The Wonderful World of Gender Roles: A Look at Recent Disney Children’s Films

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The Wonderful World of Gender Roles:
A Look at Recent Disney Children’s Films

By Elaina Donofrio

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To my parents,
for fueling my love for Disney.

To Dr. Lisa Cuklanz,
for keeping me motivated and on schedule.

To Mike Nardella, Sean Roche, and Anthony Russo,
for helping me carry my research books to and from the library.

And to everyone who read and edited my thesis,
thank you.
Table of Contents

Chapter One  
Introduction........................................................................................................1

Chapter Two  
Method.............................................................................................................5

Chapter Three  
Theoretical Backing.........................................................................................6

Chapter Four  
Literature Review.............................................................................................9

Chapter Five  
Analysis...........................................................................................................37

Chapter Six  
Conclusion......................................................................................................88

References...........................................................................................................93
Introduction

I love Disney. As I write this, I have on my *Lion King* t-shirt while the Disney Classic’s Soundtrack plays in the background. (I have the complete collection.) Henke, Umble, and Smith (1996) accurately described the Disney phenomenon:

Children can watch Disney videos before they brush their teeth with Disney character toothbrushes, go to sleep in *Beauty and the Beast* pajamas, rest their heads on *The Little Mermaid* pillow cases, check the time on *Pocahontas* watches, and drift off to sleep listening to *Cinderella* sing, “No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep believing, the dream that you wish will come true” on their tape recorders. (p. 229)

Not only does this embody my experience as a child, but also somewhat my behavior now, except I prefer “Won’t Say I’m in Love” from *Hercules*. If there is one word that nearly every child in the United States under the age of 10 knows, it is “Disney,” and as Henke, Umble, and Smith creatively depict, Disney is everywhere, not just on the screen. Although other film companies target children as well, “as a producer and supporter of culturally embedded films [Disney] far surpasses even the next closest studio” (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003, p. 94). In the Disney Princess line alone, over 25,000 marketable products are available for purchase (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011, p. 555).

Audiences typically experience the Disney phenomenon on a superficial level. The movies are funny, family-friendly, and well made. However, when you watch the films through a gender lens, some very surprising and some not to surprising elements
appear. Although Disney has evolved over the years, gender stereotypes still exist in the films. Children learn gender and are more impressionable at a young age, so Disney’s gender stereotyping is a cause for concern. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) note that “children, as opposed to adult audiences, have gender schemata that are still in early developmental stages; therefore, they are more likely to absorb new information gleaned from such sources as animated films” (p. 105). Although Devor (1992) argues that the immediate family group is the most important molder for gender, Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner (2008) note that media are influential sources of learning about societal constructions, such as gender. Therefore, the topic of gender in Disney films is extremely important due to the power and breadth of Disney and the effects that media have on children.

For this thesis, I watched four of the most recent Disney animated films: Meet the Robinsons (Anderson, 2007), Bolt (Howard & Williams, 2008), Princess and the Frog (Clements & Musker, 2009), and Tangled (Greno & Howard, 2010) and four non-animated, PG rated, Disney films from the same years: Bridge to Terabithia (Csupo, 2007), Bedtime Stories (Shankman, 2008), Race to Witch Mountain (Fickman, 2009), and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice (Turteltaub, 2010). Most research on Disney films has been centered on the Disney Princesses. Although some research that focuses on films that do not fall into this category exists, the amount fails in comparison to the literature on the former. Furthermore, even less research has been done on non-animated Disney movies. Since these films are so recent, the oldest released in 2007, I have chosen them for the topic of my study. Although Winnie the Pooh was technically the most recent animated
film at the time of my research, I have excluded it because it is an exact remake of an older version.

One of the most striking aspects of the films is the placement of the female in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, I introduce the concept of the “male ensemble,” to describe the phenomenon that most side characters in Disney films are male, especially in the animated films. I also present the idea of the “undercut,” which describes the scenario in which a female breaks a gender stereotype to later be casted in a stereotype. Therefore, her prior action is undercut. I argue that in spite of gender stereotypes and imbalances that are still prominent in these films, Disney has made a noticeable amount of progress.

Disney’s earlier animated films, such as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, exemplify the “perfect girl,” a concept characterized by the submissive female, which I will further analyze later in the paper. Both of these “heroines” fall into deep sleeps that only their Prince Charmings can cure with a kiss, based solely on superficial attraction. The heroines in the eight films that I have studied for this thesis have grown exponentially from their subservient predecessors. Stereotypical gender portrayals still exist in the more recent films of this study, but the females are stronger and the men are less hegemonic.

Next, I explore the popular Harry Potter series, a decision that was multi-faceted. Harry Potter, like Disney, is a cultural phenomenon worthy of study. The Harry Potter literature and film series can be used as an example of how to evaluate gender in non-animated films, since the Disney section of my literature review was purely based off
analyses of animated media, but half of my films for analysis are non-animated. Furthermore, as a non-Disney product, Harry Potter can be used as an object of comparison to see whether similar trends in gender roles and stereotypes occur across different texts and companies. For example, many elements that parents consider “problematic” in Disney films also occur in the Harry Potter series. During my analysis, I point out when stereotyped examples in Disney are also present in the Warner Bros. sensation, Harry Potter. Thus, I show that Disney has not only come a long way over the years but that some of the negative elements in the Disney movies are also present in other media conglomerates.

In this thesis, I will first discuss my method and theoretical backing, including important terms. Then, I have a literature review, which will discuss gender and children, children and the media, children and television, gender in children’s media, the importance of Disney, gender in Disney animated films, the importance of Harry Potter, and gender in Harry Potter. Following the literature review, I analyze components of these films, which I have separated into four main sections: the male ensemble, the undercut, animated films, and non-animated films. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of my main points, the significance of my topic, and suggestions for further research. Overall in this paper, I plan to show that Disney, as beloved as it is, may still contain some harmful elements for children who are able to “live in character from breakfast to bedtime” (Wolhwend, 2012, p. 594), but that overall, these elements are not an attribute exclusive to Disney.
Method

For my analysis, I watched the four most recent Disney animated films available on DVD: *Meet the Robinsons*, *Bolt*, *Princess and the Frog*, and *Tangled* and four non-animated, PG Disney films from the same years: *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Bedtime Stories*, *Race to Witch Mountain*, and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) noted the importance of content analysis in research (p. 313), and this is the method I used to analyze the films. While watching these films, I paid special attention to gender. I looked at the number of male characters versus female characters. In addition, I observed how gender was displayed in the films and how femininity and masculinity were constructed. In the animated films, this process involved looking at animation/art decisions, dialogue, and the personalities and interests of the characters. For the non-animated films, I focused on dialogue, sequencing of scenes, and personalities and interests of the characters. Since non-animated films must rely on actors and actresses and not animation decisions, this pushed me to look more to the other aspects of gender construction. In general, my analysis is mainly qualitative.
Theoretical Backing

For theoretical backing, several key terms are important for this project. The “perfect girl,” as described by Henke et al. (1996), is “the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with, the girl who, in her perfection is worthy of praise and attention, worthy of inclusion and love” (p. 231). The princesses of early Disney movies exemplify this concept of the perfect girl. For example, Cinderella and Snow White are extremely obedient and kind. In addition to being the object of praise, the perfect girl is extremely quiet, calm, and kind; she is never cruel or authoritative. Overall, the perfect girl depicts rather submissive characters that also “learns to see themselves through the gaze of others” (p. 231). Therefore, she is not only submissive and kind but is aware of the male gaze.

Wohlwend (2012) furthers with this concept of the perfect girl in Disney, arguing that “the Disney Princess brand identity combines the 10 heroines, creating a brand persona that is a friendly, always-beautiful, self-sacrificing ingénue who never loses sight of her goal: to attract the hero” (p. 596). Zarranz (2007), however, disagrees. She believes that in later years, Disney has created a counterpart to the perfect girl: the Diswomen. This character is still worthy of love and attention but has a mind of her own as opposed to the traditional, submissive character. Zarranz believes Esmeralda of The Hunchback of Notre Dame best exemplifies the qualities of the Diswomen. The Diswomen “trespass the boundaries of Disney’s traditional Manichean definition of femininity, becoming multi-faceted women who are successfully represented, consistent with a contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality” (Zarranz, 2007, p. 56).
Therefore, the Diswomen stand in opposition to the perfect girl and offer an evolved depiction of the Disney princess.

On the other hand, males in films are categorized as beta male and villain-as-sissy. Gillam and Wooden (2008) present the concept of the beta male in opposition to the traditional alpha male character, which “evokes ideas of dominance, leadership, and power in human social organizations” (p. 3). In general, the alpha male upholds traditional patriarchal values. In contrast to this character, “a new kind of leading man,” the beta male is becoming common in Disney/Pixar films (p. 3). The beta male has same-sex (male) bonds with other characters in the film (p. 5), has some feminine elements, such as showing sympathy and feelings and acknowledging the importance of community (p. 6), and can embrace and overcome his shortcomings. In short, he stands in direct opposition to the alpha male in the way that Diswomen oppose the perfect girl. Gillam and Wooden (2008) explain that Woody and Buzz Light Year from Toy Story exemplify the beta male.

Villain-as-sissy, as discussed by Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003), describes the phenomenon of animated films using gender transgression to depict villains as deviant. Based off of the idea of queering, or “the moment of fissure when that which is normal is thrown into question—a space through which the researcher can locate and relay evidence that problematizes the relation between the normal and the natural” (p. 92), villain-as-sissy is simply giving feminine attributes to male villains. His femininity can come from the way he looks, acts, or speaks. The villain-as-sissy appears across a range of animated films in this study, not just in Disney. Jafar from Aladdin is one example
that Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) mention. Furthermore, the villain-as-sissy also appears in some of the non-animated films.

Overall, these terms help categorize the four archetypal characters that are found in Disney films: the perfect girl and Diswomen for females and the beta male and villain-as-sissy for males. Although not every character in the films fits into one of these categories, using these classifications aids my analysis of the films because it provides a basis of how to look at the characterization of males and females.
Literature Review

Gender and Children

The first few sections of my literature review, while not directly related to my specific subject of film, include key ideas/findings that are relevant to this study of children’s films. For this reason, I have included them first to provide a solid foundation for the later sections of my literature review, which build on these early ideas.

A plethora of research has been done on children and gender. In this section of my literature review, I will look at research involving the stages of gender roles, the effect of gender on grades, gender constancy, the differences between genders in regard to interaction with media and peers, and the idea of the “other.”

Devor (1992) provides an overview on the research on gender and children and the differences between what it means to be feminine and what it means to be masculine. She found that learning to be properly gendered members of society has to begin with the establishment of a gender identity (p. 23) and that this is a lifelong process. Between 18 months and two years, children begin to settle into a gender identity, and by two, they can identify other members of their gender. Within the next year, they have a consistent concept of gender, and by five to seven years old, they are convinced that they are permanent members of their gender grouping. Young children (five and under) can think that gender is something that can change with clothing, hairstyle, and activity decisions (p. 24), and by seven, they realize that it is a function of role rather than one of anatomy (p. 23). From this information, it should come as no surprise that children are able to judge their own actions against generalized conceptions they have of how others in
society should act (p. 25). Therefore, it is clear that children, as little as they may appear, have an extensive understanding of gender at a rather young age.

Devor further explains how in North America, sex and gender are commonly used interchangeably, and thus, people see sex as the determiner of gender and, consequently, gender role (p. 27). People often see femininity and masculinity as opposites (p. 28) and certain behaviors are suitable for each group (p. 28). For example, childcare and smiling are expected of females whereas confidence and stern facial expressions are more typical of males. However, Devor does admit that exceptions and variations can exist (p. 32). From her research, it becomes very obvious that children watching Disney movies are indeed aware of the gender enactment in the films and have certain expectations about how characters should behave.

Since children do learn gender at such an early age, one wonders if associating with a certain gender has any implications or effects on the children. The following research suggests that it does. Orr (2011) looked at kindergarten classes to examine the effect of gender socialization using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort. Looking at 6,394 children (3,177 female and 3,217 male, pp. 274-275), she found that females are more likely to participate in stereotypically “female” activities, which overall encouraged “a higher degree of docility (p. 273) and that this participation has a positive effect on their grades (p. 278). She based her study on Mickelson’s “sex-role socialization” hypothesis which says that “girls do well in school because they are socialized to be good” (accepting rules, being obedient) and that males
have “a degree of resistance to authority figures like teachers and a certain devaluation of schoolwork because it’s ‘feminine’” (p. 272).

These findings are extremely problematic. Being “docile” or submissive should not necessarily be a characteristic females strive for during their lives, even if they do lead to better grades as a child, because women should not feel like they are second to men. They should know to stand up for themselves and what they believe in. In fact, it seems as though Michelson’s idea of “good” aligns with the concept of the perfect girl (Henke et al., 1996) in its promotion of women who abide by the rules and are obedient. This article shows that the messages we send children and the activities they participate in do affect them and their performance in school. There is a “tendency of parents and other agents of socialization to encourage children to participate in gender-typed activities may inhibit development and affect educational outcomes” (Orr, 2011, p. 282). Disney movies can act as these other agents of socialization.

Frey and Ruble (1992), Wohlwend (2012), Baker-Sperry (2007), and Renold (2005) all look at the interaction of children with their peers in relation to gender. Frey and Ruble (1992) looked at gender constancy, which is the belief that gender is unchanging (p. 714). In a study with 95 children between five and 10 years old, the researchers had the subjects watch a tape of same-sex and other-sex children playing with toys of differing appeals. It was found that boys with a constant concept of gender played with unattractive “male preferred” toys for longer than boys without a constant concept of gender, which suggests that gender constant boys participate in sex-typed behavior. Girls, on the other hand, had less consistent sex typing. The researchers
suggest this difference may come from the idea that “girls have a looser definition of “sex appropriate”” (p. 719). This may stem from the notion that “being a “tomboy” is not as bad as being a “sissy”” (p. 719). Therefore, this research suggests that it is more likely for girls to accept masculine things than for boys to accept feminine things (Tobin, 2000). For this reason, some researchers believe that girls will accept boy films more regularly than boys will accept girl films. Baker-Sperry (2007) also believed this was true.

Boys are not likely to embrace a female character, but “girls, however, are often willing to embrace a male main character such as the popular children’s character, Harry Potter, for example” (Baker-Sperry, 2007, p. 718). The purpose of the study was to investigate children’s interpretation of Cinderella at the level of peer interaction (p. 717), and through observation of 148 students ages six or seven (p. 719), Baker-Sperry found that gender and gendered expectations are essential to process interpretation and construction of meaning for children. The study showed that there is a difference in identification between boys and girls. Girls were able to relate to the fairy tale and compare their lives to it, and they did not question the expected gendered characterizations in the story (pp. 721-722). Boys, on the other hand, responded in a satirical way and thought that liking the fairy tale was bad since it was a “girls’ book” (p. 723). This finding supports Frey and Ruble’s idea that it is more problematic for boys to accept feminine things.

Wohlwend (2012) also studied classroom behavior. Two six-year-old boys played with Disney Princess transmedia and drew lots of princesses at school, which seems to transgress and blur gender boundaries. However, they chose to change the story
lines and often made the dolls participate in more masculine behavior. For example, one of the boys emphasized that the girl doll he was using was the bad guy in their play.

From this observation, Wohlwend’s research supports the idea presented by both Baker-Sperry (2007) and Frey and Ruble (1992): boys are less likely to accept feminine things. Or in this case, they choose to use them, but they morph them in masculine ways.

Renold (2005) explored the concept of the “other.” Her chapter is about children who experience intense feelings of marginalization by their peers but who still continue to vigorously resist normative gender and sexual discourses and ways of being (p. 146). She uses the term “other” to conceptualize transgressive identities that blur or cross hegemonic gender and sex boundaries (p. 147). However, she does note that the idea of the “other” is contemporally and contextually contingent because the idea of hegemony may change over time or across groups of people. Renold provides three important definitions to distinguish between concepts of “other.”

“Othering” is “daily performances engaged in by all children to delineate their particular gender/sexual identity (in relation to what they are not) and this means by which some genders are constructed as ‘normal’ and others as ‘abnormal’ (Renold, 2005, p. 148). Therefore, this is based on the concept of the hegemonic masculinity and femininity in a particular setting. “Doing other” are ways that some children (usually the dominant) can try out and momentarily engage with “other ‘non-hegemonic’ femininities, masculinities, and sexualities” (p. 148). To clarify, these are not the marginalized children but the dominant group temporarily transgressing the norm. Lastly, “being other” describes “the ways in which girls and boys consistently located themselves and
were located by others as ‘different’ from hegemonic and other dominant forms of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality” (p. 148). As previous studies have suggested, being other may be less frowned upon for females than it is for males. This may be one of the reasons why Renold found that boys often use humor as a way of parodying and subverting conventional gender and sexual dichotomies (p. 152).

While Baker-Sperry (2007) examined how children react differently to a story read aloud, Tobin (2000) and Oliver and Green (2001) examined gender differences in children’s responses to film entertainment (p. 71). In Oliver and Green (2001), the study focused on animated children’s films whereas Tobin (2000) chose non-animated children’s films. Tobin (2000) conducted his study at Koa Elementary School in Pearl City, Hawaii. He had eight all girl focus groups, eight all boy focus groups, and 16 mixed groups and showed them clips from *Swiss Family Robinson* and *The Black Stallion*. From the study, he looked to see what children knew about media representations of violence, race, and gender, and to see how they interacted with one another.

Tobin (2000) found that most of the girl’s comments were made in the all girl groups, which may suggest they feel more comfortable voicing their opinions without the presence of males (p. 32). The girls were more collaborative, talked more, and followed up on more of their intuitions in the all girl groups. Boys, on the other hand, acted the same in the all boys and the mixed settings. Tobin (2000) suggests it may be because it is the only way they know how to perform their masculinity (p. 33). The boys also displayed their hypermasculine tastes and demeanor by often attacking the girls’ interests
Surprisingly, the girls were annoyed that they had to watch a ‘boy’ media, which goes against the previous assumptions that girls were more likely to accept boy things than the other way around. However, this dissatisfaction with the movies may be a consequence of the violence in the movies.

In this segment of the discussion, the boys dominated the conversation with their excited talk about the violence in the scene, their knowledge of special effects, and their bragging about the toys they have or soon hope to get…the boys clearly are excited by and interested in the violence in movies. (pp. 37-38)

This idea that girls are less attracted to violent movies is further explored in Oliver and Green (2001). Girls displayed empathy for victims in the films, while boys who stepped out of line (for example, one boy admitted to liking Barbie) were reprimanded and humiliated (Tobin, 2000, p. 43). The other boys in his group teased him for this “feminine” interest. This example actively shows the concept in Renold (2005) of being marginalized for being other.

In Oliver and Green (2001), children watched a sad scene, an action scene, a “girls” movie, and a “boys” movie and reported how they felt. It was found that females were more likely to report sadness, which aligns with them feeling empathy in Tobin (2000) but that there was no gender difference in response to the action segment. They believe this might be because it was devoid of violent and aggressive content (Oliver & Green, 2001, p. 83). The most surprising finding was that the children more strongly gender stereotyped the male film than the female film. “‘Male-oriented” programming that includes a great deal of violence is perceived as more exclusionary of female viewers
than is “female-oriented” programming exclusionary of male viewers” (p. 84).

Therefore, this finding may be the exception to the previous conclusion that girls are more likely to accept masculine things than boys are to accept feminine things.

Overall, this research on gender and children shows that this is an extremely important topic for study. Firstly, this previous research shows that children learn gender at a very young age. Furthermore, it is clear the extremely feminine or masculine (violent) content can be exclusionary of the other gender, although it is unclear which is more exclusive. The reason for this avoidance of opposite-gender media is the fear of “othering” and the repercussions that follow, for example, boys being teased for liking “girl” things.

**Children and the Media**

After looking at research on gender and children, the literature review moves to children and their interaction with the media before looking specifically to children and television/movies. In this section, I look at children’s development and identity in relation to media, the power of media on children, and children’s consumption of computer games.

Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998) introduce the influence of the media on children. As the authors note, “children are thought to be particularly susceptible to the power of media” (p. 306). The reason for children’s higher levels of susceptibility is directly related to the fact that they have less information about the world and therefore, fewer defenses to resist the power of media images and persuasion. In essence, children are malleable. Children can learn new behaviors watching television and movies,
although the authors do admit that some of these behaviors can be prosocial (from watching education programming such as Sesame Street, for example, p. 307). Overall, the authors clarify “the concern is not whether television can teach children things, but rather what it is teaching them (p. 311). The next area of my literature review looks at exactly that.

Kirsh (2010) looked at media and youth and how this interaction impacts development. He found that media directed at children and adolescents was limited in diversity as well as filled with gender and racial stereotypes (p. 120). In his analysis, he makes a distinction between gender stereotyping and gender-role attitudes. According to Kirsh (2010), gender stereotyping consists of expectations that children have regarding how males and females should be (how they should act, think, feel, etc.). Gender-role attitudes, on the other hand, are youths’ beliefs about the appropriateness of those stereotypes for males and females. For example, children may have the expectation that women wash the dishes, and men take out the trash (gender stereotype), but if a child grows up in an environment where mom does trash duty and dad takes care of the dishes, his gender-role attitude would be in disagreement with this stereotype.

Kirsh (2010) found that higher levels of television viewing were associated with traditional expectations of gender-related activities, occupations, and traits. Therefore, the media instills these stereotypes. Although counter-stereotypes are prevalent (p. 121), they do not overpower the inundation of traditional gender stereotypes in the media. Recent studies have shown that these representations do impact children. An association exists between stereotyped content in children’s cartoons and gender-role attitudes of first
and second grade children (Kirsh, 2010). One of the most interesting and unique aspects of Kirsh’s book was his thought that boys might be influenced more by media containing children while girls are more influenced by media containing adults (p. 122). Overall, he says more research needs to be done to learn how media impacts the development of the youth.

Huntemann and Morgan (2001) delve a little deeper into the concept of development of children and explore the role of mass media in the process of identity development. One of the first points the authors make is the fact that today’s children and even most of their parents have never known a world without television (p. 309). “All together, the massive flow of popular images, representations, and symbolic models disseminated by the media profoundly shapes what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it. (p. 309). The authors stress that the importance of media in the everyday lives of children cannot be overdone since the quantity and redundancy of images in the media accumulate as part of the overall childhood experience. (p. 311). They also emphasize that young people actively use mass media to define themselves (p. 312).

Besides stressing the importance of media, Huntemann and Morgan (2001) look at different aspects of identity (gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, class/work) and how they are portrayed in the media. I have chosen to focus on the gender category for the purpose of my literature review. “Whether a child is a boy or girl is perhaps the most significant aspect of self that a child develops within the first few years of life” (p. 314). Huntemann and Morgan (2001) note that media provide a constant source of information
about gender and normative models of behavior. In fact, when asked about gender appropriate chores, children will replicate role expectations as seen in the media. One problematic aspect of note here is that men outnumber women two or three to one in prime-time television (p. 314). This is a trend that continues into Disney movies and that I later introduce as the male ensemble in my analysis. The authors suggest conducting focus group research to further analyze the role of mass media in identity development.

Aarsand (2007) looked at children’s consumption of computer games. Although this media is not directly film related, it is important because many computer games are produced as spin-off products of films. In fact, “sports and films are examples of two cultural arenas that play an important role in young people’s everyday lives, of which computer games have also become a part” (p. 47). Therefore, this chapter, although not directly about film media, reinforces the importance of it and its impact on children.

Two arguments exist about the consumption of computer games—(1) it is good because it enables children to meet demands of postmodern society and (2) it is bad because it produces a fat and criminal child. This second argument epitomizes the idea of moral panic, a concept that has been observed in the past with both motion pictures and television. Both of these arguments rely on the idea that children are shaped by their surroundings. Aarsand (2007) studied computer games in the home and in the classroom. For the home, he looked at eight families with two working adults and at least two children between eight and 10 years old. In the classroom, he focused on four boys in a seventh grade class who were heavy users of computer games. What he found was that in both settings, the films that the computer games were based on were a popular subject.
The hands-off computer game time (discussion with peers and family members) was an important part of the consumption of the games (p. 60). This finding is incredibly important because it sheds light on the fact that children not only interact and consume a material as they use it (or watch it) but each time it is discussed. This finding is similar to the research of Wohlwend (2012) and her study of children interacting with Disney transmedia in the classroom among peers.

Overall, this section on children and the media has shown the power of the media and the impact it has on children, since they are still very malleable. Furthermore, some problematic elements exist in this media, such as traditional gender roles, and they can influence children’s view of the world.

**Children and Television**

Some of the elements found in the research on children and the media, such as children’s early exposure and malleability, are also present in the review on children’s experience with television and other moving-image media. Many scholars have done research in this area. In this section, I look at a brief history of the medium, the impact consumption has on children and aspects that vary consumption, television’s impact on imagination, and social roles found on television and their contribution to stereotypes.

In Paik’s (2001) chapter in *Handbook of Children and the Media*, she explains that people are concerned about the effects of new media, especially on children and young adolescents (p. 7), but that before we go any further, we must understand the role of the medium and how it is used. She covers every mass medium, but I chose to focus on her section on movies and television.
Film was actually the first mass medium that appeared on the social scene (Paik, 2001, p. 8). By World War I, “film became a widely accepted as a means of family entertainment” (p. 8). This sentiment has persisted through the present day. In her section on children and the movies, Paik (2001) notes that companies started making family films to attract both adults and children (p. 9). According to her research, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) were two of the first films made for children. It is interesting to note that it was in fact Disney who created the first film specifically for children, since that is my topic of study.

In the 1930s, boys attended movies more than girls, but that has changed throughout history and girls are actually more frequent moviegoers now (p. 10). On the topic of gender and movies, Paik (2001) notes the difference in movie preference based on sex. Historically, boys prefer action, western, war, and comedy movies while girls prefer musicals, love and romance films. This finding is in accordance with Oliver and Green (2001)’s note that girls usually dislike violence in movies, which action, western, and war movies tend to incorporate.

Television was disseminating into households in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s with the “Golden Age” of TV occurring in the 1950s (Paik, 2001, p. 14). In her look at children and TV, Paik (2001) discussed how children watch a lot of television and are exposed to it as early as six to 12 months (p. 15). One interesting aspect of her discussion of television was that the way that children watch TV (with family, friends, alone, etc.) is a significant component of the viewing experience (p. 17). Tracking media consumption has become more difficult with the popularity of the Internet because
children can watch movies and television programs online and do not have to rely on the physical device of the television set. Now that we have a brief overview of these two media, we can continue our review of research in this area.

Huston, Bickham, Lee, and Wright (2007) looked at how children watch and learn from television. They provided a brief overview of some research on children’s attention and comprehension of TV (p. 41). Among many conclusions drawn, they noted that the amount and content of television consumption changes as children develop (p. 42) and that television viewing starts as early as infancy. This finding is similar to Paik’s (2001) note that children as young as six to 12 months are exposed to TV. During infancy children are not overly attentive to the screen, but the amount of time children pay attention to the screen does increase exponentially with age (p. 44). Overall, they noted that watching television represents a popular activity for children at all points along the developmental path (p. 48).

The goal of Comstock and Scharrer (2001) was to “examine the behavior of children in their use of television and other film-related media” which they define as “the videocassette recorder (VCR) and movies seen in theaters or through in-home playback” (p. 47). They decided to give attention to this topic for a couple of reasons: it provides moments of piqued interest and enjoyment and a lot of evidence exists that says for children, TV and film can have adverse consequences, such as hyperactivity and aggressive and antisocial behavior. However, some studies also show that it shapes daydreaming and imaginative processes and can have prosocial outcomes, which contribute to scholastic achievement (p. 48).
Many variables play a role in children’s use of TV and other film-related media, such as societal and structural factors (determine channels available, content, costs), household characteristics (socioeconomic status, number of TVs), child attributes (age, mental ability), and situational influences (presence of others, time of day/week). Comstock and Scharrer (2001) found that most people have a low involvement response to television—“viewers most of the time are only passively involved in what they view” (Comstock & Scharrer, 2001, p. 52). In fact, attention is so erratic in children that no attention is give to the screen 40% of the time, but by age 12 when TV usage peaks, children’s behavior in response to TV is the same as that of adults (p. 53). As previous studies have stated, viewing begins between two and a half and three years old, but attention can be given to the screen as early as six months.

Two important terms in the reading were similarity and wishful identification. Similarity “refers to the preference for characters like oneself and is very evident among children in the greater attention and greater favoritism they give to portrayals of those of the same gender, age, or race” (Comstock & Scharrer, 2001, p. 54). Slightly different, wishful identification refers to the preference for a character that the child would like to resemble. This desire increases with age, but the motive to use TV to evaluate oneself begins early. This fact shows how important it is to have good role models in children’s programming.

Like Comstock and Scharrer (2001), Bickham, Wright, and Huston (2001) also look at the passive model in television consumption. Their goal was to question the simple condemnation of television as well as the assumptions that accompany that view
While Comstock and Scharrer (2001) note many factors that influence television consumption, Bickham et al. (2001) note that the medium itself and other factors hardly matter—the content, however, has “lasting, cumulative impact” (p. 102). The authors explain that passive viewing is more applicable to younger children. It gives the child little or no credit for working actively to process the message. Conversely, during active viewing, the child is cognitively involved in the television experience, and the attention the child gives is determined by the child’s agenda and goals and not by the images on the screen (p. 105). Therefore, content does not have to necessarily be interesting and engaging for a child to actively watch it. Educational programming must rely on active processing.

Valkenburg (2001) looked more deeply at a concept mentioned earlier in this section: television’s effect on children’s imagination (p. 121). First, she provides the reader with definitions for terms that relate to imagination. Imaginative play, as defined by Valkenburg (2001), is play that children engage in that transcends that constraints of reality by acting “as if” (p. 122). For example, the boys in Wohlwend’s (2012) study were engaging in imaginative play. This type of play begins around 12 or 13 months and helps children break free of established associations and meanings and encourages creativity. She defines creativity as the capacity to generate many different or unusual ideas. Lastly, Valkenburg (2001) defines daydreaming as a state of consciousness characterized by a shift in attention.

Once she explains each of these terms, Valkenburg (2001) discusses the stimulation hypothesis and the reduction hypothesis. The stimulation hypothesis says
that TV encourages imagination. However, just because children incorporate aspects from TV and movies does not mean they are more imaginative or creative than children who do not incorporate these pieces from texts (p. 124). Furthermore, there is no proof that TV stimulates imagination. The reduction hypothesis argues that TV hinders children’s imagination, and most studies agree that television and TV violence have a reductive effect. A few hypotheses fall into the reduction grouping. The displacement hypothesis says that TV takes up time that could be used for imaginative play (p. 125), and the passivity hypothesis says that TV is an easy medium, meaning it does not take mental effort, so it does not encourage creativity. While these hypotheses are interesting, more research is needed on this subject. These researchers, for example, have not studied whether or not the content of the films or television programming has an effect on imagination. For example, in my Gender in Disney Animated Films section of my literature review, I discuss an article that suggests that messages given in movies may discourage imagination (Ross, 2004).

Now that I have looked at prior research suggesting the impact of television on children’s identity and imagination, I turn to a more in-depth look at the images found in TV and movies. Berry (2007) discusses the narrow range of social role portrayals in television programs of race, ethnicity, sex, and gender (p. 87). The reason the author chose to study this topic is because TV can serve the function of modeling behavior for children—“people learn through interacting with and observing others” (p. 96). From his research, Berry (2007) found that women on TV are younger, in traditional and stereotypical roles, and more likely to have blonde or red hair than brown or black (p.
He compares the representation of women on TV to that of African Americans in that they are underrepresented and segregated in specific types of content. One interesting note he makes about children and racial representations is that for children, race and social class are connected (p. 99). This is due to the stereotypes they are exposed to in the media. In fact, an example of this appears in my analysis of Disney’s *Bolt*. In the movie, a black character lives on the street and scavenges for food while a white character plays the leading role in a television series. Therefore, this characterization exemplifies the connection between race and class that exist in the media.

Overall, children associated worrying about appearance, crying and whining, weakness, flirting, and relying on someone else to solve their problems with women (Berry, 2007, p. 100). Almost every one of these qualities is found in at least one of the eight children’s films I studied. Berry (2007) suggests that improvements will be made only when we become sensitive about the types of messages we are sending our children (p. 104).

Signorielli (2001) further emphasizes the importance of TV as “the central and most pervasive medium in the American culture” (p. 341). She notes that children, minorities, and the older generation watch the most TV. Therefore, studying children’s interaction with the medium is very important. For Signorielli (2001), studying mass media is a three-step process. First, she examines the images; then she figures out the impact or effect of the images; last, she tries to understand institutional processes that create images and ensure their success or failure (p. 342).
She defines stereotypes as “conventional or standardized images or conceptions… generalizations or assumptions that are often based on misconceptions” (Signorielli, 2001, p. 343). The reason why stereotypes on television are impactful are in part due to the cultivation theory, which says that the more we see something the more we think it is true (p. 344). Images on TV tend to be repetitious, and therefore, the same images are seen quite often. Some of these images include the underrepresentation of women as well as women cast in minor roles (p. 345). Signorielli (2007) and Huntemann and Morgan (2001) had similar results. Furthermore, stereotyped images on TV include women being younger than men and cast in traditional roles. If they break a stereotype in one regard (job success), they usually fall back on a stereotype in a different aspect of their life (romantic relationship). Other common images on TV were a negative connotation associated with aging, women being thin and men being muscular, and stereotyped occupational portrayals.

Signorielli (2001) explains that children are aware of the stereotypes and expect to see them on TV, and children as young as preschoolers are impacted (p. 352). Hence, from this review of children and television, it is obvious that TV plays an undeniable role in children’s development.

**Gender in Children’s Media**

This section looks at research done on gender in children’s media in general and not specifically Disney, although some of the studies include Disney in addition to other sources. By surveying popular and scholarly collections of children’s literature and by asking dozens of women to recall their childhood memories, Stone (1975) drew many
conclusions and found comparisons between Disney and other fairy tales. Although heroines in the Grimm Brothers fairy tales are uninspiring, “those of Walt Disney seem barely alive” (p. 44). This observation relates to Henke et al.’s idea of the perfect girl. Also, while Disney often has “innocent beauty victimized by the wicked villainess” (p. 44), other fairy tales do not have this type of stereotyped conflict between a passive, beautiful woman and an aggressive, ugly one (p. 46). In fact, most heroines are judged by their actions and not their looks. Therefore, Stone (1975) shows that the themes present in Disney do not necessarily exemplify the motifs in other fairy tales. Some people think fairy tales “offer not only dreams and hopes but actual programs for behavior” (p. 48) and the women in the interviews admitted reading stories influenced them. Thus, the content of fairy tales is important.

In the study of children’s media, certain types of male characters occur. For example, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) studied male villains in 10 full-length animated movies and found “ways in which gender transgression and “queering” served to further signify villains as deviant and to enhance the positive gender qualities of heroes” (p. 90). They referred to this as villain-as-sissy. Towbin et al. (2008) also found that bad guys or their sidekicks tend to have feminine traits (p. 34). “Gender transgression may also cast doubt on a person’s competence, social acceptability, and morality” (p. 91). This means that by making the villains have more feminine traits, such as delicate features and silhouettes resembling corseted women, children (boys) may feel like having similar feminine traits makes them a bad person since the bad guys in the movies also possess these traits.
Another categorization of male characters that has appeared in children’s media is the idea of the beta male (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). Through their study of Cars, Toy Story, and The Incredibles, Gillam and Wooden have found that Pixar “constantly promotes a new model of masculinity” (p. 2). The beta male stands in direct contrast to the alpha male, has a homosocial relationship throughout the film, and matures enough to accept some of his more traditionally feminine characteristics. Therefore, he presents another option for male characters in animated films.

The Importance of Disney

Gender in Disney animated films is an important topic to study because Disney holds such a high place in American society. “Disney’s global hegemony in the field of children’s media is unparalleled (Buckingham, 1997, p. 285). Buckingham (1997) critiques past analyses of the Disney Corporation and believes that prior criticisms do not explore “the ways in which Disney enters into children’s (and indeed parents’) lived cultures” (p. 287). Further, he notes that analyses of the core texts—animated movies—are conspicuously absent. Although this article is a tad dated and research has been done on the core texts since this was written, Buckingham draws attention to the importance of animated movies. He also astutely notes that adults are not the intended audience for this medium, so children might not even notice what adults and critics see as significant. This point puts the entire paper into perspective. Although critical, in-depth analyses of the movies may unveil some unsettling ideas, children may not consciously notice them.

In his book The Mouse that Roared, Giroux (1999) says that the “organization and regulation of culture by large corporations such as Disney profoundly influence
children’s culture and their everyday lives” (p. 2). Disney is a substantial educational force in our country that often sets the norms and legitimizes claims of gender, race, etc. (p. 3). More than 200 million people a year watch a Disney film or home video; 395 million watch a Disney TV show every week; 212 million listen/dance to Disney music, records, CDs, and tapes; and more than 50 million people a year go to a Disney theme park (p. 19). This book clearly shows that Disney is very prominent in our culture, and, thus, is an important part of our lives. However, he notes that the effect is not the same for everyone who sees or interacts with Disney.

Gender in Disney Animated Films

The literature will now turn to the study of gender specifically in Disney animated films. “Disney films specifically have been shown to portray some stereotypical depictions of gender” (England et al., 2011, p. 556), and extensive research has been done on this topic. Henke, Umble, and Smith (1996) examine how female self is constructed in five Disney Princess films: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, and Pocahontas. In their analysis, they discussed the term the perfect girl that is exemplified by early heroines such as Cinderella and Aurora (Sleeping Beauty) who are helpless, passive victims in need of protection (p. 234). Progress has been made in the portrayal of later princesses, such as Belle (Beauty and the Beast) and Pocahontas who exercise some power over their future (p. 239). Princesses have been increasingly able to articulate their dreams and enact changes (p. 245), but overall, the researchers still find the image problematic (p. 247).
Others have also researched the Disney Princesses. Zarranz (2007) “examines evolution undergone by some of Disney’s female characters through the first years of the so-called “Disney Decade” of the 1990s, paying special attention to the representation of sexual politics” (p. 56). Zarranz coins the term Diswomen, which describes multi-faced, better-represented females compared to the subservient perfect girl. She cites Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* as the best example of the Diswomen and argues that she is the first successful femme fatale heroine in Disney (p. 60). Zarranz (2007) agrees with Henke et al. (1996) that more recent films have had more complex female characters.

Not only are the passive qualities of the Disney heroines problematic, but also Ross (2004) argues that these films give children ideas about the value of their own imaginations and their power to envision and enact change (p. 54). Disney “thrives off homogeneity and rigid adherence to rules” (p. 53). Films such as *Alice in Wonderland* suggest that adventure is something that nice girls would be wise to avoid (p. 56), supporting the perfect girl idea. Alice wants to escape boredom, satisfy her curiosity, and exert power, but in the end, she needs to be rescued (p. 57). Ross explains that the trickiest part of this example is that Disney seems to be suggesting that children should not follow in Alice’s footsteps and use their imagination. Rather, they should feel guilty and ashamed for this type of behavior (p. 58). “Disney movies implant seeds of guilt and fear to spring up along with children’s developing imaginations” which is a serious problem (p. 63).
England et al. (2011) also studied the Disney Princess line, focusing on behavioral characteristics and climactic outcomes. They found that stereotypical representations exist and that male and female roles have both changed over time, but male characters exhibit more androgyny throughout and less change in gender role portrayal. For example, in current films, princes had more feminine than masculine traits (p. 562). Overall, the researchers believe that gendered stereotypes are still prevalent but have become more complex, a change reflecting changes of roles and expectations in American society (p. 563).

Towbin et al. (2008) has findings much in alignment with this other research. They looked at how men, women, elderly, and homosexuals were portrayed in Disney movies and what characteristics, roles, and behaviors these characters had. After coding 26 feature-length Disney animated movies with either sustained or current popularity (p. 25), the researchers found that “movies continue to portray traditionally limiting images of gender” (p. 35). However, more recent films show females as heroic and courageous (p. 36) and males as having an inner emotional life (p. 37). At times, mixed messages about gender are presented. For example, a girl will be extremely courageous but then be put in a one-down position to a male. Therefore, this could imply punishment for acting in an “unladylike” manner. This finding relates to Signorielli’s (2001) discovery that when women on TV break a stereotype in one aspect of their life, they usually fall victim to one in another aspect. In general, the research seems to agree that although progress has been made in Disney films, problems still exist.
The Importance of Harry Potter

Clearly, the Disney Corporation exemplifies a media conglomerate with texts that have direct contact with children. Another phenomenon that fits this description is the Harry Potter series, which is the focus of these last two sections. Mayes-Elma (2006) explains that “the instant success of the first and subsequent books and Rowling’s quick rise to fame have amazed scholars” (p. 2). In fact, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* marks the first time since *The Wizard of Oz* that a children’s book has been placed on the *New York Times* best-seller list (p. 3). Heilman and Donaldson (2009) best describe the Harry Potter phenomenon: “Harry Potter has become more than just a book; it has become an icon, a Michael Jordan, a Coca-Cola, a Pop-Tart, in modern pop culture. The Potter books are now ubiquitous early texts for children…” (p. 1). However, Harry Potter books are not just for children. In fact, they are celebrated for their broad readership across age groups and gender (Doughty, 2002, p. 243).

Overall, it is clear that Harry Potter is a worthy topic of study. For this reason, I have chose to look at research done on gender in Harry Potter. I will use this overview to aid my analysis of gender in Disney movies and to use it as a point of comparison. Looking at Harry Potter will answer questions of whether negative aspects found in Disney movies are purely a Disney attribute or are found in other media.

Gender in Harry Potter

Mayes-Elma (2006) while noting the success of the novels, uses critical theory, critical literacy, and feminist theory to examine *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (p. 25). She does a content analysis of the visible and the invisible, which means not just
what is explicitly written but also the world of meanings, values, and norms (p. 70), and codes her analysis by scene — sequence of events related to one another (p. 72). Several themes arise from her analysis of gender in Harry Potter.

First, she found that females are more likely to enforce rules while males are more likely to break them. If females do break rules they feel guilt associated with the rule breaking. For example, Ron and Harry do not feel the same guilt that Hermione does for their transgressions when they first stumble upon Fluffy, the three-headed dog, in the forbidden corridor. This first theme made me realize that if you are looking for something, you sometimes do not notice the exceptions. For example, McGonagall (a woman) breaks the rules when she allows Harry on the Quidditch team and does not feel guilty. Similarly, Severus Snape and Argus Filch (two men) are both sticklers for the rules. My prior knowledge of Harry Potter made me cognizant of her evaluation of this book, but also made me more aware to be fair when making my own analysis.

Some other prominent themes that Mayes-Elma (2006) noted were that intelligent women were depicted as unattractive (p. 93), females asked males to validate information (p. 94), and that women were often cast in a mothering role or had maternal qualities. She even goes as far as to say that “traditionally, if a woman is not seen as a mothering figure, she is seen as the direct opposite: a cold, heartless, selfish person, but men are not seen in this binary way” (p. 99). It will be interesting to see if Disney keeps up this harsh binary depiction of women.

After noting the popularity of Harry Potter, Heilman and Donaldson (2009) proceed to explain that Harry Potter books mainly reinforce gender stereotypes (p. 139).
If any one gender stereotype existed, it would not be very significant, they note, but due to the “repeated and varied examples of demeaning stereotypes” it is very significant (p. 140). Similar to research done on television, the books are dominated by male characters. Furthermore, the more important characters are predominantly male and females are usually in secondary positions of power and authority. For example, most Ministry of Magic employees are male (p. 142). Female characters often tend to be more irritating and gossipy than male characters in the series.

Other themes present in Heilman and Donaldson’s (2009) analysis are body and appearance obsessed females. The most striking example are the Veelas introduced in the fourth book. They are the most beautiful females—and they are not even human (p. 152). In familial and romantic relationships, the women are treated second to the men. For example, Mrs. Dursley and Mrs. Weasley are stay at home moms and in most scenarios throughout the series, the men decided when romantic relationships are on or off. Finally, stereotypical masculinities are present throughout. Hegemonic males are brave, confident, and charismatic. This depiction of women in the home and men in charge can be problematic for readers because “even if young readers are not actively seeking lessons in gender identity, they can be learned” (p. 159). Their depiction put women in the submissive position.

Dresang (2002) notes the importance of names of fictional characters during her analysis of Hermione. I had never considered studying the origins of names but it seems to be useful in her study. She looks at the mythological Hermione, the Saint Hermione, the Shakespearean Hermione, and the Hermiones of H. D. and D. H. Lawrence to create a
conducive environment to critically examine J. K. Rowling’s Hermione (p. 215). Furthermore, she provided a basis to analyzing non-animated characters (as well as animated characters). While animated characters can be put into a gender role or stereotype by their caricature and art, Dresang (2002) uses verbs to examine gender roles. For example, Hermione shrieks, squeaks, wails, and squeals.

Lastly, although Doughty (2002) notes that a broad audience reads the Harry Potter books, she believes them to be “quintessentially boys’ books” (p. 243). Due to the violent sequences of action and Harry’s obsession with the sport of quidditch, Doughty sees Harry Potter belonging in the boy book market. This directly relates to Baker-Sperry’s (2007) belief that girls are more willing to accept “boy things,” like Harry Potter.

Overall, my overview of research on Harry Potter has shown that many of the same stereotypical elements in media discussed earlier in this review also exist in this cultural phenomenon. Therefore, during my analysis of the eight Disney films, this knowledge will put findings into perspective. Although problematic elements may appear in Disney’s children’s movies, they also emerge in other media sensations. Now that the literature review has thoroughly covered research on my topic, starting with children and gender in general and extending to in-depth examinations of gender in children’s texts, I will use this background knowledge to provide an extensive analysis of my eight films.
Analysis

After analyzing the eight Disney films I chose, I drew conclusions similar to the findings of the above research on Disney; compared to the past, the more recent Disney films have made progress in terms of gender stereotypes. This progress stems from the existence of the beta male instead of the alpha male and of the multi-faceted, passionate female in place of the submissive perfect girl. In spite of this evolution, gender labels and imbalances are still present in the films. In the animated films, females’ placement in the home environment exemplifies one of the most troublesome aspects of the films. In the non-animated films, dialogue often reinforces the gender stereotypes. However, these worrisome elements exist in media outside of the realm of Disney, and in order to expose this fact, I included examples of traditional gender roles found in Harry Potter when applicable. To begin my examination of these films, I present two new concepts: the male ensemble, which describes the gender imbalance in the films, and the undercut, which describes the phenomenon whereby the films weaken the progress of females after showing their strengths.

The male ensemble refers to the overabundance of male characters in the films, especially the animated ones. My decision to use the word ensemble stems from the use of this word in theatre. The ensemble implies a group of side characters. The importance of the male ensemble is clear when referring back to the literature review. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) found that it was common for men to outnumber women on prime-time television, but they never gave this phenomenon a name. Many other researchers
have reported similar findings but never addressed it with a term. Therefore, the male ensemble reflects this common finding in prior research and in my own research.

The undercut refers to a female character showing promise breaking gender stereotypes in one scene to then be undercut in subsequent scenes in the movie. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) describe a similar occurrence where women on TV will break a stereotype in one aspect of their life but then fall back on another stereotype in a different part. My use of the term undercut is meant to describe the progress of the women being undercut. Although it happens in subsequent scenes in the non-animated movies, the animated movies have the undercut either several scenes apart or over the duration of the film.

The “Male Ensemble”

In the Disney films, most of the characters tend to be male, especially in the animated films. This phenomenon, however, is not exclusive to Disney. Oliver and Green (2001) describe a similar occurrence on television. “Given public concern about gender-role portrayals in children’s media entertainment, why has the entertainment industry not made greater strides to produce media content that features more egalitarian portrayals?” (p. 68). Moreover, Heilman and Donaldson (2009) note that in Harry Potter, male characters dominate whereas female characters are usually in secondary positions of authority and power. In movies, on television, in cultural phenomenon such as Harry Potter, and yes, in Disney, male characters dominate the scene. In fact, Signorielli (2001) noted that “women are especially short-changed and underrepresented on children’s programs” (p. 347), and Disney is no exception.
Six of the eight films I watched (Meet the Robinsons, Bolt, Bridge to Terabithia, Bedtime Stories, Race to Witch Mountain, and Sorcerer’s Apprentice) have a male character as the central protagonist. That means that half of the animated films and all of the non-animated films have a male as the lead character. However, the most striking part is not that the main character is male, but that most of the tangential characters in the film also happen to be male. I describe this phenomenon as the male ensemble.

In theatre, ensemble can refer to the group of people who play all of the back up characters in the production. In a musical, this group might also be referred to as the chorus. For example, in The Wizard of Oz, the same group of actors may play the munchkins, the flying monkeys, and appear as background characters in other scenes in the play; they are the ensemble. Therefore, the ensemble is a group of characters who are important to the plot but do not hold central roles. In the Disney films, the ensemble is overwhelmingly male, creating the concept of the male as the norm.

**Animated.** In the Disney films that I watched, many of the side characters, people that the central actors happened to run into, were usually male. In Bolt, of the 24 named characters in the film, 19 are male. The title character, Bolt, is a dog that is the star of a television series. During the film, he gets lost and goes on an adventure, where he meets many new people. Of these new friends he encounters, there are two cats that heckle him (both male), six pigeons (all male), a hamster (male), and a cat that becomes his friend and also represents the only central female character he meets on his journey. In Meet the Robinsons, of the 32 named characters, only eight are female. Since these are
both boy movies, as I will argue later, this trend may be expected. However, this phenomenon also occurs in the other two animated movies.

The male ensemble can also be seen in both princess movies. In Tangled, all the ruffians Rapunzel meets at the bar are male, Flynn’s two sidekick cronies are male, the palace horse Maximus is male, and Rapunzel’s pet lizard Pascal is male. Of the named characters, only three are female. Similarly, in Princess and the Frog, 17 named characters are male and only seven are female. Louis the alligator and Ray the lightning bug are two of the most significant non-central characters, and they are both male. From these observations, it is clear that the male ensemble exists in Disney animated films.

Non-animated. In The Bridge to Terabithia, the opposite actually occurs. Of the 26 credited characters, only 11 are male. This imbalance has a lot to do with Jess Aarons, the main character, having four sisters and two female teachers. I will discuss this distribution of female characters later in my analysis, but as for the male ensemble, it is nonexistent in this particular film. In Bedtime Stories, 48 actors were credited and 25 of them were male. Although the majority were male, it was very slightly so. In fact, this is the most egalitarian representation we have yet seen in the Disney movies studied. However, like Bridge to Terabithia, the characters that these women play represent the worrisome aspect of the film, since they are cast in very stereotypical roles.

Race to Witch Mountain and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice are the two “boy” films of the non-animated selection, which I will argue later. In Race to Witch Mountain, there are 49 credited characters, 38 of them being male. Jack Bruno, the main character, drives a taxicab and unknowingly picks up two alien children, Seth and Sara. On their
adventure across Nevada and to California, most of their encounters are male. When they stop to get their car fixed, the one person working, Eddie, is male. In the restaurant they stop at, most of the customers are male. All the CIA workers shown in the film are male in addition to most of the attendees of the UFO convention in Las Vegas. Therefore, *Race to Witch Mountain* exemplifies the male ensemble.

In *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* there are 36 credited characters, and 13 are female, representing a little more than one third of the characters. Although it is not the most imbalanced representation we have seen, it is still a striking example of the male ensemble. It is very interesting that the two non-animated “boy” films had prominent examples of the male ensemble while the other two non-animated films showed equal representations or had more female characters. Since I did not study any non-animated films that could be considered “girl” films, I cannot draw a conclusion about the gender allocation in those films.

This distribution of characters could be credited to the prior findings that girls have an easier time accepting a male character than boys do accepting female characters (Frey and Ruble, 1992; Baker-Sperry, 2007). Therefore, for a “boys film” to be widely accepted by its target audience, the film needs an overabundance of male characters. Overall, of the eight films that I have studied, the majority of them represent the male ensemble. However, it is important to note previous research that shows that this is not an aspect unique to Disney—it occurs on television and in major cultural sensations, such as in the Harry Potter series.
The Undercut

In almost all of the films that I watched for this study, a female either breaks a gender stereotype or shows a desire to do so but then is undercut in a subsequent scene, aligning her with the typical female. Therefore, her progression away from the stereotype is weakened by the series of events. In the non-animated films, these undercuts usually happen right after the breaking of the stereotype, whereas if the undercut does occur in animated films, it is over the course of the film that it develops.

Non-animated films. In Bridge to Terabithia, Leslie, the main female in the film, wins a footrace against the boys in her class. Jess, the main male, has been training for this race and believes that he will win. Everyone seems shocked not only that Jess loses but that he, and all the other boys, lose to a girl. Jess’s little sister May Belle draws attention to this fact asking, “Jess, Jess, did you win?” Jess just shakes his head dismally no in response. At the end of this scene, Leslie is viewed as the hero. She is a girl, she is new to the school, and she is faster than all the boys in her class. As a grade school kid, it is pretty cool to be the fastest one in the class, and it is even cooler for a girl to be able to say it, since running and athletics is typically viewed as a more masculine pastime.

However, in the next scene when Jess, Leslie, and May Belle get off of the school bus, Leslie’s move away from the stereotyped girl dissipates.

May Belle: We’re neighbors?! You got little sisters?

Leslie: No, just me.

May Belle: Oh. Ya got any Barbies?

Leslie: Yeah, I think I have a few.
In a matter of seconds, May Belle highlights the fact that Leslie beats Jess and all the boys in the race and then haltingly puts Leslie within the confines of the stereotyped girl, forcing her to admit to owning Barbies—the quintessential girl’s toy. Therefore, Leslie’s move away from a stereotype is undercut in this scene.

*Race to Witch Mountain* and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* also had striking examples of the undercut. In *Race to Witch Mountain*, Jack, Sara, and Seth search for Dr. Alex Friedman because she is very intelligent and studies the possibility of life on other planets. Right after the three find her and she agrees to help them, becoming their one and only hope, they enter the main area of the convention center. Within moments, a man tries to hit on her and invites her to dinner. Therefore, after being positioned as the source of knowledge and help, she is undercut as the typical female object of desire. A similar occurrence happens in *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.

Becky overcomes her fear of heights to help Dave fight the evil sorceress Morgana. When Dave and Becky are reunited after the battle, Dave tells Becky she did it—she overcame her fear of heights and helped him win. However, in this same conversation, Becky then agrees to be Dave’s girlfriend. Hence, in these last two examples, the girls break the gender stereotype (are extremely intelligent and brave) and then are subsequently put into the typical gender role of a female as the object of desire and in need of a man.

**Animated films.** In the animated films, the undercut does not occur in such a quick precession as it does in the non-animated films. In *Bolt* and *Meet the Robinsons*, the undercut can be seen in the domestic nature of and Wilbur’s mom and Mittens. Both
characters showed strong qualities and promise but then are later defined by their area of expertise—the home. A more detailed analysis is in the section “the domestic sphere.” For the princess films, the undercut is seen throughout the duration of the plot. Both Rapunzel and Tiana are strong willed and motivated, but in the end they need the man to accomplish their goals. Overall, Disney shows promise in female characters but ultimately undercuts their progress using dialogue and action in subsequent scenes.

Again, I must draw attention to the fact that the undercut does not occur exclusively in Disney films. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, after Hermione uses her intelligence and bravery to negotiate through the protection set up for the stone, she actually undercuts herself.

“Harry—you’re a great wizard, you know.”

“I’m not as good as you,” said Harry, very embarrassed as she let him go.

“Me!” said Hermione. “Books! And cleverness! There are more important things—friendship and bravery and—oh Harry—be careful!” (J. K. Rowling, 1997, p. 287)

Although the undercut is a prominent feature in Disney movies, I would just like to make it clear that I am not suggesting it is solely an attribute of Disney. Other very prominent forms of media, such as the Harry Potter novels also utilize it. I present these two terms because they encompass flagrant attributes in the eight films that I studied and represent troublesome aspects of gender in the films. However, I still maintain that the popularity of similar aspects in other media and the progress Disney has made in its films are reasons why Disney should not be so highly criticized. Yes, Disney employs stereotypes,
but once reading the following analysis, people will realize that they are not as bad as
*Mickey Mouse Monopoly* and other critical pieces may make them out to be since these
people purely focus on the negative portrayals of gender, race, and class found in the
older Disney animated films.

**Animated Films**

For my animated films, I watched *Bolt, Meet the Robinsons, Tangled,* and
*Princess and the Frog.* I have divided my analysis for the cartoons into “boy” films and
princess films, the first two representing the “boy” films and the latter two the princess
films. I explain my reasoning for this distinction below.

**“Boy” films.** I argue that *Bolt* and *Meet the Robinsons* typify “boy” films for
Disney. The themes in both movies are male-oriented. In *Bolt,* the dog is a character on
an action adventure series that has bombs and explosion, fight scenes, and a surplus of
weapons. Even when the TV show is not being shot during the movie, these elements
become dominant on Bolt’s cross-country adventure. In *Meet the Robinsons,* the
storyline centers on a theme of science fiction. Time-travel is a central motif in the
movie and much of the plot occurs around the idea of science and inventions. As Oliver
and Green (2001) argue, male-oriented programming that includes an abundance of
violence usually excludes female viewers. Furthermore, there is not a central love
storyline in either of these films, which usually typifies a girl movie. For all these
reasons, I classify *Meet the Robinsons* and *Bolt* as boy movies.

**The good.** As I have stated earlier, these movies contain examples of progress
being made relative to gender in previous Disney animated films. In both *Meet the
Robinsons and Bolt, there are strong female characters. In Bolt, Mittens the cat is one of the central protagonists. Although she lives on the street, she has cleverly exerted power over the pigeons in the city. They work for her; bringing her half the food they collect each day. The most striking aspect of this hierarchy is that all of the pigeons reporting to Mittens are male. She uses the threat of her claws (she actually is declawed) to keep the pigeons in line. Therefore, as a female, she has the power over all of the male workers who are scared of her. Another example of a female in power in Bolt is Mindy from the network. She is the representative from the network who speaks with the director about the Bolt television show in the movie. In the first scene we see with her, she threatens to fire everyone on the show if they do not make the changes the network wants, thus wielding the power she has over the jobs of the mostly male crew.

In Meet the Robinsons, there are also two females who stand out from the cast of characters. Mildred is in charge of the orphanage where two of the main characters Lewis and Michael (“Goob”) grow up. She is shown running the orphanage by herself throughout the movie and taking care of the boys. She fulfills the motherly role for the two youths but also commands their respect. For example, in one scene Goob refers to her as chief, acknowledging her place as the authoritative figure. This characterization shows progress because Mildred is shown in a working environment. When we see her, she is always trying to schedule adoption interviews for the boys. We do not see her cooking, cleaning, etc.

Another strong female character in Meet the Robinsons is Wilbur’s mother, Franny. Throughout the film, she is depicted in a position of power. When we first see
her, she is conducting a band of frogs, all of who are male. Then at a scene at the dinner table, she is shown defeating her brother in a meatball battle by deflecting all of his shots using karate-type moves. During most of the movie, the father of the family is not present, so Franny acts as the head of the household. Her depiction is progressive in regards to gender because it shows her in a position of power, in the band and in the family, and shows her ability to physically defend herself. Thus, both Meet the Robinsons and Bolt have great examples of strong female characters.

**The bad.** Some promising elements exist in the two “boy” films, but problematic elements also present themselves. Problematic elements are those that rely on traditional gender roles or introduce gender bending as a negative feature.

**Powerful women?** Although the previous four females represent strong, powerful players, there are also many troubling aspects to their characters. For example, although Mittens has power over the pigeons, in the end she needs Bolt to save her. This dependency suggests that she may only be powerful over the least powerful men in society but that compared to other characters, she is still in a subordinate position. The characters of Mindy in Bolt and Mildred in Meet the Robinsons although both powerful, working women, are drawn with some masculine characteristics, which may suggest that powerful women need to be masculine.

Both Mindy’s and Mildred’s haircuts are so severely short that they are styles more suitable for men than women. In addition, Mindy is drawn with an extremely large nose. In Disney films, a prominent nose is the sign of a male character. Similarly, Mildred has a protruding, strong chin and a large forehead, animation choices usually
saved for males in Disney animated films. Therefore, these art decisions seem to suggest that these powerful, work-oriented women are more masculine, which makes one wonder if *that* is the reason why they are so powerful.

Conversely, the problem with Franny’s representation is that she is highly sexualized. She has an unimaginably tiny waist, a large bust, and long, extremely slender legs, making her an object of male gaze. This dichotomy creates a very difficult paradox: is it better for a powerful woman to be depicted as overly masculine or overly feminine? The ideal answer would be to make her as normal as possible. This way, the depiction of the powerful lady does not have to be reduced to an object, but she also does not have to lose her femininity. One final statement about the problem with the portrayal of the powerful women is that none of them are the central character in their respective movies. Therefore, as powerful as they are, they are still second to a male protagonist, Bolt in *Bolt* and Lewis in *Meet the Robinsons*.

Even though these depictions may not be ideal, Disney’s inclusion of strong female characters shows progress. Long ago are the days of completely helpless princesses or lionesses that have no power. Additionally, the Harry Potter series has flagrant examples of powerful women who perhaps are not as great as they might appear. Hermione, while being wildly intelligent and hardworking, has buckteeth and bushy hair—not exactly desirable qualities or the epitome of beauty. Furthermore, her actions are often overshadowed by the action of her heroic best friend and male, Harry Potter. Therefore, the non-ideal woman in power exists elsewhere besides Disney.
Feminized Villains. As prior research has shown (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Towbin et al., 2008), Disney has a tendency to feminize their male villains in animated films creating a villain-as-sissy prototype. This characterization is overwhelmingly present in the portrayal of Bowler Hat Guy in *Meet the Robinsons*. From their study, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) noted several common aspects of the feminized male villain: “delicate physical features [that] invoke traditional ideals of feminine beauty,” a “voluminous chest but a much narrower waist and hips that together create a silhouette resembling a corseted woman,” exceptionally long fingers, feminine props, and an obsession with appearance (p. 98).

Bowler Hat Guy exemplifies all of these characteristics. His legs are very long and thin like toothpicks, and when he runs, it is done in a very feminine, dainty manner. Emphasis is placed on his long skinny fingers throughout the film, for example, when he is signing a contract in one scene. Furthermore, he has an obsession with unicorns. His notebook has one on the front and his villainous lair, which is pink and purple, has unicorn prints covering most of the interior. This acts as his feminine prop. At one point he even says, “I know, I’m disgusting, but one learns to love it,” which shows that he is concerned with his appearance, a typical feminine trait.

Although these feminine traits exist, he is not entirely feminized. For example, Bowler Hat Guy has a large nose and chin, typical of male animations. Furthermore, he has a large mustache and very prominent, bushy eyebrows, which stands in stark contrast to the findings of Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) that says the villains tend to have shapely, arched eyebrows typical to female brows. Therefore, these elements contrast the
feminized characters of the Bowler Hat Guy, but I argue that they do not overpower them.

When looking at the character, you see a rather pathetic, dimwitted, girly man. He rarely even comes up with his own ideas. His mechanical bowler hat, Doris, is usually the mastermind. Thus, not only is he seen as an extremely feminine character, but also a female hat subjugates him. This is problematic because, as the article notes, children learn gender through interaction (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe, 2003, p. 90), so it is bad if they associate feminized males with the concept of villains and evil, especially because Bowler Hat Guy is an exceptionally inept villain. As Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) note, the feminized villain is not purely a Disney invention. Although all of their examples appear in animated films, I argue that it can also be seen with the physical representation of Voldemort in the Harry Potter movies. He is very thin, with long spindly fingers, and overall he is an asexual character. The feminized villain in non-animated films will also appear later in my analysis.

Dialogue. Between both Meet the Robinsons and Bolt, a few lines of dialogue present themselves as problematic. In Meet the Robinsons, Carl, the robot that works for the Robinson family, complains, “These skinny limbs don’t exactly make the tea pot whistle.” By voicing this opinion, Carl suggests that a man needs muscles and a good build to get a girl. No one offers any counterarguments to Carl’s statement, so it seems as though no one disagrees with him. Carl’s bit of dialogue further instills traditional images we hold of what a male should be like.
In *Bolt*, Mittens, the female cat, explains to Bolt, “Do you know why we [cats] hate dogs? Because we want to *be* dogs. We have a dog complex.” At first hearing this line, one might not think there is anything wrong. However, since Bolt is the main male character and Mittens is the main female character in the film, I argue that this quotation can be analogous for gender. You could easily substitute the word ‘girls’ for ‘cats’ and ‘boys’ for ‘dogs,’ and the statement about having a dog complex instantly makes one think of the well-known penis envy theory of Freud. Therefore, when looked at in this context, the quotation says that girls envy boys and want to be boys, making them inferior to their male counterparts.

**The intersection.** When looking to the same dichotomy between Mittens and Bolt in *Bolt*, another very worrisome aspect arises in relation to the intersection of race, class, and gender. As a cat, Mittens has black fur while as a dog, Bolt has white fur. This opposition presents Mittens as Black and Bolt as White. Mittens is also a female and Bolt is a male, making Mittens doubly subjugated. Furthermore, Mittens lives on the streets, struggles to feed herself, and lies in the lower levels of society while Bolt is a superstar in Hollywood who has people to take care of him. Therefore, Mittens is depicted as poor, Black, and female while Bolt is rich, White, and male. Therefore, by being female, Disney aligns Mittens with all of the subjugated groups in society and as a male, aligns Bolt with all of the dominant groups. As Berry (2007) unearths, race and social class are often connected for children (p.99). Therefore, by coloring Bolt and Mittens in these ways, it seems almost certain that children will draw these distinctions, subconsciously at least.
When looking back at the quote about cats wanting to be dogs, the argument that this could be extended to girls wanting to be boys can be even furthered to include the poor wanting to be rich and even more problematic, Blacks wanting to be White. Perhaps this was not a conscious decision, but by including this piece of dialogue and depicting the characters in these drastically opposite ways, the gap between the two characters increases and implies that the lavish, White, male lifestyle is the ideal.

**Princess films.** With the release of *Princess and the Frog* in 2009 and *Tangled* in 2010, the number of films in the Disney Princess line reached a perfect 10. A number that, according to the LA Times in November 2010, will not be going up any time soon (Chmielewski & Eller, 2010). Previous research (Henke et al., 1996; Zarranz, 2007; England et al., 2011; Towbin et al., 2008) argues that the portrayal of the princesses has gotten better over time, although problems still exist. These final two princess flicks continue this trend. There are redeemable aspects that fight stereotypical gender roles, however, many of the same problematic elements endure. Overall, the advances that Disney has made are commendable.

**The good.**

*Princesses.* In *Tangled* and *Princess and the Frog*, Rapunzel and Tiana, respectively, make a giant leap from the days of the perfect girls of Cinderella and Aurora (Henke et al., 1996). In fact, they are portrayed more like the multi-faceted Diswomen (Zarranz, 2007). Rapunzel, far from being submissive, is extremely ambitious and adventurous. She desperately wants to know what the floating lights in the sky are, and instead of passively listening to Mother Gothel forbidding her to leave, she repeatedly
asks to go out and see them. Finally, when her mother is out running errands (errands
that Rapunzel planned and knew would take several days to complete), Rapunzel leaves
the tower she has been imprisoned in and goes on an adventure to find the meaning of the
lights. Therefore, Disney presents Rapunzel of having a mind of her own and going after
her dreams. Her curiosity, unlike that of Alice in Alice in Wonderland, is not shameful
but awe-worthy and inspiring. By being adventurous, she finds the truth about her
identity and her birth parents and is able to live in the palace.

Tiana, the princess in Princess and the Frog, is also characterized by her
ambition. She is extremely hard working, holding multiple waitressing jobs. One day, if
she saves enough money, her goal is to buy a space to open up her own restaurant.
Therefore, Disney presents Tiana as a determined, motivated female. Furthermore, the
audience sees Tiana in a work environment during the film, making her a working lady.
She does not passively sit around, but rather, she is self-sufficient.

In addition to being driven characters, Rapunzel of Tangled and Tiana of Princess
and the Frog seem unaware of the male gaze. The two girls do not act concerned with
their body or their appearance during the films. For example, when Rapunzel first leaves
her tower, she feels torn about disobeying her mother. A progression of scenes shows her
oscillating between acting very happy and distraught. While she is upset, she behaves in
a rather messy, embarrassing manner, crying shamelessly. Rapunzel does not care that
Flynn witnesses all of this occurring. In fact, she seems overall unaware of his presence.
At one particular moment in the film, Flynn says he’s going to “turn on the smolder” to
get Rapunzel to fall for him. Rapunzel seems completely unaware of Flynn’s intention
and looks at him in a confused manner. Thus, this scene and the crying episode exemplify a total disregard for the male gaze. Rapunzel acts how she wants to act based on her feelings at the time. She is not concerned who might be watching her.

Similarly, Tiana does not try to impress Prince Naveen. Instead, she cannot stand his presence and just wants to be rid of him. Therefore, both of the women act on their own accord and do not seem to think about their appearance or what the men think of them. I believe this is a step in a positive direction because it shows young girls who are watching the film that they do not have to be concerned with every aspect of their image. Both of the ladies marry the men in the end of the film, so it shows viewers that you can find happiness and true love by just being yourself. Worrying over looks and what other people think about you does not have to be the way you live your life. For these reasons, both Tiana and Rapunzel epitomize the progress Disney has made with its animated characters. Both of these princesses are distanced from the idea of the perfect girl.

*Princes.* “Male heroes in contemporary films are no longer the epitome of masculinity as machismo,” but instead are tamed by the gender roles of our time (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003, p. 104). Both of the main men in these films exhibit some feminine characteristics, exemplifying this observation of Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003). In *Tangled* when Flynn finds a Wanted poster of himself, he is unconcerned with the fact that these fliers exist and with the subscript “Dead or Alive.” Rather, he is upset that his nose in the mug shot is a horrible depiction of his real nose. He even makes a comment to his two accomplices that they have no reason to be upset because they look “amazing.” This obsession with looks and the complimenting of other males are
surprising because generally we associate a concern over looks with female characters not male ones. Furthermore, Flynn’s facial features are gentler compared to some Disney heroes of the past, such as Hercules. His face narrows to his chin and he has a longer hair style so despite his patch of chin hair, he has an almost feminine look to him.

Prince Naveen, from *Princess and the Frog*, also exhibits some feminine traits. He loves to dance and throughout the film, the audience sees him dancing several times. Dancing, typically, is thought of as a more feminine activity, whereas sports would be seen as more masculine. Furthermore, he does not have a job and cannot support himself. This aspect of his character stands in direct opposition to the alpha male. Although he is a prince, his parents cut him off for being a freeloader; so in reality, he does not have “unquestioned authority” or “social dominance,” two traits of the alpha male (Gillam & Wooden, 2008, p. 2). In general, both of the men typify the idea of the beta male in that they stand in direct opposition of the alpha male and display feminine qualities. Having the beta male character in children’s films is good because it presents masculinity for boys that is not hypermasculine. Creating more normal male heroes is another one of the strides Disney has made, which is why I argue that it is not as bad as people may like to believe, although some flawed elements still exist, which I explore below.

*The bad.*

*Domestic sphere.* The “prevalence of domestic work is an important theme in the Disney Princess movies and a substantial change that Disney incorporated over time was the temporary discontinuation of domestic work as a symbol of femininity,” notes England et al. (2011, p. 563). However, these two most recent Disney films mark an end
of this temporary discontinuation. In *Princess and the Frog*, Tiana, although she is shown in the workplace, loves to cook. In fact, her job is in a restaurant. Historically, people see cooking as a job suitable for women. Hence, Tiana’s love for cooking promotes these traditional gender stereotypes.

Similarly, Rapunzel has been locked in a tower for her entire life before the start of *Tangled*. She embodies the concept of the domestic sphere. She sings of all of the activities she likes to do during the day to pass the time. Some of these actions are reading, baking, dancing, and chores—all which are extremely feminine activities, especially baking and chores. By placing the two women in the home in this way, Disney is using the environment to display their gender. They may be ambitious and adventurous, but in the end they still wind up in the home, doing female tasks.

Even the two non-Princess films include hints of the women being categorized by the domestic. In *Meet the Robinsons*, Wilbur hides Lewis in the garage. When Lewis asks if Wilbur’s mother will find him, he responds, “Mom never goes in the garage.” By saying this, the garage is being characterized as a male place where the home is seen in opposition as a female place. Even in *Bolt*, the domestic sphere comes into play again. Mittens takes boxes and other materials she finds on the ground to create a makeshift home for her and Bolt. Although they are travelling cross-country, this action places Mittens, as the female lead, in the household. Therefore, although Disney has created stronger, more balanced female characters, it slightly undermines its progress by placing these women in the traditional home setting. Using the conventional home for females is not a characteristic unique to Disney. As Heilman and Donaldson (2009) note, J. K.
Rowling also had a tendency to place females in the home. In fact, Mrs. Dursley and Mrs. Weasley were both stay at home moms in the Harry Potter series.

*Animation.* Not only does Disney undercut the power of the women by placing them in the home but also by the way they draw the female characters. Females are characterized by larger than normal eyes, smaller mouths and noses, prominent collarbones, and impossibly small waists. Overall, these qualities give the girls a gentler, less imposing, submissive look. The girls in both movies are always seen in dresses, a clothing style reserved for women. Even when they are frogs, Tiana has skinny legs and a slender figure and Prince Naveen is bulkier.

The men, on the other hand, have bigger noses and mouths, broad shoulders, prominent cheekbones, and tall stature. All of these qualities add to their visual prominence. Prince Naveen even has an unusually long neck, which contributes to his look of self-assurance, while Flynn has facial hair, which adds to the image of his adventurous, scruffy lifestyle. These images are what we have come to expect from Disney because the princesses are always beautiful and skinny while their men are always strong and handsome, but the images do provide children with unrealistic expectations for their own bodies. The princesses may not care about their appearance, but they are traditionally beautiful, so why would they need to?

Using beautiful women is, of course, not a tactic used only by Disney. When we flip through magazines we are bombarded with images of unnaturally beautiful women—unnatural because usually they are digitally manipulated to appear this way. Even in
Harry Potter, the most beautiful women, the Veelas, are not even human (Heilman and Donaldson, 2009).

*All by myself?* One of the more conservative aspects of both the princess films is Rapunzel and Tiana’s reliance on the men to accomplish their goals. Both women show such promise throughout their respective films; as discussed earlier, they are motivated, ambitious, and determined. However, at the end of the day, all of these strong personality traits are undercut by their dependence on the male figures in their films. Reliance on a male character is a common trend in Disney animated films. For example, Megara, a very independent Diswoman, needs Hercules to save her from Hades.

In *Princess and the Frog*, Tiana’s one real goal in life is to open up a restaurant of her own. She works multiple jobs to earn money and to practice her cooking, and in the end of the movie, she gets her restaurant. However, this only happens after she marries Prince Naveen. As hard as she works, she does not have everything she needs for the restaurant until she is married to her Prince.

In *Tangled*, Rapunzel also has one goal in life—to see the floating lanterns up close and not from her tower. Each year on her birthday, she hopes and dreams of these lights, but each year she does not have the courage to go off on her own. Then, one year, the one depicted in the film, Flynn Rider shows up in her tower. It is with his assistance that she finally accomplishes her dream to see the lights. She requires his help to escape her tower and travel throughout the land until she makes it to her destination. Although Disney instills traditional animation and a reliance on a male character, these princesses have such promising, admirable traits. They may be amongst the pile of Disney
princesses who needs their prince to save them, but they are better developed then princesses of the past.

_Flynn, Dr. Facilier, and Mother Gothel._ All three of these characters represent typical gender representations in Disney and work to undo “the good” in the film. Although Flynn has some promising elements and exemplifies the beta male, he characterizes a stereotypical male in many ways. As mentioned earlier, Flynn tries to “turn on the smolder” to win Rapunzel’s affection in one part of the film. As Towbin et al. (2008) notes in their article, “boys and men seemed to lose their senses in the presence of a beautiful women” (p. 29). This makes them into a sexual being. Flynn was unconcerned with Rapunzel’s personality, he just saw that she was very pretty and thought that the best way to get what he wanted was not intellect and planning but brute good looks. Flynn also changes his name from Eugene because he thinks Flynn Rider is a more masculine, heroic sounding name. These aspects of Flynn’s personality may show young viewers that boys need to win girl’s affection and be a tough guy. Rapunzel does say she likes Eugene better, yet she and everyone else continue to call him Flynn.

Dr. Facilier, the villain in _Princess and the Frog_, represents the feminized villain, as we saw in _Meet the Robinsons_ and in prior research. His outfit is purple, a color associated with girls or homosexuals, and he is unnaturally tall and skinny. Intensified interest is given to his hands and long fingers, especially as he is playing and shuffling cards. As mentioned earlier, focus on the hands is a characteristic of the feminized villain. Dr. Facilier also has darkened eyelids, which alludes to the idea of wearing eye makeup. Like Bowler Hat Guy, Dr. Facilier has a mustache, which is a masculine trait.
However, this one piece of masculinity does not overpower the many feminine traits of the villain. As stated earlier, gender bending within the villain character is problematic because it may show children, especially boys, that acting feminine is a bad thing.

One last character of note that exemplifies stereotypical portrayals in the films is Mother Gothel in *Tangled*. In Disney, evil women tend to be driven by desire to have what isn’t theirs—purity, beauty, acceptance, love, etc. (Henke et al., 1996, p. 244). In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel is driven by her desire to have beauty and youth—two things the evil woman does not possess. Furthermore, Stone (1975) notes that Disney often has “innocent beauty victimized by the wicked villainess” (p. 96). Mother Gothel perfectly exemplifies this sentiment. She is old, ugly, and steals baby Rapunzel from the castle so that the princess’ hair can keep her young and beautiful forever. Her desire for youth and beauty is so strong that she keeps Rapunzel locked in a tower for 18 years and fights to get her back when she escapes. Although Tiana and Rapunzel may not be aware of the male gaze, Mother Gothel is very aware. Overall, Mother Gothel shows viewers that the goal in life is to be pretty and that by being pretty, one will be accepted as Rapunzel is. In this way, *Tangled* depicts traditional values found in Disney. However, since Mother Gothel is a detestable character, the audience hopefully identifies her motives and aspirations as twisted, instead of yearning to feel and act as she does.

**The Ruffians.** In the film *Tangled*, Rapunzel and Flynn enter a pub and encounter a group of Ruffians. All of them are extremely large and most of them are very fat. They have facial hair and generally look scary, for example, one has hooks for hands. However, in the musical number “I’ve Got a Dream,” the audience sees that the
group of thugs is more feminine than they appear. The men each sing in turn about a
dream: to be a pianist, a florist, and an interior designer; to make a love connection; to
sew and to knit; to collect unicorns; and to have a puppet show. All of their dreams
involve traditionally feminine activities. Flynn calls the dreams “touchy feely,” noting
their feminine nature.

The dreams seem very out of character since the men are presented with such
daunting statures and appearances. During the film, the thugs help Rapunzel and Flynn,
so they are good guys even though they are a little intimidating at first glance.
Nevertheless, in the closing scene of the film, all of the Ruffians have achieved their
goals. Therefore, Disney shows examples of queering with the men because they are
simultaneously exhibiting masculine and feminine characteristics. This positive example
counters the negative connotation given to queering in terms of the villain-as-sissy found
in the films.

When looking at the non-animated films as a whole, I believe they support my
thesis. Although traditional stereotypes and flawed elements may be present in the films,
similar qualities are found in other places, such as Harry Potter. Furthermore, the
progress that Disney has made from earlier films is undeniable. This progress can be
seen in the characterizations of many of the females, including Tiana, Rapunzel, Mindy,
and Franny, who all possess minds of their own and take action, unlike the females in
earlier Disney films.
Non-Animated Films

For my non-animated films, I selected *Bridge to Terabithia, Bedtime Stories, Race to Witch Mountain*, and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. For my analysis of these films, I have divided my analysis into imagination films (*Bridge to Terabithia and Bedtime Stories*) and “boy” films (*Race to Witch Mountain and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*). While the cartoon films rely heavily on animation—the way the characters are actually being drawn—and the interests of the characters, the non-animated films rely more heavily on dialogue and the construction of scenes. Since non-animated films use real actors, only so much can be done to how the characters look in comparison to an animated film that can have each person drawn however Disney desires. However, even though the films rely on different tactics, similar themes emerge in both the animated and non-animated films, as we have already seen with the appearance of the male ensemble and the undercut.

**Imagination films.** Both *Bedtime Stories* and *Bridge to Terabithia* have a theme of imagination that controls the plot of the story. In *Bedtime Stories*, the main protagonist, Skeeter, tells a bedtime story to his niece and nephew, Bobbi and Patrick, each night he watches them while their mom is away on a trip. Though no fault of Skeeter’s, who has no children of his own, each of his bedtime stories starts off pretty terribly. He tries to use pieces of his own life to create a bedtime story that the children find lame and boring. However, the children use their imaginations to help contribute to Skeeter’s stories, and they become imaginative, creative, and interesting. In the end,
Bobbi and Patrick make each story better than Skeeter ever could have. These imaginative stories start to come true in Skeeter’s life throughout the movie.

*Bridge to Terabithia* also has children using their imagination. Leslie, the new girl at school, is very whimsical and imaginative. Both her parents are authors, so it makes sense that this child is so inventive. One day, she and a local boy, Jess, go on an adventure in the woods. When they come to a part of the land they have never been before, Jess is nervous and wants to head back, but Leslie explains to him that they have come to the land of Terabithia where they will be rulers of all the Terabithians. They must save the natives from the Dark Master and the trolls. Skeptical at first, Jess soon becomes enthralled in this made up land that him and Leslie visit each afternoon.

Although this distinction does not have to do specifically with gender, as the “boy” film and princess film categorizations do, I think it is very important to note the way Disney inspires imagination in children with these two films. Ross (2004) argues that Disney often suggests that children should feel guilty and ashamed for using their imagination—using *Alice in Wonderland* as his example. However, I think both these films show how Disney has moved away from this notion. *Bedtime Stories* inspires imagination not only in children but also in adults. Skeeter learns from his niece and nephew the importance of imagination and uses it in his winning plan for the new hotel. The imagination based films not only show Disney’s move away from discouraging imagination, but they also show very egalitarian gender portrayals, as will be discussed later in this analysis.
In *Bridge to Terabithia*, people may argue that Disney is discouraging imagination because Leslie sadly dies on her way to Terabithia one day because she falls into a rapid creek when a rope swing breaks. Yet, the film as a whole in no way discourages imagination. Terabithia and the made up adventures that ensued saved Jess who was extremely unhappy with his life before Leslie moved to the neighborhood. Furthermore, after Leslie’s death, many characters in the book have a change of heart, showing how valuable and meaningful Leslie was to them. Instead of discouraging Jess from continuing his imaginative play, Jess introduces Terabithia to his little sister May Belle, strengthening their own relationship. Thus, I argue that both films inspire imagination in their viewers.

In regard to gender, the imagination films do have some stereotypical aspects, especially in respect to females, but overall represent one of the most balanced representations of gender we have seen thus far. First, I will look at the main characters in each film—Leslie and Jess from *Bridge to Terabithia* and Skeeter from *Bedtime Stories*. Then, I will look at the women collectively in both films and finally at the “bad guys.”

**Jess and Leslie.** Out of all the duos yet presented in these Disney films, Jess and Leslie best represent non-stereotypical gender portrayals. Their relationship with one another seems to be the source of this progressive representation. Before Jess meets Leslie, he makes comments that one would expect from a little boy in grade school. He is in dire need of new shoes because he runs so much that he has worn out his current ones. His mom tries to give him is sister’s old shoes, but Jess refuses to take them since
they have pink on them. “These are girls ones,” he complains. Since his family does not have money for new shoes, Jess is forced to use his sister’s. He tries to use a black marker to color over the pink spots and make them more “manly,” but the sprinkler washes away some of his coloring. The boys at school call him “twinkle toes” when they see the pink on his shoes. This situation represents a stereotypical gender idea that the color pink is for girls and never for boys because it will make them “girly”—something that Jess does not want to be.

However, once Jess meets Leslie, the pair creates a good balance of gender roles. First, I’ll look at Jess. He loves to draw, which is typically a more feminine trait. Often seen carrying around his sketchpad, many people comment how good he is, including Leslie and his music teacher Ms. Edmunds. To counter this traditionally more feminine quality, Jess loves to run and is extremely fast—fastest in his class until Leslie comes to his school. Running and athletics are traditionally seen as a more masculine pastime. Therefore, Jess’s two favorite hobbies—drawing and running—make his interests rather balanced.

Furthermore, in some instances Jess acts like a scaredy cat. When an animal keeps eating food from their garden, Jess catches the animal and releases it far away from their house, instead of shooting and killing it like his dad wants. When his dad yells at him, he does not stand up for himself. We see him acting in this scared manner at school, as well. During the film, Jess does not stand up for himself when the bullies in the class pick on him and his little sister. In this sense, Jess represents the beta male. He is not the typical alpha male; he is not overly macho. On the other hand, he is sensitive and caring.
He even accepts some feminine traits, such as drawing. Therefore, Jess is an ideal, balanced character.

Two instances occur where we see Jess take the initiative. The first happens when he warns Leslie not to sit in the back of the bus. The eighth grader Janice always sits in the back seat, so Jess looks out for Leslie, who is still the new girl at this time, so she does not get beat up. This particular act does not put Jess at risk, so it matches well with his nonconfrontational attitude. It also puts him a bit in the masculine hero role because he is saving the new girl. The other time Jess stands up for himself is towards the very end of the film after Leslie dies. Before her death, he remained nonconfrontational and passive, but in the situation described below which occurs after her death, Jess does not hesitate to use some well-directed aggression. In this way, Jess is one of the characters, as mentioned above, who has a change of heart after Leslie’s death.

A bully in his class makes a comment about Leslie’s death, and after sitting quietly all year listening to his comments, Jess turns around and punches him in the face. Although this instance does show a masculine way to handle problems, using fists instead of words, it marks a turning point in Jess’s character. Before this time, Jess was probably more feminine than he was masculine in this sense since he hated confrontation. This scene showed that he is masculine when he needs to be—to stand up for his best friends.

Therefore, I think all of these examples show that Jess represents a “normal,” desirable character. He is feminine in certain ways, such as his love for drawing and his nonconfrontational demeanor. However, he is also masculine in different ways, for example his talent at running and racing and his desire to stand up for those he cares
about. All of the description of Jess’s character provided above proves that he epitomizes
the beta male—a desirable individual to have in a child’s film because it presents a less
strict form of masculinity. Overall, I believe this neutrality stems from his relationship
with Leslie.

The other protagonist in the film, Leslie, represents Jess’s counterpart. She is the
new girl at the school but being new does not account for why she is so different. Leslie
is wise beyond her years in Bridge to Terabithia. She seems to be above traditional
gender roles and even points out instances to Jess when he seems to be relying on them.
In appearance, she has short blonde hair but not short enough to be considered a boy’s
haircut. Leslie rarely wears dresses but her outfits usually incorporate feminine colors,
such as pinks and purples. Even her name, Leslie, can be a girl or boy name. Overall,
her appearance is a good balance between masculine and feminine, as are her interests
and personality traits.

In a sense, Leslie is a tomboy. When she lines up to run the race with the boys in
her grade, a boy shouts to her that the race is only for boys. Not seeming to care, Leslie
runs the race anyways and wins, making her faster than all the boys in her grade. As
stated earlier, running and athleticism is usually a masculine trait. However, Leslie is
also girly in a sense. In the scene after the race, she tells May Belle that she has some
Barbies that she can have. Barbies, arguably, are the most stereotypical you can get for a
girl’s toy. Although this scene does represent the undercut when isolated from the rest of
the film, in the larger picture, it adds to the neutrality of Leslie’s character. The running
and the Barbies balance each other out in regards to gender for Leslie’s interests.
As far as personality traits, Leslie also has a good mix of feminine and masculine qualities. Her teacher, Mrs. Meyers, chooses Leslie’s composition to be read aloud, complimenting her use of adjectives and descriptions of all her senses. Orr (2011) found that girls do better in school “because they are socialized to be good” (p. 272). Therefore, Leslie’s composition being read aloud makes her the epitome of a good student—a stereotypically female attribute. In the scenes following the classroom episode, we see that Leslie is also extremely adventurous. When her and Jess come across a rope swing in the woods, Jess is scared to try it because he is afraid it might break. Leslie, on the other hand, searches for a stick long enough to pull the rope swing over to them. Adventure and daring are usually personality traits we associate with males. Therefore, being a good student and being adventurous work to balance Leslie’s personality in respect to gender.

One final situation shows the way in which Jess and Leslie balance each other out in regard to traditional gender roles. When Jess and Leslie are building a tree fort in Terabithia, Leslie is hammering a nail into some wood.

Jess: “You’re really good at that [hammering] for a girl.”

Leslie: “You mean like how I’m pretty good at running…for a girl? You’re pretty good at art…for a boy.”

After this exchange, the both of them laugh and Jess understands that talents should not be based on whether you are a girl or a boy. They are a reminder of traditional gender roles, yet they emphasize that you are good at what you are good at, gender and sex aside. Leslie, even though she is a child, understands this, and in her own way, makes Jess
understand this. Overall, Jess and Leslie’s characters epitomize gender equality and balance. Through their own personality traits, interests, and relationship with each other, they exemplify what it means to be a great representation of gender roles. Hence, the two protagonists in *Bridge to Terabithia* show the admirable qualities included in Disney movies, even though some stereotypical elements exist, which will be discussed later.

**Skeeter.** In the movie *Bedtime Stories*, the main character is a middle-aged man named Skeeter, played by Adam Sandler. Traditionally, Adam Sandler has played some questionable characters that tend to objectify women, for example, Billy Madison. However, perhaps since he is acting in a children’s film in *Bedtime Stories*, his character Skeeter, deviates from his other characters. In fact, Skeeter presents a pretty good representation of gender roles. In my analysis of this protagonist, I will start with a few of his flaws and then move onto his good character traits.

*The bad.* The bedtime stories that Skeeter tells Bobbi and Patrick are usually the places where the traditional gender roles become most exaggerated. In his first bedtime story, Skeeter makes himself a knight. Then, in the next two, he makes himself a cowboy and a Luke Skywalker lookalike. Overall, all three of these characters embody manhood and masculinity. His goal in these made-up stories is usually to get rich or to win the girl. Since the man is traditionally the provider, focus on wealth and women falls victim to stereotypical gender roles. Furthermore, the women in his bedtime stories are either damsels in distress or very feminine creatures, such as fairies or mermaids. Overall, the bedtime stories usually embody traditional gender roles.
The good. As a child, Skeeter was extremely helpful at his father’s motel. He was always very well behaved, hardworking, and obedient. In some ways, these are characteristics more suitable to a female. As Orr (2011) notes, girls have a tendency to be obedient and dismissive that is reminiscent of the concept of the perfect girl (Henke et al., 1996). Even as an adult, Skeeter continues to work at the new hotel and his demeanor does not change much from when he was a child. Still, he is hard working in his position as handyman.

Visually, he is not traditionally handsome. In fact, he is rather goofy looking; he even makes a comment about his goofy appearance during the film. In this sense, he is not our typical Disney hero, who tends to be extremely attractive. However, even though he is not a traditional, overly masculine lead, he still gets a chance to pick the theme for the new hotel. The reason for this opportunity is due to his hard work and industrious behavior he has while at work. Instead of trying to impress the boss with his presentation with superfluous material, he gives a straightforward talk. His demonstration comes from his heart; it is emotional and earnest.

In these ways, Skeeter represents a beta male and the more normal hero, like that found in England et al. (2001). In the end, Skeeter saves the school, runs the hotel, and gets the pretty girl. This may seem like a typical happy Disney ending, but it is actually very deserved. As a model man, Skeeter is kind and hardworking, an all around nice guy. None of these rewards are handed to him, but he works hard for them and really earns them. We have come a long way from Simba in The Lion King, who is king simply because of his descendants, even after he leaves his kingdom struggling for many years.
The ladies. As mentioned earlier, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Bedtime Stories* have the most egalitarian portrayal of males and females; *Bridge to Terabithia* even has more women than men. However, the majority of these women are cast in very stereotypical roles. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Jess’s mom is always seen within the home. If she has a job, it is not alluded to over the duration of the film. Jess’s dad is the only one ever mentioned supporting the family. Furthermore, both of Jess’s older sisters are never seen outside of the home. Although they are not yet women, they are teenagers who have been confined to the domestic sphere during this film. Thus, similar to the animated films, *Bridge to Terabithia* relies on the domestic sphere to categorize females.

In addition, both of Jess and Leslie’s teachers, Mrs. Meyers and Ms. Edmunds, are female. The first thing we see of Mrs. Meyers is a close-up of her red lipstick, and the first thing we hear her do is reinforce the rules. She is reminiscent of the Professor McGonagall character in Harry Potter: unattractive and a stickler for the rules. She does not seem to have any motherly qualities to her. When Jess gets picked on, she tells both Jess and the bully to behave instead of showing some sympathy for Jess, the victim.

However, she is one of the characters to show a change of heart after Leslie’s death. After Jess punches the bully in the face at the end of the film, Mrs. Meyers tells Jess how upset she was when her husband died, and she actually begins to cry. Although crying and showing emotion is typically a feminine trait and could be used to argue her fulfillment of a stereotype, I see it in the opposite way. Before this, Mrs. Meyers seemed like the evil, heartless women that Mayes-Elma (2006) described in her analysis of the binary portrayal of women in Harry Potter (p. 99). By crying and showing emotion and
sympathy, Mrs. Meyers became a well-rounded character and not just a cruel stickler for the rules.

Conversely, Ms. Edmunds, Jess and Leslie’s music teacher, is very different from Mrs. Meyers. She is very kind and pretty. In her class, all of the students get along. However, besides Jess’s mom, Mrs. Meyers and Ms. Edmunds are the two most prominent women in the film, and they are both teachers—traditionally a very female occupation. Positioning women in the home and having the workingwomen in the stereotypical teacher role exemplifies what I meant when I said that the overabundance of female characters in this film is not necessarily ideal. Stay at home mom and teacher are two common portrayals for a woman, which could be used in an argument against Disney. However, as mentioned earlier, Harry Potter also frequently places the woman in the home. Therefore, this theme, while not ideal, is not unique to Disney, although it is also present in *Bedtime Stories*.

Wendy, Skeeter’s sister, is a principal in the film. In many ways, she is like Mrs. Meyers. She is not old and unattractive, but she is big on reinforcing the rules. She is very controlling of her children’s lives. For example, Wendy does not let Bobbi and Patrick watch TV or eat hamburgers or marshmallows, and she tries to serve wheat grass cake at Bobbi’s birthday party. Wendy’s best friend, Jill, is a teacher at her school. She is very good with kids and helps them make signs to save the school during one scene in the movie. She is very traditionally pretty, skinny, and domestic. We never actually see Wendy or Jill working, just taking care of the children. Therefore, like in *Bridge to Terabithia*, the women who have professions are type casted as teachers.
Whereas the counterpart of the teachers in *Bridge to Terabithia* is Jess’s unemployed mom, in *Bedtime Stories* it is Violet, the unemployed party girl. Her dad is the owner of the hotel so she is very rich and spoiled. The first thing we hear about Violet is Skeeter saying, “I always heard she was very hot.” Violet is, for all intents and purposes, extremely good looking. She is skinny and has long blonde hair. As far as we can tell, she does not work. She just parties and gets followed around by paparazzi. The one scene where she is with Bobbi and Patrick, she seems at a complete loss. In general, she is not very intelligent and does not know anything about kids.

This representation of females in these two films may be seen as extremely problematic because they reinforce stereotypical gender roles for females. There are the unemployed, the pretty teacher, the mean teacher, and the party girl. As I said before, this depiction is reminiscent of Mayes-Elma’s (2006) discovery in Harry Potter that “traditionally, if a woman is not seen as a mothering figure, she is seen as the direct opposite: a cold, heartless, selfish person, but men are not seen in this binary way” (p. 99). This, in fact, is very true in these movies. Skeeter, although he is not a father and was at a loss with the children at first, turns out to be a superb uncle. Since Skeeter, Leslie, and Jess represent great examples of well-balanced characters with regard to gender, it is disappointing that the women of the movies could not be portrayed in this way, as well. However, as stated before, upsetting portrayals of women exist outside of Disney media, as well.

**The bad guys.** In the animated films, the villain had a tendency to be feminized, true to the findings of Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003). From their research, they found
that characteristics such as delicate features and silhouettes resembling corseted women were prominent among the bad guys. In *Bedtime Stories*, the feminized villain made an appearance but in a less pronounced manner, since real actors are being used and Disney cannot rely on animation. The first example of the feminized villain in *Bedtime Stories* was the hotel employee, Kendall. He is a big shot at the hotel—dating the owner’s daughter. For a male, he is extremely clean cut. He has no facial hair, has very shapely eyebrows, and has a fake tan. Shapely eyebrows and fake tans on men are usually associated with homosexuals, whether this is valid or not. In addition, Kendall’s idea for the new hotel was a Broadway theme. For his presentation, he sang, danced, and recruited the help of back up performers. Overall, Broadway is more of a feminine interest. This portrayal along with his appearance presents Kendall as a feminine character.

Kendall is a villain in the movie because he is very mean to Skeeter and the children and tries to get the school knocked down. Therefore, he is positioned as the feminized villain. Although Kendall is an awful person and deserves to be demoted to room service in the end as he is, his characterization as feminized villain makes this problematic. If children repeatedly see males who gender bend being punished in the media, they may believe that it is because of this feminization, and not because of their character flaws.

Mr. Nottingham, the owner of the hotel, represents another variation of the feminized villain. Although his physical appearance is not overly feminized (he is overweight, short, and bearded), his personality is more feminine. Like Bowler Hat Guy
in *Meet the Robinsons*, he is a rather pathetic villain. Mr. Nottingham develops a fear of germs and this development presents him as a pitiable character. Furthermore, he is an asexual character, and there is a focus on his hands—a sign of the feminized villain. This focus comes from his fear of germs and not wanting to touch anyone. In the end of the film, however, he overcomes this fear and becomes a nurse at the elementary school.

Typically, society thinks of nursing as a female occupation. Therefore, Mr. Nottingham presents another example of gender bending among villains. I agree with Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) that gender transgression with villains may create confusion among children, but I must emphasize that this is not a Disney specific trait. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) even studied some films that were not Disney, such as *Pokémon*.

The villain in *Bridge to Terabithia* is extremely surprising. First off, he is not an example of a feminized villain; rather, he is the prime example of hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, he is Jess’s dad. In the land of Terabithia, the Dark Master is the villain. After Leslie’s death, the Dark Master chases Jess and we learn that it is nothing more than Jess’s dad. His categorization as the villain makes sense because during the film, he gets mad at Jess on many occasions—for losing his keys, for not killing the animal in the garden, for drawing all the time. To Jess, he is a villain.

Jess’s dad exemplifies masculinity. For his job, he works as a carpenter, which is a traditionally masculine occupation. He is the sole provider for the family since his wife is a stay at home mom. Furthermore, he works in a garden and is the voice of authority in the house, constantly telling the children to do their chores. At one point, he tells Jess to make himself useful and draw him some money—insinuating that drawing, a female
hobby, is not a useful way to spend time. Overall, Jess’s dad exemplifies the alpha male. Although this may be better than a feminized villain because it does not look down upon gender bending, it does cast the alpha male in a bad light. Similar to the dilemma whether over feminizing or over masculinizing a strong female character is better, I argue again that a more “normal” representation would be better suited here, as well. Again, I think in a perfect world, it would be best to have a character that is balanced in regards to gender to be the villain.

“Boys” films. The next two non-animated films I am looking at, Race to Witch Mountain and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, exemplify “boys” films for non-animated films, just as Bolt and Meet the Robinsons do for animated films. Race to Witch Mountain, similar to Meet the Robinsons, has a science fiction based plot. While Meet the Robinsons focuses on time travel, Race to Witch Mountain deals with the topic of life forms on other planets visiting earth. In the beginning of the film, the audience is shown a montage of newspaper clippings and sound bytes from news programs discussing the possibility of life outside of Earth. Then, within the beginning scenes of the film, two aliens, Sara and Seth, crash into Earth. Throughout the film, violent fight scenes occur between Siphon, the evil alien drone, and Sara and Seth. Furthermore, the movie includes car chases and many explosions.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice also includes car chases, explosions, and fight scenes. The plot of this movie, however, is centered on wizards and magic. During the film, the good and bad wizards battle over possession of the grimhold, which holds many evil sorcerers captive. I argue that both Race to Witch Mountain and The Sorcerer’s
"Apprentice" serve as the more boy-friendly films of the four non-animated films I selected. According to Oliver and Green (2001), male-oriented programming with a lot of violence is exclusionary of female viewers. Although a small romantic plot does exist in both movies, making it more appealing to girls, overall, these movies would be classified as more “boy” films. This classification may be why the male ensemble is so prominent in both of these films. When analyzing these movies, first, I will look at *Race to Witch Mountain* and the major players in the film, and then I will turn my analysis to *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.

**Race to Witch Mountain.**

*Jack Bruno.* The main protagonist in *Race to Witch Mountain* is cabdriver Jack Bruno, played by The Rock (Dwayne Johnson). Like Adam Sandler, The Rock has certain connotations when people think of him. Instead of being goofy like Adam Sandler, The Rock is known to be large and tough. In this movie, he does not disappoint. In one of the opening scenes, we see Jack hitting and kicking a punching bag in his apartment—a perfect example of hegemonic masculinity. When two large men he used to do business with (using context clues, the audience can tell this business was most likely illegal) approach Jack, he uses his brute strength and size to fight them off. In every way physically, he represents the idea of hegemonic masculinity. He is brave, big, strong, and aggressive; Jack Bruno is the epitome of the alpha male.

If this were all that we were shown of his character, I would classify Jack Bruno as a stereotypical representation of gender. However, throughout the duration of the film, the audience sees a softer side of Jack emerge. Once Sara and Seth climb into the back of
Jack’s taxi, it is clear that he may have more fatherly instincts than the audience, or he, expected. Very protective of the kids, Jack puts his arm around them and orders them to stay close to him. The manner in which he does this act is reminiscent of a father protecting his children. Furthermore, when the children are captured and tranquilized by the CIA, Jack becomes overly defensive when he sees Sara has been shot and runs after the children in an attempt to save them.

Exposure to the children did not completely reform his macho persona, though. When Dr. Friedman joins the trio for their search for Witch Mountain, Jack tells her it is too dangerous, insinuating that as a man, he is better equipped for the situation, but she is a woman and should stay behind. Dr. Friedman, instead of getting offended, quickly puts Jack in his place and tells him to “man up.” Therefore, Jack Bruno begins the film as a prime example of the alpha male, but by the end of the film when he hugs Sara goodbye, the audience can see that he has become a better-rounded character. He still may throw punches to get out of the grasps of the CIA, but he is doing so to save the children he has come to love and care about. For these reasons, I believe Jack Bruno embodies a good balance of masculine and feminine traits. In some ways he represents hegemonic masculinity, and in other ways, the audience sees a softer, more emotional side.

**Dr. Alex Friedman.** The main female character in *Race to Witch Mountain* is a doctor by the name of Alex Friedman. Like Leslie in *Bridge to Terabithia*, she is given a gender-neutral name and also represents a nearly normal character with regard to gender. Dr. Friedman has medium length, dark brown hair and glasses. Her glasses hint to her intelligence, which we are introduced to the first time we come into contact with her. She
is a discredited astrophysicist because of her fascination with UFOs and life on other planets but is wildly intelligent nonetheless. Science and math are usually thought of as more boyish subjects in school, so making Dr. Friedman an expert in this subject adds to her masculinity. We only ever see Dr. Friedman, working; she is giving a scientific lecture at a UFO Convention in Las Vegas. In this sense, Disney is stepping away from women in the domestic sphere in this film.

Towards the end of the film, after Jack uses his strength to fight through most of the defenses of the CIA in Witch Mountain, it is up to Dr. Friedman to get them access to the spaceship. She authoritatively walks into the dome and uses her scientific knowledge and background to stream together complex words and phrases that make her sound like she knows what she is doing. The CIA workers believe her and leave the scene. However, Dr. Friedman is not just all science. She also has a motherly side to her. She volunteers to help Sara and Seth get back home upon first meeting them. Then, she hugs the children and shows concern over their well-being. Therefore, Dr. Friedman, while being masculine in a sense of her career choice, also represents femininity in her motherly qualities and provides viewers with a well-balanced character.

Three situations, however, undermine the power that Dr. Friedman wields throughout the film. First, as mentioned earlier during the undercut heading, Dr. Friedman is turned into an object of desire directly after qualifying her as a source of help. Additionally, when she tries to explain the severity of the issue at hand to people at the convention, they call her a “drama queen.” Jack then steps in and says the exact same thing and they get scared and take action. I find this scene problematic because it shows
that woman do not have authority in the situation. She is labeled with the stereotypical “drama queen” name while the man is taken seriously.

The last situation also exemplifies the undercut. Dr. Friedman kicks someone during her and Jack’s escape from the CIA, and he looks at her in surprise. She justifies the move with “I have three older brothers.” Therefore, this comment suggests that having physical strength or knowing how to use it is merely a masculine trait. The only reason why she, a female, has this skill is due to her three older brothers. In spite of these three minor occurrences, I think that Alex Friedman’s intelligence, working stature, and motherly qualities make her a good example of a gender-balanced character.

_The bad guys._ In _Race to Witch Mountain_, three villains are present during the film. The first is Wolf. We never actually see this man, only his cronies that he sends after Jack Bruno. Even though we do not know what Wolf looks like, we can guess that he is a big and scary man, at least that is what the name Wolf implies. Moreover, the men that he sends after Jack are bulky in stature, strong, and violent. If he has power over this type of man, the audience can assume that he is equally as formidable. Another villain in the movie is the alien drone Siphon. He is a trained assassin who will not stop until he completes his mission. Siphon stands taller than Jack Bruno (over 6’), wears an all black outfit, and is ruthless. He does not seem to have a mind of his own; he is merely a drone programmed to behave in this manner. The audience does not even see Siphon’s face until the close of the movie.

Both Wolf and Siphon represent mysterious, masculine villains. Neither of them have much of a personality. We just know that they are violent, angry, and powerful. I
believe that this type of blanket portrayal creates a bad name for the alpha male. Although Disney has begun to more towards the beta male (Gillam & Wooden, 2008), giving the alpha male this type of negative connotation is not the answer. Rather than villainizing the alpha male, Disney should aim to do what they have done for Jack Bruno—reveal a more feminine side to the character. The alpha male can be hegemonic and extreme without being villainous and unappealing.

The last villain in the film is Henry Burke, head of defense for the CIA. He and his crew work throughout the movie to capture Sara and Seth for study. Burke is an older gentleman and all the people who work beneath him are younger males. Many times throughout the film, he is shown giving direction to the younger men. Having the entire government division consist of males seems problematic because there should be some women in this unit, as well. However, putting men in a position of power tends to happen in the media. For example, in the first few Harry Potter books, everyone in the Ministry of Magic, the form of government in the wizarding world, is male (Heilman & Douglas, 2009).

More troublesome than the entirely male CIA is that most of the major males in the film are presented as bad guys. Even Jack Bruno, who helps save the day, is an ex-convict—a fact that is brought up multiple times throughout the film. Besides this preoccupation with villainous males, *Race to Witch Mountain* includes characters that exemplify a good balance of feminine and masculine traits, such as Jack Bruno and Dr. Alex Friedman.
The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.

Balthazar and David. In the film, Balthazar, played by Nicholas Cage, is one of Merlin’s three apprentices—the only one to not become evil. He is responsible for trapping all of the bad wizards in the grimhold and protecting the people. Visually, he has long hair for a male and is slender. It does not seem that he is overly muscular. David becomes Balthazar’s apprentice during the course of the film. He also is thin and appears weak. Due to their personalities and the close relationship they form throughout the film, Balthazar and David represent the beta males in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Their characterizations differ from that of the feminized villain because they both long for a female. With the exception of Kendall, the other feminized villains in my study were asexual characters. Furthermore, since neither Balthazar nor Dave portray villains, they cannot be categorized as villain-as-sissy characters.

Balthazar, Veronica, and Horvath were Merlin’s three original apprentices. Because of their close contact with each other, Balthazar fell in love with Veronica. However, Horvath fell in love with her, as well. The entire plot revolves around the battle between Horvath and Balthazar trying to keep possession of the grimhold (Horvath wants to release the evil sorceress Morgana—who entered the body of Veronica—and Balthazar wants to keep Morgana captive). At first, we think this is the only source of their discord.

Then we come to learn of the men’s mutual love for Veronica. It is interesting that the plot is driven for the men’s affection towards the sorceress. I think the power this woman has over these two men and the course of the story is incredible and shows the
command woman can take. However, since Veronica is trapped in the grimhold for most of the film and her power comes from the men’s desire for her, I believe that this puts Veronica in a stereotypical female role. She needs Balthazar to save her from the grimhold and Morgana’s possession, and she is an object of desire.

Although Balthazar does love Veronica, he also has a desire to save the world from the evil Morgana. Therefore, his actions are not solely driven by affection. In the end, he sucks Morgana’s soul from Veronica to save her and almost dies. Before it is too late, David uses his magic to bring Balthazar back to life. This brings me to the other beta male in the film—Dave.

In some ways, he exemplifies stereotypical masculinity. He wants the pretty blonde girl, Becky, to be his girlfriend when they are children in school and later in life when they are studying at NYU. In addition, Dave is a huge nerd. He loves physics and has a lab that he does work in for the school. In one scene, he even uses his science knowledge to fix the broken transmitter at the radio station. Science, as I have already stated, is a subject more geared towards boys. However, he uses these two traditional masculinities—lusting for a girl and loving science—to do something surprising. He uses his science knowledge to impress Becky and win her over. I think that this is a good representation of gender because it shows that you do not need to embody hegemonic masculinity to win the girl. Dave is not charismatic; in fact, he is a little awkward. However, he listens to Becky when she talks and helps her with her physics; in the end, they end up dating.
Although women are not shoved into the domestic sphere in *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, one scene in particular shows how out of place the men are in this area. Dave still does not have full control over his magic at this point. When he walks into his lab, brooms, mops, sponges, and other cleaning supplies have taken over his area and are cleaning out of control. Cleaning and chores of this sort are typically very feminine in nature. Dave has no power to stop the magic, and it is clear that he is completely out of his element. In the end, Balthazar needs to save him and Dave has to cancel his date with Becky.

In a way, Dave’s control over his magic represents hegemonic masculinity. Before he knows he is a sorcerer, Dave epitomizes a nerd. He does not plan on going out for his birthday because he has too much homework, and he is uncomfortable speaking to Becky. Once Balthazar starts to train him to be a sorcerer, Dave starts to become more courageous and ask Becky on dates. In the above example with the out of control cleaning supplies, Dave’s inability to handle his magic causes him to cancel a date. In a scene discussed later in the paper, Dave uses his magic to return Becky’s possessions to her. In the end, Dave is able to perform magic, even without the help of his ring, and it is only then that Becky agrees to be his girlfriend. For these reasons, I believe that Dave’s magical ability correlates with his fulfillment of hegemonic masculinity.

While Dave may begin to fulfill hegemonic masculinity more as the movie progresses (he becomes more charismatic, confident, and attractive as a character), I still argue that he represents the beta male along with Balthazar. The two develop a strong friendship during the film and take care of one another. For example, Balthazar saves
David from the cleaning supplies and David saves Balthazar’s life at the climax of the film. The inclusion of the beta male in a non-animated film shows Disney’s dedication to this type of character. Furthermore, by making both characters successful in their endeavors—Dave masters his magic and gets the girl, and Balthazar defeats Morgana and saves Veronica—it shows the perks of being a well-rounded male.

**Becky.** Unlike the representations of Dave and Balthazar, Becky, the main female in the film, embodies gender stereotypes. She is pretty, skinny, and has long blonde hair. When we are introduced to Becky as a young adult, Dave has dropped some papers and looks up to see Becky’s crotch in a skirt—immediately pitting her as an object of lust. Furthermore, her interest in music and difficulty with physics fulfills gender stereotypes that say music is more feminine and science is more masculine

*Becky:* My brain just does not think physics.

*Dave:* What does it think?

*Becky:* Music, mostly.

To further this interest, Becky works at the radio station on campus.

Moreover, Becky needs Dave to save her on multiple occasions. When her radio transmitter breaks, she needs Dave’s scientific knowledge to fix it. Another situation arises later in the film where Dave saves Becky. They are in a subway station and a man runs by and steals Becky’s purse and bracelet, which was her grandmother’s. Dave takes it upon himself to follow the thief and get Becky’s possessions back. Lastly, Becky is petrified of heights. In one scene, her and Dave are on the roof of a building. Becky refuses to approach the edge until Dave takes her hand and leads her there. In all these
situations, Becky portrays the damsel in distress in need of assistance. I think this representation, similar to Tiana and Rapunzel, is problematic because it shows that women need the help of a man to get things done. However, as argued earlier, these females still show more personality and growth than the women of early Disney films.

Race. Similar to my analysis of Bolt, I feel that although it does not have to do directly with gender, it is important to discuss the intersection with race and social class. In The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, there are two Black characters with some speaking lines. The first is Dave’s overweight roommate Bennett. The audience only sees him in two scenes. In the first, he is planning Dave’s birthday party. Very excited, he plans to invite cheerleaders. When Dave says he has too much work to go out, Bennett seems disappointed and tries to persuade him otherwise. In this first scene, Bennett is portrayed as a partier who is only concerned with pretty girls. In the second scene, we see Bennett lying on the floor with a girl, surrounded by candles. It is clear he is trying to seduce her. He leaves the girl to help Dave, but the image we are left with of Bennett is an overweight, Black male interested in pursuing girls.

The only other Black character with more than one line in the film is the thug who tries to steal Becky’s valuables in the subway station. In this situation, Disney is aligning criminal behavior with Blacks. This alliance is worrisome because children already tend to make connections between race and social class (Berry, 2007, p. 99). By making the two most prominent Black characters a boy concerned with women and a thief, Disney is casting Black men in a very bad light. As said before, this idea may not be directly
connected to gender, but it is important to realize the intersection between race, class, and gender.

Now that I have finished an analysis of the eight films of my study, I will briefly conclude my paper with an overview of my findings, the significance of my topic, research limitations, and suggestions for further research.
Conclusion

After a literature review and a thorough analysis of the films, it is clear that Disney has been getting better throughout the years by portraying females as motivated instead of passive and men as beta males rather than extreme alpha characters but that many stereotypical elements still exist in the films. The presence of the male ensemble in the majority of the films perfectly exemplifies the gender imbalance present within the films. I believe that this overabundance of male side characters can be extremely worrisome because of the children watching these films. The movies present a world that is not typical of the reality in which we live. Males do not outnumber females in this striking way in everyday life.

This inundation of male characters can be related to the cultivation analysis theory in mass communication, which argues that television creates a world that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes reality because people believe it to be so (Baran & Davis, 2012). Therefore, the male ensemble, or the overpopulation of male characters in Disney movies, is similar to the way body image or the prominence of violence is inaccurately depicted in media. Violent acts are not as common as television illustrates them to be, people are not as skinny and perfect as seen in the magazines, and men are not as prominent as Disney has them appear.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the undercut in Disney represents another prominent issue. By building female characters up or having them break stereotypes just to subsequently knock them back down and cast them in a traditional role is no better than never building them up in the first place. Examples of the undercut can be found in each
of the films that I studied; however, I argue that the undercut can probably be found in most media if you are looking for it. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) note its presence in television programming, and I have noted examples of it in Harry Potter. Therefore, I propose the undercut as a new term to be used in discussion for gender and not merely as an argument against the Disney Corporation.

In *Meet the Robinsons* and *Bolt*, Disney presents some empowered women, but they are depicted as either extremely masculine or extremely feminine. The villain character in *Meet the Robinsons* exemplifies the villain-as-sissy archetype discussed by Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) even though he does embody some masculine traits. Furthermore, through animation and dialogue, *Bolt* creates an intersection of race, class, and gender that is extremely problematic.

In the princess movies, some positive and negative aspects also arise. For example, the leading lady in each film exemplifies the Diswomen (Zarranz, 2007), but then she is animated in unrealistically beautiful, very feminine ways. The men, on the other hand, display some feminine traits, but are drawn in masculine ways typical of Disney. The most salient aspect of these two films is the return of the princess to the domestic sphere. In *Tangled*, the Ruffians present an interesting case of queering. Overall, Disney has made progress in these recent films by including empowered females and more androgynous males.

In the non-animated films, positive and negative representations also exist. Leslie and Jess provide extremely well-balanced gender displays in *Bridge to Terabithia*, although the domestic sphere plays a prominent role for other females in the film. In
Bedtime Stories, Skeeter exemplifies the beta male because of his emotional side and male friendships. Yet, we also see stereotyped representations of females. Bedtime Stories also shows how the villain-as-sissy can exist outside the realm of animation with the characters Kendall and Mr. Nottingham. Although neither of these films includes the male ensemble, Race to Witch Mountain and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice have striking examples of gender imbalance. Besides this inundation of male characters, these two non-animated films have instances of balanced beta males, such as Jack Bruno in Race to Witch Mountain and David in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Although some problematic elements do occur, such as many examples of the undercut in Race to Witch Mountain, and Becky’s character in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Disney should not be faulted for these films.

Overall, I do not believe Disney should be as criticized as they are by some groups. Mickey Mouse Monopoly presents Disney in a very one-sided manner. Similarly, Giroux (1999) criticizes Disney for assigning rigid roles to women and people of color (p. 108). Yes, stereotypical elements exist in the classic animated films. I have identified some of these same issues in more recent films in my above analysis.

However, people also need to note the progress and the positive elements. Maybe Disney should not be held up on a pedestal as a perfect example of gender representation, but it does not deserve to be so vehemently criticized either. Its portrayal may not always be ideal—but since when is anything in life ideal? As noted numerous times throughout this paper, most of the elements that critics disparage Disney media for are also present in major franchises outside of Disney, such as Harry Potter.
My topic is significant because as displayed earlier, Disney is an important part of U.S. culture, and its media reaches a large audience. My findings show that Disney is progressing, which is encouraging, even though stereotypical elements still occur. As Giroux (1999) noted, Disney will not affect everyone in the same way. Buckingham (1997) furthered this observation by explaining that children might not perceive the problematic elements that adults and critics see in the films. However, it is still important to notice these aspects so we can understand that it is possible to be perceived in this way.

My research has some limitations. For example, there may be some gendered aspects of the film that I did not notice because they are so commonplace. Society and the media condition us to a point where we may become unaware of some troubling elements because they have become so normalized in our lives. Additionally, I think a key area of further study would be to study children’s reactions to these films. Does the villain-as-sissy character actually give children a negative connotation of gender bending? Do children notice that the girls often need the help of a male in Disney films? Researchers can speculate about these questions and make intelligent, informed guesses, but until further research is completed, definite answers will not be known. Additionally, I believe a detailed analysis that looks at Disney, Warner Bros., MGM, Dreamworks, and other prominent companies that produce children’s texts would be beneficial. A comparison could be made between the different companies in their portrayals of gender and stereotypes.

Does Disney include gender stereotypes in its children’s movies? Yes. Could they do some things better in this regard? Of course. But, do these troublesome elements
exist elsewhere? Absolutely. This paper’s goal was to study recent animated and non-animated Disney films geared towards children and to examine the way gender was represented. After a thorough literature review and analysis, I can surely acknowledge the shortcomings of Disney, but I can just as confidently note the progress Disney has made and the positive portrayals it includes in its films.
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