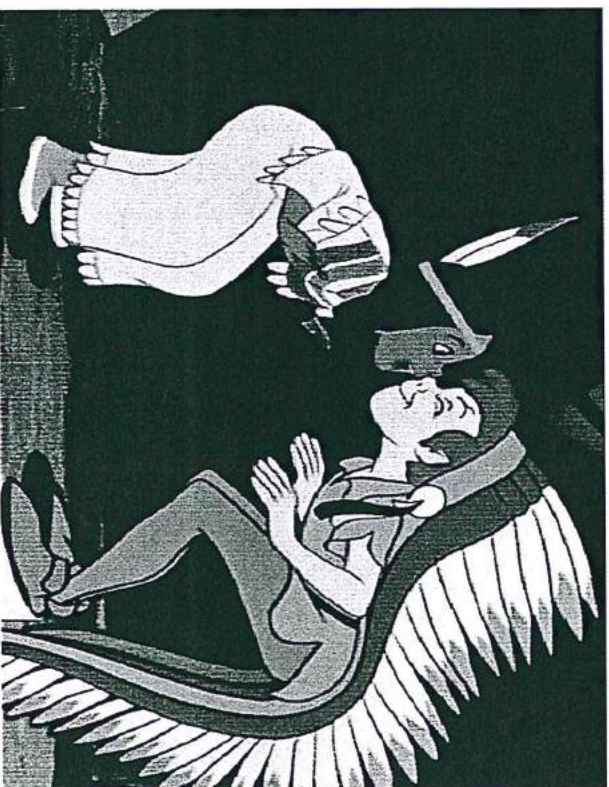
For contrast, Disney then cuts from their meal to the Queen's castle. The film's two women serve as foils for each other, highly complex positive and negative (rather than simple good and bad) extremes of the female principle. If the positive is based on natural inner beauty radiating outward, then the negative derives from neurotic, obsessive dwelling on one's physical attributes, appearance as image. Yet Disney, no male basher, does not blame men for this neurosis. However unconsciously, he takes umbrage at what's now often viewed as the "*male*-inspired process of turning her [face and] body into a *thing* to be prized."²¹ The key male character before Prince Charming's arrival—the Queen's husband, Snow White's father—never appears in the film, though he plays a significant role in the Grimm and Perrault sources.

This Queen's tragedy is self-absorption. Confronting the mirror once again, she learns that Snow White lives still. At this point we encounter

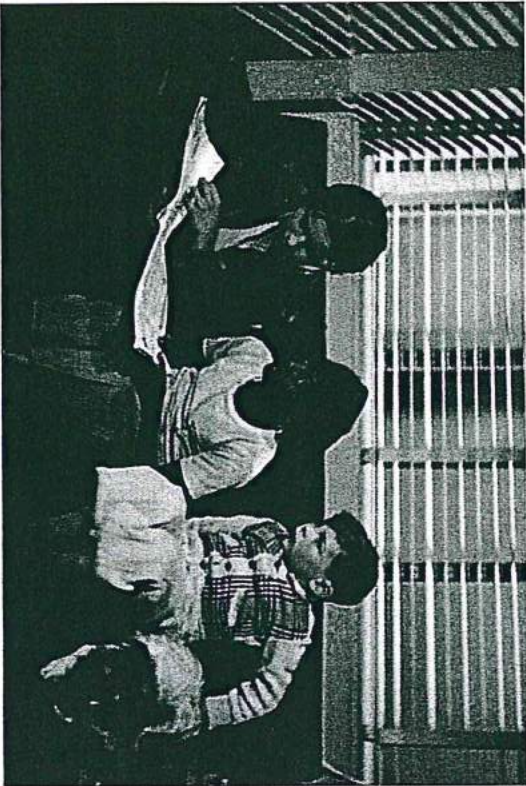
Disney's most significant alteration. The Grimms' evil Queen "painted herself and dressed like an old pedlar woman, so that no one would know her," before setting out for the dwarfs' cottage. Disney's mixes "a formula to transform my beauty into ugliness." Nowhere is it implied that, if and when the Queen does succeed in eliminating Snow White, she can return to her former beauty. This qualifies her decision as abject madness. The image of a crone, grinning and without irony cackling, "I'll be the fairest in the land," is implicitly one of the great artistic condemnations of the Beauty Trap. Now, every other woman in the land is fairer than she.

A true foil for Snow White, the queen-crone taunts her nasty pet bird. Snow White's oneness with nature was conveyed by her warm relationship with a sweet bird. Though "beauty is as beauty does" may be a tiresome cliché, it's one we now accept as an enlightened outlook. The Queen—initially far more beautiful than Snow White, physically speaking—makes herself hideous by bad behavior. What a difference between her cruel domination (the huntsman lies dead in a cell, a skeleton arm stretching for water) and Snow White's always positive "domination" over the dwarfs. Though Snow White, as we already know, possesses a lovely voice, she joins the dwarfs only at the end of their choral performance, via a single note that, ribbonlike, ties their individual voices together into communal song. Yet her continued presence creates a positive bonding among the men notably missing from their earlier scenes. They failed to function as a group, until a woman entered their lives. Rather than de-emphasizing their masculinity, she helped little boys become, finally, adult persons.

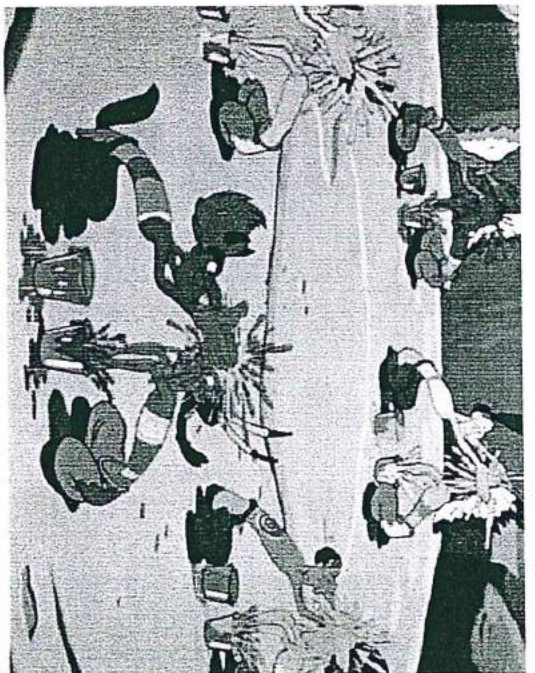
Snow White is formidable. Dopey must climb up on Sleepy's shoulders to dance with her, visually implying that the strong woman is worth any two men. Snow White remains, however, as feminine as she is feminist. The delightful kissing sequence—the dwarfs anxiously file past Snow White on their way to work next morning—makes clear that Snow White is aware of, and willing to positively exploit, the power of her sensuality. Each dwarf receives a kiss on his bald head. She, however, remains in clear control. Dopey rushes around the building for an additional kiss. Though his first transgression is tolerated, his second is not. Incessantly, he tries for a kiss on the lips, yet willingly accepts one identical to what his comrades receive. Grumpy, after feigning disinterest, submits to a kiss, and is transformed. After experiencing this female's "white" (as opposed to the



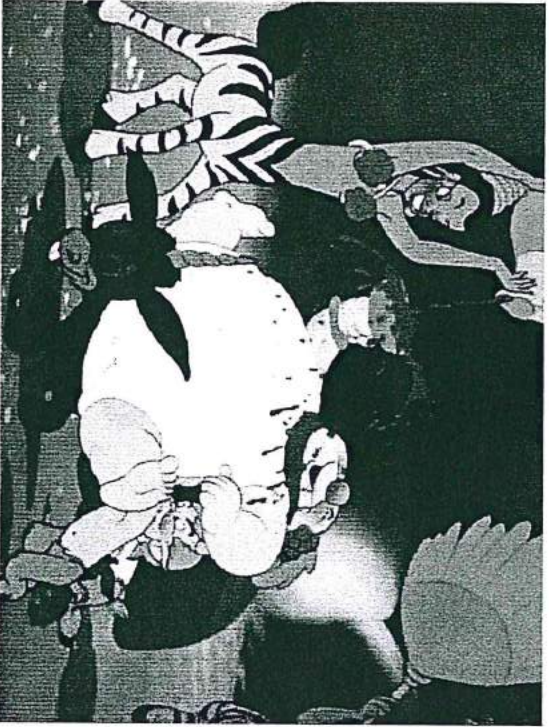
PROMOTING INTERRACIAL LOVE. The once potent stigma of miscegenation was at the heart of most racist thinking, and Disney films were among the first to discard such outdated ideas by offering positive images of interracial love to impressionable young people. Anglo boys who identified with Peter Pan were charmed by his happy romance with Princess Tiger Lily. (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



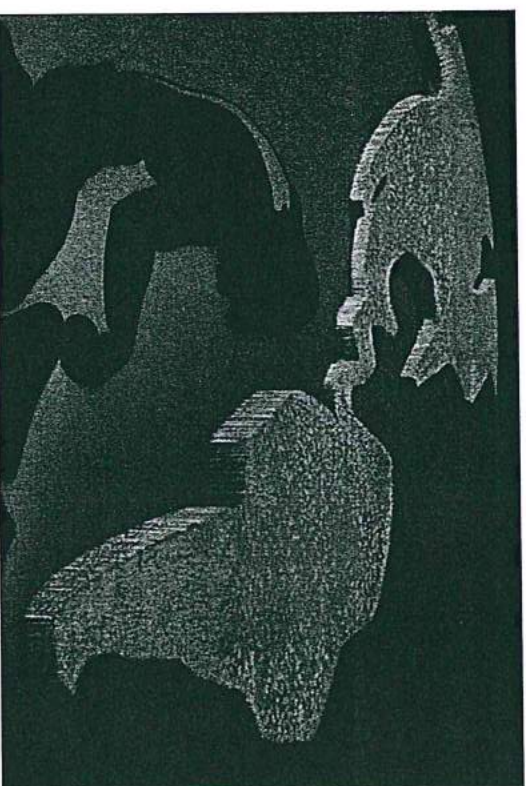
INITIATING AN INTEGRATED AMERICA. When the government hired Disney to produce educational shorts about modern health issues, Walt added an anti-racist subtext by insisting (over objections from some officials) upon including among the children a centrally situated, non-stereotypical African in *Defense against Invasion* (1943). (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



THE USES AND MISUSES OF CARICATURE. Racial caricaturing within a work of art is always abhorrent when employed to imply the inferiority of any one ethnic group or when any one such group is singled out for negative caricature while, in contrast, the Anglos are more fully developed. Disney takes the other approach: The Indians in *Pecos Bill*, though certainly caricatured, are no more exaggerated than any of the grotesque whites encountered in the story (TOP). Likewise, the five black crows in *Dumbo* are positively caricatured, being the only characters (other than Dumbo's mother) who—like the brown mouse—reveal true and selfless humanity (BOTTOM). (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



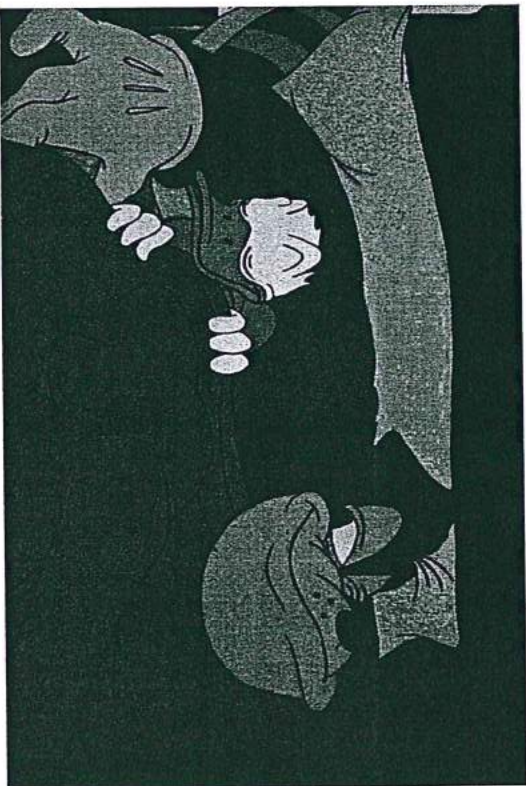
DEFYING THE PRODUCTION CODE. Though nudity was banished from films following Joseph Breen's 1933 crusade to "clean up" Hollywood, Disney alone managed to slip subliminal images of healthy sensuality into films like *Fantasia* (top), in that same movie (bottom), he defended "the orgy," depicting such an event as harmless fun for positively portrayed characters, whereas conservative directors like Cecil B. DeMille used open sexuality to identify villains who would in the end die horribly. (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



THE INCEPTION OF DIVERSITY. Ten years ahead of his time, Disney cast ethnics in anti-clichéd roles. Creating a symbol for the typical American farmer in *Food Will Win the War*, he chose an African American (top); as signifier of our common pan-American heritage in *The Grain That Built a Hemisphere*, Walt picked a notably nonviolent Native American (bottom). (Property of Walt Disney Productions, 1942, 1943; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



THE "STRAFINING" OF ACAPULCO BEACH. Politically correct critics attack Disney for allowing Donald Duck and friends to sweep down on Latina women in *The Three Caballeros*, claiming it is both racist and sexist. They fail to take into account the moral context. The Duck and his pals are portrayed as embarrassing jerks, while the women are all shown in a highly positive light. The film (and the filmmaker) criticize rather than celebrate such outrageous activity, qualifying the sequence as both anti-racist and anti-sexist. (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)



THE SECRET LIFE OF A MACHO MALE. Disney films imply that extreme macho posturing may be an attempt to cover up and compensate for deep-seated insecurities about one's gender identity. Tough, abusive Sgt. Pete is such a character. In *The Vanishing Private* (1942), when he believes no one is around, Pete dances with pink flowers (top). In *The Old Army Game* (1943), Pete slips into bed with blissfully oblivious draftee Donald (bottom). (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)

Queen's "black") magic, Grumpy will never be grumpy again. Disney's dwarfs fulfill, in the words of Michelle Wallace in *M2*, the hope that

men must be made so uncomfortable by the lunacy of sexism that they feel compelled to do a few things males seem rarely to do—explore their motivations and become suspicious of their desires in regard to women.²²

For economy's sake, Disney eliminates several attempts by the Queen to kill Snow-white. While an unpleasant incident involving attempted strangulation may have been excised for the sake of family entertainment, another appears cut for a thematic purpose. The Grimms' Queen tempted Snow-white with a poisoned comb, which so attracted the girl that she opened her door. By implication, then, Snow-white is, in the source, as vulnerable to vanity as her antagonist. Disney's Snow White allows the crone to enter only because she carries an apple, which the heroine hopes to bake in a pie for her friends. The Grimms' greedy, selfish girl wanted to devour the apple all by herself. The original Snow-white endangered herself by superficial self-interest; Disney's Snow White, by her desire to please others who, having treated her well, deserve recompense.

The Grimms' Snow-white appears an absolute airhead, allowing the same tricky pedlar woman into her home three times. Disney's Snow White slips only once, in accordance with her construction as an intelligent if imperfect being. As in Grimm, Disney's dwarfs warn her about strangers. Here, though, she appears less dumb than naïve, admirably vulnerable to an old woman's protestations. In Disney, not only the dwarfs but also the animals sense danger, though Snow White—still the radical innocent—does not. However strong an individual Snow White may be, there comes a time when only community effort will suffice. Animals (nature) and dwarfs (men) align themselves for the first time, owing to a now-shared belief in the positive female principle. Together, they rush (too late) to rescue their dearly beloved, as Snow White bites into the poisoned apple. Though this might appear to cut across the film's incipiently feminist grain, the opposite proves true. Were Disney to present Snow White as perfect, she would not qualify as a feminist heroine, only an old-fashioned male's placement (in art) of his ideal woman on a pedestal. Few things prove more damaging to healthy relationships between women and men than dichotomizing women as saints or sinners. Despite a descent into evil and madness, even the Queen is hardly a cliché. Rather, she em-



A KISS IS STILL A KISS. A male-to-male kiss was all but unheard of in Production Code Hollywood. Disney alone circumvented such rules. Chip 'n' Dale in *Two Chips and a Miss* (1944) are among many male characters who embrace and, to their surprise, enjoy it. (Property of Walt Disney Productions; reprinted courtesy of Buena Vista Releasing.)

a *female* voice—warm, resonant, and intelligent. However normal now, the employment of a woman in this capacity was, in the late 1940s, as unlikely as a female news anchor being hired for a radio or TV broadcast. The long-held prejudice that a man's voice sounded more "objective" and "rational" held sway. Disney alone broke that gender barrier.

As in *Snow White*, in the previous decade, this film early on warns against the Beauty Trap. The orphaned Cinderella's stepmother and half sisters, Drusilla and Anastasia, are "bitterly jealous" of the girl's "charm and beauty." Disney turns his back on the source, where the sisters were themselves "beautiful and fair in appearance." The Grimms' Cinderella appears nondescript until adorned with a magical makeover that briefly conveys an appealing if artificial surface—allowing her to "catch" the prince by calculatedly exploiting the male gaze. Disney's shrewish sisters have sufficient motivation to be jealous: this Cinderella is indeed a beauty. Significantly, though, she's a *natural* beauty whose loveliness shines through her rags, thereby reversing the source's conception. The Grimms' notion of Cinderella as unattractive owing to her clothing, becoming gorgeous after receiving a "gold gown," is justly deserving of the feminist dismissal of a certain kind of artificial beauty as dehumanizing. Disney reverses such attitudes.

The essential concept—an outright attack on the fallacy of judging women by appearance only—emerges as this film offers a variation on *Snow White*'s theme. Cinderella is completely unimpressed with (if not oblivious to) her physical attractiveness. She cannot be faulted for being born with good looks any more than Gloria Steinem. It would be wrong to dismiss a woman of brains *and* beauty so long as she keeps the latter in perspective. As Disney heroines, Cinderella and Snow White are sisters under the skin. If Snow White brought woodland animals into the dwarfs' home, then Cinderella hides her household's vulnerable animals from the wicked people who run this place.

Structurally speaking, *Cinderella* emerges as *Snow White* turned inside out, providing a perfect complement to the earlier movie. That notion is enhanced by Disney's sense of cinematic geography. Whereas *Snow White* opened with the Queen on high, gazing down from her tower's window at the young woman below, this film begins with an upward camera movement toward just such a tower. Cinderella up on high and inside. Still, certain elements, essential to his ongoing vision, do not alter. For Cinderella, as for Snow White, marriage is the end-all, suggesting there are

indeed limitations to any feminist interpretation. Again, though, there's a farsightedness to Disney's presentation of marriage. This is enhanced here by Disney's portrayal of the prince's father, broadly caricatured as a well-intentioned yet foolish old king who literally daydreams about the grandchildren he doesn't have but desperately wants. For this reason, he grows ever more anxious for his son to take a bride. This satiric (if never savagely so) vision presages the contemporary feminist point of view that "marriage had been the invention of men to . . . take control of [women's] capacity for reproduction—in order to lay claim to the rights of property."²⁶ In contrast, there's the prince, who, like *Snow White*'s indistinguishable male hero, signifies the emerging enlightened American male, here wandering less to look for medieval romance or chivalric adventure than searching for a sense of self.

The ball, in Disney's version, is held to celebrate the return of a prodigal son. In the source, the less ambitious (and less interesting) prince never left his father's kingdom. In Disney, the invitation list is open to *all* "available maidens," including ones as unattractive as Cinderella's stepsisters. In the source, only "beautiful young women" (emphasis added) were allowed entrance, so the prince "might choose between them." The institution of marriage would shortly emerge as a key Hollywood theme, most notably in Vincente Minnelli's *Father of the Bride* (1950). In such a context, *Cinderella* appears considerably foresighted in comparison to that celebration of capitalist excess. The title character (Spencer Tracy) prepares for an elaborate ritual in which his daughter (Elizabeth Taylor) will cease to be his little girl, emerging as an American Nora—a trophy-wife living in the Ibnesque home of her husband (Don Taylor). Such portrayals were also evident in most other marriage-minded movies of the Eisenhower era, running the gamut from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) to *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955).²⁷

While the source's prince unquestioningly does as told by his father, Disney's modernist hero scoffs at the notion of a certain time when any-one—male or female—"ought to" get married. Serving as the filmmaker's spokesman, this prince never damns (any more than he dreams of) the institution itself. He'll marry, happily and without hesitation, at that moment when he meets a woman who impresses him as an individual, rather than in the service of a conservative social convenience. As a foil, there's his father, forever muttering things like "There must be one who would make a suitable mother . . . wife."

In the introduction to their anthology *Woman in Sexist Society*, Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran complain that as long as unenlightened, patriarchal males call the shots,

woman shall remain a person defined not by her brain or her will or spirit, but rather by her *childbearing* properties and her status as *companion* to men who make, and do, and rule the earth. [Emphasis mine.]²⁸

By favoring the son, Disney makes clear whose side this auteur is on. Disney comes down squarely in favor of the feminist position expressed, some twenty years later, in *The Dialectic of Sex*: "the patriarchal family . . . defined woman as a different species due to their unique childbearing capacity" (emphasis added).²⁹

Cinderella, of course, will prove to be the prince's right woman. In Grimm, however, the prince is single-mindedly (indeed, simply-mindedly) attracted to the way she *looks* after donning her magical gown. In Disney, he isn't drawn to Cinderella's pleasant physicality so much as to her overall essence. Likewise, Disney's Cinderella undergoes a confusion not present in the source. For this Cinderella never realizes she's danced with the prince, but is mistakenly convinced she's fallen for an ordinary man—ordinary, at least, in the world's eyes. She, then, projects the new American woman who would assume center stage during the second half of the twentieth century.

That famed theme song of all Disney heroines—"Someday, my prince will come!"—is well illustrated here. What attracts her to the young man ("my prince" rather than "the prince") is his rightness for her. That is why she falls in love, not (as in the source) the potential of "marrying up." "Bride," Cinderella sighs, articulating a perfect balance between old (still subscribing to marriage) and new (redefining marriage for a new age). Other women in the film likewise present positive images of women who "take charge." The fairy godmother was nonexistent in Grimm, wherein a magic tree does the job. But if Disney planned to include an evil old step-mother, then for fairness's sake, there must also be a fine older lady as her foil—a positive female pole for full moral compass.

Cinderella will, receiving inspiration from her fairy godmother after the darkest moment, reassert her power of fiercely tested positive thinking. This too connects Disney's film to the later women's movement: "One of the curious and interesting things . . . is [the feminists'] discovery of Mother," Decker noted. "Several volumes of the movement's literature are

dedicated to the author's mother," for whom the feminist writer has during her own life's journey gained new respect.³⁰ All the while, Cinderella's determination is mirrored by the little mice who create, in Disney's delightful addition, a makeshift gown. Though wiseguy Jacques initiates this project ("Cinderelly, Cinderelly, we can help our Cinderelly") while slow-minded Gus-Gus performs most of the grunt work, a female mouse assumes full control of the operation. Under her knowing guidance, the task is properly performed by male subordinates. Orchestrating the work of animals cleaning the house, she resembles a miniature Snow White. Only when a woman is in charge do men perform menial jobs properly.

In the Company of Women *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)

Marriage is here again a central issue, though the filmmaker's approach is even more questioning than in the earlier films. Freely inventing from material in both Grimm and Perrault, while effectively pacing the picture to Peter Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty Suite*, Disney's team chose to begin their version with the announcement of an arranged marriage. The recently born Princess Aurora (Rosamond in the original) is betrothed by her parents to five-year-old Prince Philip, heir-apparent in a neighboring friendly country (Philip doesn't exist in the source). Only after establishing this impending situation does Disney introduce the essential plot device. Furious at not being invited to the betrothal ceremony, a witch (here called Maleficent) decrees that the princess will die after pricking herself on a spinning wheel. In Grimm, this will happen at age fifteen, Rosamond on a spinning wheel. In Grimm, this will happen at age fifteen, Rosamond in her final days of childhood. Disney shifts the date to a year later, when, at sixteen, Aurora, every bit a teenager, will be torn between childlike loyalties and adult instincts.

Initially, Disney follows the source, having a good fairy (twelfth and last in Grimm, her number here reduced to third) alter the curse to sleep rather than death—an indeterminate time in the film, one hundred years in the original. The king's only solution (in both versions) is to destroy all the kingdom's spinning wheels in a great bonfire, interpreted by Disney as a well-intentioned male's drastic (and notably unsuccessful) response to the problem. Here, Walt breaks from the earlier conception by having his three wise women/fairies spirit Aurora away. They will live together, as a community, in the woods—precisely that sort of women's commune numerous feminists experimented with throughout the seventies. "There is

a fear on men's part," Anne Koedt warned, "that women will seek the company of other women on a full, human basis . . . [and thereby] threaten the heterosexual institution" of marriage.³¹ Disney, based on internal evidence in his work, reveals himself as that rare male *not* threatened, and obviously admiring such an approach. The drama that follows makes clear that marriage is indeed not threatened, but in good time salvaged, by just such a community of women. His mother figures/female mentors raise their founding close to nature, leading to another of Disney's admirable "natural women"—beautiful without makeup.

Aurora (now called Briar Rose) becomes, like Snow White and Cinderella, linked—in the film's visuals and its music—to gentle birds; the villainess/foil, like her predecessors, is accompanied by a menacing raven. The good fairies (their names, including Flora and Fauna, make clear they, too, are *natural* women, if elderly ones) blessed the girl not only with outward beauty but also inward spirit. Once again, this positive personality is effectively expressed in the unique context of a movie-musical—in Disney, "song" always symbolizing a sweet yet fiercely independent spirit. As in the earlier films, song first attracts the prince to her. Another of Disney's young wanderer figures, Philip likewise overhears the girl singing in the woods to animal friends. He's irresistibly drawn to the source of that wondrous sound. We really do believe that, were he to discover a woman less physically perfect than the one he encounters, he would still fall in love with her.

Likewise, she falls in love with him. "Women are in no position to love freely," one 1970s feminist posited. "About the only discrimination women are able to exercise is the choice between the men who have chosen them."³² But in Disney films, each heroine chooses for herself—a reversal of what occurs in Grimm and Perrault. These two teenagers, though consistent with earlier Disney incarnations of young people discovering true love, also reflect the period during which *Sleeping Beauty* was created. "Why do they still treat me like a child?" Aurora/Briar Rose complains of the three good fairies. Her precise words were, four years earlier, spoken by Natalie Wood's Judy in *Rebel without a Cause* about her parents. Shortly, Prince Philip has strong words for his dominating parent: "Father, you're living in the past!" He then storms out of the castle, rejecting the patriarch's carefully formulated future plans, riding off to the woods to meet his true love. With similar words, *Rebel's* Jimbo (James Dean) rushed out of his father's house, hopped into his car, and headed for a wooded—i.e., "natural"—spot to meet Judy.

Finally, Disney brings one of the most significant plot elements from the earlier films to full fruition. Like Snow White and Cinderella before her, the princess has no idea she's fallen in love with a prince. She responded to the man as an individual, as—importantly—he did to her. Now, though, in an ironic turn of events, the prince likewise does not know he has met, and fallen in love with, the very princess he's promised to. Each, aware of but unconcerned with his/her royal station, would affront the social order by marrying a peasant. Like earlier Disney couples, though more adamant and insistent, Aurora and Philip would willingly defy an outdated structure were it to stand in the way of true love.

Whenever possible, Disney diminishes any element in the source that might inadvertently create what we today would tag as a sexist tone. The Grimms' princess, on the eve of her birthday, discovered the spinning wheel when

the king and queen rode abroad, and the maiden was left behind alone in the castle. She wandered about into all the nooks and corners, and into all the chambers and parlours, as the fancy took her.

Rosamond proved a second cousin to Pandora—the heedless, immature female who surrendered to whimsical curiosity and opened the wrong box, loosing evil upon the world. Disney's mature, complex, emotionally torn young woman—weeping alone, Juliet-like, divided between duty to beloved parents (promised marriage to a royal man) and to herself (desired marriage to the man she truly loves)—is instead cast in a spell that draws her unwillingly toward the wheel.

The Grimms' prince (arriving a century later, after countless others tried and failed to break through walls of thorn hedge), did so for the most superficial of reasons: "I do not fear to try, I shall win through and see the lovely Rosamond" (emphasis added). His only desire is to fulfill a male compulsion by getting a good *look* at this girl's legendary beauty. Conversely, Philip fights his way through all barriers to rejoin his "one true love," the girl—make that "woman"—of his dreams. The prince in Grimm is, simply, lucky. As the hundred years have passed, thorns fall away so he has no trouble entering unscathed. The prince in other earlier versions does hack his way through the barrier, allowing ample opportunity to display considerable—and conventional—machismo. Disney alone feminizes the situation. His Prince Philip, locked away in a dungeon by Maleficent, cannot perform his princely duties without help from the three good women.



THE FEMINIZATION OF FAIRY TALES. In Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Charming is the traditional male hero who single-handedly rescues the helpless virgin. Disney's version transforms that macho parable into a feminist fable, as he merely follows a community of strong women. (Copyright 1958 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy Buena Vista Releasing.)

It is *they* who break his chains, *they* who provide a bridge for him to escape over a dangerous moat, *they* who cut away the thorn hedge, and *they* who finally transform his ordinary sword into a magic weapon, able to conquer the dragon barring his way. Without a team of capable, clever women accompanying him across dangerous ground, Disney's hapless prince would not succeed. When he does, it is at reawakening the woman he deeply cares for with true love's kiss. For Grimm, "when he saw her *looking so lovely* in her sleep, he could not turn away his eyes; and presently he stopped and kissed her" (emphasis added). What we encounter in the old tale could today be viewed as sexual victimization of a woman by a man obsessed with her physical beauty but uncaring about her person—imposing himself upon her without permission.

Disney even adds, through a gag, one final notion of the ever-present importance of women—and not only young, conventionally beautiful ones. Two of the good fairies have agreeably argued throughout as to whether Aurora's wedding gown ought to be blue or pink. The couple

dances together, first in the castle and then amid clouds. All the while, the two good (if slightly mischievous) fairies employ their magic wands to constantly change the dress's color, back and forth. Though the lovers remain oblivious, we are kept very much aware of women who have, throughout the preceding events, controlled the story's situation for positive purposes. Even when at odds with one another, they continue to do so—seemingly forever. It is a fitting way to end not only this individual film, but the trilogy by which Disney transformed patriarchal old fairy tales into contemporary feminist fables.

Blending

So Dear to My Heart (1948)

Old Yeller (1957)

Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier (1954–1956)

Tales of Texas John Slaughter (1958–1961)

The Story of Robin Hood (1952)

Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue (1954)

The Sword and the Rose (1953)

Lady and the Tramp (1955)

The African Lion (1955)

Jungle Cat (1960)

Perril (1957)

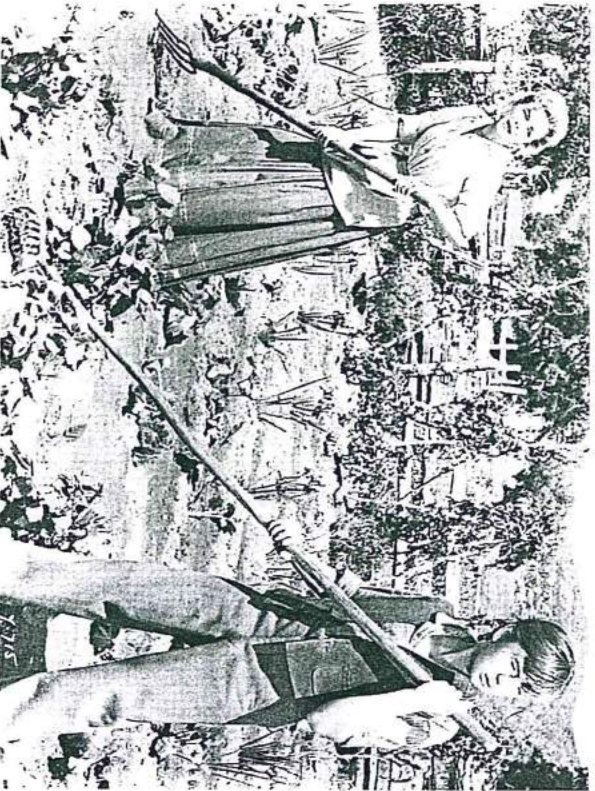
The early articulation of feminist thinking evident in the fairy-tale trilogy was hardly confined to animated classics. Strong women, including nonglamorous females, handily compete with men in the world of business or manage a home, this always a matter of the female's choice. In *So Dear to My Heart*, set in heartland America during the early twentieth century, Grandma (Beulah Bondi) is first glimpsed doing the plowing on her farm. Where her "man" is (having deserted, now dead) is never mentioned. Disney apparently didn't consider an explanation worth the effort. The same holds true for Westerns. Dozens of filmmakers told the tales of post-Civil War Texans, heading up the trail to Kansas cowtowns. Only Disney focused instead on the frontier woman left behind to maintain a household, as incarnated by Dorothy McGuire in *Old Yeller*. Even when the focus remains on a relatively traditional male hero—frontiersman Davy Crockett (Fess Parker), cattleman John Slaughter (Tom Tryon)—

Disney emphasizes the relationship of the man to his wife, particularly the equality of their relationship.

The same holds true for the British historical films. *Robin Hood* and *Rob Roy* concentrated, as their titles indicate, on legendary male outlaw heroes. Even here, though, Disney's image of women is impressive and, by today's standards, enlightened. Maid Marian does not, as in the more famous Warner Brothers version (1936), serve as Robin's aristocratic trophy-wife after arriving in Sherwood. Disney's Maid Marian becomes a full member of the revolutionary force, trading in her elegant clothing for the rough green outfit worn by the Merrie Men. She then volunteers for the most hazardous mission of all, spying on Prince John and his ruling-class thugs. Without her, Robin and his men could not pull off their final daring mission. Likewise, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine—though elderly—physically joins in the fight against her oppressive son.

In Disney's depiction of the Highland Rogue, Rob Roy's mother and wife both join in the Scottish rebel's fight against tyranny. More significantly, they invoke a feminine, and incipiently feminist, principle by—after proving their equality as worthy combatants—convincing the righteous outlaw to give up violence and find more peaceful ways to solve political problems. Only when he listens to this advice—advice that proves to be correct—is a just peace at last created. All's well that ends well, and, in Disney, things “end well” only when the men allow the will of women to override their own violent inclinations. This concept was furthered still in Disney's version of Charles Major's novel *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, a historical romance based on incidents from the reign of England's Henry VIII. The book's title indicated male domination of the period. To make the material more in line with his ongoing vision, Disney scuttled that concept, suggesting an equality between men and women when he named his movie after a symbol for each: *The Sword and the Rose*. While the sword of hero Charles Brandon (Richard Todd) dominates in the film's early portions, the rose of heroine Mary Tudor (Glynis Johns) wins out at the finale.

Animated films were released intermittently with such live-action dramas. There's a touch of feminism in *Lady and the Tramp*. When several male dogs kid Lady about her obvious pedigree, a rough-hewn female, Peg, comes to Lady's defense. For Disney, sisterhood exists even among *les biches*. A sensitivity to women's issues can be found in the *True-Life Adventures*. In *The African Lion*, the female of the species is seen dragging a gazelle's carcass to her hungry cubs. During the hunt, Disney



VEIN OF IRON. In the historical novels of Ellen Glasgow, frontier women were portrayed as stronger than the men, an image that rarely appeared in movies. Disney offered the exception; females old (*So Dear to My Heart*) (top) or young (*Old Yeller*) (bottom) are most often seen working behind a plow, the children required to help with the chores. (Copyright 1946 and 1958 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy Buena Vista Releasing.)



THE SWORD OF SHERWOOD FOREST. In Disney's version of the Locksley legend, Maid Marian (Joan Rice) is not, like Olivia de Havilland in the more famous Warner Brothers movie of two decades earlier, a papier-mâché helpless heroine, waiting for Robin Hood to rescue her. A flesh and blood woman, she can wield her lover's sword when necessary, or employ it as a phallic symbol when he is absent. (Copyright 1952 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy Buena Vista Releasing.)

emphasizes her ingenuity and courage. Constantly, there are crosscuts to the male, seen lazily yawning, much to the audience's amusement. *Jungle Cat* similarly focuses on the female of the species, her mate reduced to a supporting role. The title character in *Perrin*, a *True-Life Fantasy*, is a female squirrel, her mate Porro seen strictly in relationship to her primacy,

Into the Sixties

Pollyanna (1960)

The Absent-Minded Professor (1961)

A Tiger Walks (1964)

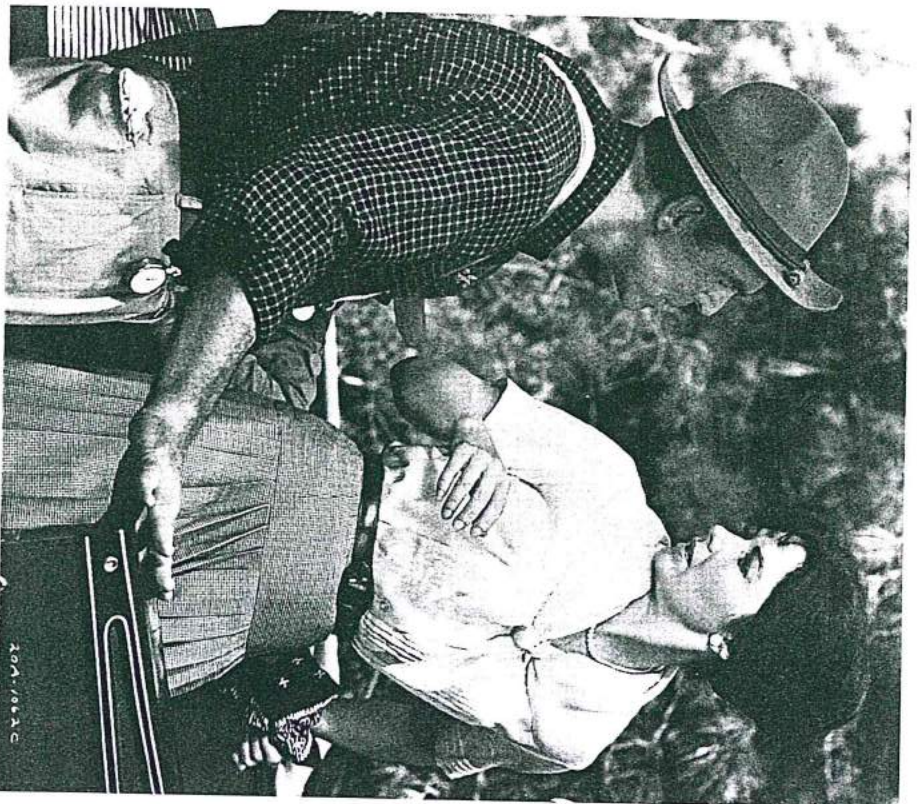
Follow Me, Boys! (1966)

As the sixties emerged, Disney's live-action comedies and dramas presented portraits of liberated women freeing the minds of men heretofore locked in constrictive worldviews. When, in *Pollyanna*, we see an old-fashioned band playing at an evening carnival, the drummer is a female, a fact emphasized in close-ups. Not a stunning young woman, to lend the scene sex appeal, but an older, unglamorous lady, clearly chosen owing to her talent. In *The Absent-Minded Professor*, Betsy (Nancy Olson)—is presented as a protofeminist heroine: self-sufficient, working at the college not because she has to (proposals come to her constantly), but because she wants to, flatly refusing to marry to satisfy social convention or for financial security.

In *A Tiger Walks*, Pete the sheriff (Brian Keith)—a traditional "man's man" in the John Wayne mold—is forced to choose between two value systems: the natural love of women—represented by his daughter (Pamela Franklin) and wife (Vera Miles)—and the unnatural ambitions of men (symbolized by a jaded coterie of local political leaders, uptight middle-age Anglo men in business suits). At the moment of decision, Pete moves in opposition to what the stock Western hero would do—deciding to stand with the women and attempt to rescue an escaped circus animal rather than use guns to kill it. By absorbing female values, Pete saves himself from the macho mentality that threatened to destroy him in their more enlightened eyes.

Likewise, Disney's approval of what would shortly emerge as feminist values is in evidence in *Follow Me, Boys!* as Vida (Vera Miles) makes her choice between retro male Ralph (Elliott Reid) and iconoclastic Lem (Fred MacMurray). Though Ralph owns a new car and can chauffeur Vida around, while Lem is unable even to afford new shoes, attitude—not social status—attracts this enlightened woman. Vida isn't necessarily sure that she wants to marry at all, and has refused to do so for conventional reasons. She will marry if, and only if, she finds a man worthy of sharing her life.

When, on the open road, the three accidentally come into contact (Vida and Ralph are picnicking, Lem out camping with his scout troop), Ralph



"YOU DON'T OWN ME!" A song with that title, performed by Lesley Gore during the early sixties, is often considered the first feminist rock 'n' roll record. Disney championed such an attitude in *Follow Me, Boys!* His heroine threatens to break off the relationship if her fiancé ever again "orders" instead of "asking" her to help. (Copyright 1965 Walt Disney Productions; courtesy Buena Vista Releasing)

makes the mistake of ordering (rather than asking) Vida to step back into the car. Outraged, she prefers to walk back to town with the scouts, later breaking a dinner date with Ralph to attend a movie with Lem. He, however, almost loses Vida, for reasons similar to Ralph's macho-mentality blunder. While Lem is trying to teach the boys to be self-reliant in nature,

Vida shows up with chicken dinners for everyone. Lem is insistent that she remove the food at once, so that they can learn to survive on their own. Vida has no objection to Lem's concept but questions his tone of voice:

vida: Is that an . . . order?

lem: No, a suggestion.

She can live with this answer, so they enter into a debate as to whether the boys ought to be allowed to eat the dinner. Suddenly, though, Lem reverses his position.

lem: All right, it's an *order*!

vida: Now, you sound like Ralph!

Though Lem is far more attractive than Ralph, that does him no good whatsoever. To win the Disney woman, a man must first set aside what she furiously refers to as "male pride." In time, Lem backs off his patriarchal position, something Ralph proved unable to do.

lem: All I did was ask you to get rid of the chicken.

vida: No, you didn't. You said: "I forbid you." Huh! "Master of the Universe."

There's little question whose side Disney is on. The male-as-master is an offensive notion, throughout his work in general, in this film in particular. In time, Lem and Vida will become Disney's vision of the enlightened couple, existing in a state of total equality—the ultimate onscreen expression of Disney's enlightened attitude.