

PIXAR'S NEW FAIRY TALE *BRAVE*: A FEMINIST REDEFINITION OF THE HERO MONOMYTH

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ABSTRACT

Literature has been traditionally shaped by the paradigm of Western culture, characterized by the hegemony of white, male ideals. The literary impact of these biased ideas is considerably evident in the fairy-tale genre, relevant as the traditional vehicle for certain values. This article uses a feminist approach to examine the fairy-tale form and analyzes Pixar's fantasy film *Brave* (2012) as illustrative of the gradual substitution of the male hero monomyth for new literary paradigms in which the female experience is constructive and fundamental: The heroes' quests offer an insight into Merida's forced heterosexual alliance and Elinor's experience on motherhood.

RESUMEN

El paradigma literario tradicional de occidente se caracteriza por la hegemonía de ideales blancos masculinos. Esta inclinación actúa notablemente en el género literario de los cuentos de hadas, cuyos valores, considerados conservadores, se transmiten de generación en generación. Este artículo usa una perspectiva feminista para examinar la tradición de los cuentos a través del análisis de *Brave* (2012) como una película que ilustra la sustitución gradual del mito del héroe por nuevos cánones literarios, en los que la experiencia femenina es significativa y de interés: La encrucijada de las heroínas se centra en el matrimonio forzado de Mérida y la maternidad a través de los ojos de Elinor.

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales have generally been considered a minor generic category within literature, yet have been the object of a great deal of analysis from the perspective of other fields, from anthropology to psychoanalysis. These approaches have foregrounded their relevance as vehicles for the transmission of certain values and the developing of both the individual and the common psyche. However, for literary critics whose orientation is focused on the ideological impact of literary texts, the values expressed through fairy tales are considered conservative as they maintain a long-established supremacy of patriarchal principles. The persistent representation of the hero as male and the heroine as a passive character, typically a reward for the hero,¹ is thus one of the main focuses of this study.

Heroic characterization has evolved alongside with the changes that contemporary society has witnessed in recent decades. It is therefore possible to find now a growing literary corpus in written and film narratives in which the role of the hero is assigned to a female character. The twofold idea of this article proposes an analysis of the animated fantasy film *Brave* (2012) as an illustration of how this change is affecting the basic paradigm of the fairy-tale narrative. Nevertheless, my further intention is to highlight the importance of alternative hero models to reverse the biased intentions of perpetuating male power –which has represented heroism as a male characteristic and heroines bound to sexual or mothering confinements. To do this, *Brave* is a great example as its protagonists Merida and Elinor shift traditional narratives that eclipse women behind the deeds of male heroes; they avoid being silenced and powerless, as their predecessors were, by challenging and transgressing the long-established representations of femininity and female relations. My approach will be primarily based on premises provided by archetypal criticism, which help me produce an assessment of the redefinition of archetypal roles from a feminist point of view. At first glance, archetypal criticism is far from being compatible with feminism, as the theories generally follow the traditional focus on the male hero's experiences as universals.² Thus, here I support the visibility of the female experience as deserving of recognition and fair representation within literature and culture.

Brave was produced by Katherine Sarafian for Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures in 2012. Brenda Chapman, writer and main director, became Pixar Studios' first female feature director. However, she was replaced by Mark Andrews a year before *Brave*'s release date because of creative disagreements. Disney Studios considered the image of its female protagonist was a too radical departure from the princess tradition, even from its most recent productions (namely, from *Beauty and the Beast* onwards), then Andrews revised

¹ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 1928.

² Jung placed women "where man's shadow falls, so that he is only too liable to confuse her with his own shadow," Pratt 2008:14.

the original script. Nevertheless, Chapman said finally that she is “very proud of the movie and that [she] ultimately stood up for herself, just like Merida” (*New York Times*, August 2012). Andrews and Chapman won awards for Best Animated Feature Film of the Year, the Golden Globe Best Animated Feature Film, and the Women Film Critics Circle Best Animated Females, among others. *Brave* was successfully received in theatres with a gain of \$539 million worldwide.

Brave unfolds the story of princess Merida, first daughter of the ruling house in Edinburgh, the Dunbroch clan. One day Merida is informed by her mother Queen Elinor that she is to be betrothed to one of the eldest sons of Dunbroch’s ally clans. She is given three suitors to choose from, but is not offered the option to reject them, her mother argues, because the consequences would be fatal for the nation. After an argument Merida runs into the woods and finds a witch who sells her a magic cake to change her mother’s mind; the spell turns Elinor into a bear, apparently a punishment for Merida’s selfishness. Merida and Elinor’s quests focus on reversing the spell and preventing the fatal outcome as Elinor would abandon any trace of her human self, becoming a whole beast. Underlying this narrative, we can discern a certain attitude regarding women’s social conformation that comprehends passivity, resignation and silence. Then, the eruption of their unsocialized behaviors requires that the readers understand the fiction as set in the middle-ages, yet representing present-day questions.

FAIRY TALES AND ARCHETYPAL SIGNIFICATION

Tales were orally transmitted in their origins, commonly changed (consciously or not) by the storytellers who charmed their audiences with wordplay and performance. It was not until the invention of the printing press and the settlement of the vernacular tongue that fairy tales were considered more or less fixed. Then, they had a “dual social function” as both modes of entertainment for the upper classes and instructive narratives. Mostly due to this latter function, it gradually became a genre for children. The fairy-tale film genre expectedly emerged from the cultural and technological evolution in the following centuries. Well into the 20th century, the Walt Disney Company was the main responsible for the production of animated tales, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937, and a long list of adaptations.³ Now, the image dominates over the text, the filmmaker becomes the “magician behind the scenes,” and standardized folk tales transcend particular communities and interests (Zipes, 61-72).

³ The ideological conservatism of Disney’s productions, even the most recent ones, is analyzed in detail in Towbin et al’s “Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films” (2004) or Do Rozario’s “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess” (2010).

Fairy tales approach family interests and it is argued that their circulation would depend on the child's satisfactory, unconscious assimilation, a function foregrounded particularly by archetypal and psychoanalytical critics; Bettelheim asserts: "[the conscious and unconscious content of fairy tales has been] shaped by the conscious mind, not of one particular person, but the conscious of many in regard to what they view as universal human problems, and what they accept as desirable solutions." (36) Arguably, each fairy tale is the literary heritage of human essential principles. Fairy tales show profound concerns settled in the human psyche (socially or anthropologically speaking) and offer pleasing outcomes, but the problem arises with the conceptualization of the *human* universal as exclusively male. The tale of "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a good example. It shows Jack the hero overwhelmed in his weaning, which represents a boy's anxiety in maturation and self-sufficiency. The tale's symbolism is associated with this process of maturation, for example, the mother-ogre providing him food (numbness and return) or his stealing the harp and the chicken for his family (as the family provider) to succeed in his quest (Bettelheim, 183-93). However, these tales focused on male heroes differ fundamentally from those in which it is a heroine who undergoes the process. "Beauty and the Beast", first published in 1740 by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, sets a good example. Belle, the pure and beautiful heroine, is a mistreated child who eventually becomes the mistress of the monstrous Beast to release his father from Beast's claws. She gracefully faces her imprisonment and servitude, and even falls in love with Beast, reversing his curse: he was actually a beautiful prince transformed into a monster. Belle is then rewarded for her patience and passivity by marrying him. Belle's anxiety encompasses what traditionally has been considered feminine/wife virtue (Bettelheim, 303-310). Also, feminist interpretations of fairy tales show the beasts' correlation to women's fears toward the "burden of hyper-masculinity" (Jeffords, 171) and marriage, rape and gender violence (Warner, 279).⁴ This may anticipate Elinor's transformation into a bear, uncovering Merida's anxieties on womanhood.

We can say that *Brave* closely follows the fairy-tale form, although this animation is not based on a tale. A close analysis will prove that its content provides an instructional message that can be of great significance to children and people of other ages. Unlike traditional fairy tales seeking for the transfer of conservative practices, *Brave* offers a radically different perspective: it is not only the story of a child gaining independence and voice, but also a call to revise patriarchal standards. Merida is born in the bosom of a regal family--a complete representation of patriarchy, and from the beginning she complains about being a princess: her "whole life is planned out"--unlike her brothers', and she has "duties, expectations" and, of course, limitations. Her character may serve as a model for gender performativity, as

⁴ Warner offers a distinguished feminist insight into fairy tales and female narrative in *From the Beast, to the Blonde* (1994)

Butler names it in *Undoing Gender*. Gender is considered indeed a structural regulatory apparatus that ensures social homogenization and powerlessness, working at the same time from the inside, so one gender dominates over the other. The patriarchal imperative works on through the reiteration of the norm, such as is done by the gendered fairy-tale stereotypes and the princess phenomenon.⁵

When Merida is told that she is to be engaged to a stranger for the realm's sake, her anxiety grows, and she rebels against her feminine duties (patience, passivity, grace). She states to her mother: "I don't want my life to be over. I want my freedom,"⁶ speaking out a feminist discourse. It can be interpreted either literally as an illustration of a *princess'* neutralization –removal of agency, adaptation to the traditional marriage narrative and subjugation to patriarchal authority- or universally as the submission of a whole historically, socially unprivileged community---the non-white-hetero-masculine. On the whole Merida and Elinor may represent inner conflicts and anxieties of womanhood also recorded in history and literature.

ARCHETYPAL RITES OF PASSAGE IN BRAVE

Archetypal studies examine the use/creation of myths, symbols and meanings of this unconscious aspect of fairy tales. It would be appropriate to begin my study of *Brave* by focusing on structure. Archetypal analysis has been used for the purpose of literary criticism by authors such as Villegas in *La estructura mítica del héroe en la novela del siglo XX* (1973), where he applies the patterns studied by Campbell about mythical rites of passage,⁷ or Warner, who offers a feminist perspective to the fairy tale formula. *Brave's* heroes undergo two rites of passage as they enter the magic forest and must pass a crucial test to fulfil their identity quest.

Campbell divides the structure of rites of passage into three sub-stages. The first, *separation or departure*, has five relevant steps: the *calling to the adventure*, *the refusal of the call*, *the crossing of the threshold*, *the supernatural help*, and *the entrance into the unknown* (Campbell, 49-96). In *Brave*, the *calling to adventure*, the incentive the hero finds to enter the new challenge, is Merida's entering the forest

⁵ Further examined in MERIDA AS FEMALE HERO AND PRINCESS. For additional study of gendered/sexed norms rooted on present-day patriarchy see "On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy" (17) and "Gender Regulations" (40) in *Undoing Gender* and "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion" (81) in *Bodies that Matter*.

⁶ Marriage would mean for Merida her confinement to domestic life and the end of her adventures. Pearson and Pope expand on the concept of the hero's "spiritual and psychological" death, which "dehumanizes, dominates, or owns another human" –the devastating beast that neutralizes Elinor and Merida. Her marriage means her absorption into passivity and silence; hence the heroes must save other people from suppression and annihilate the menace of spiritual death.

⁷ Campbell's notions of the mythic hero as male, and all the attributes only applicable to male characters would cast away any feminist approach to *Brave* as a fairy tale. However, Merida and Elinor strive to transcend their limitations and return to live according to the acquired values in a new status quo. (Villegas 1973: 69)

accepting the adventure and bringing both heroes into the narrative; she determines to change her fate when she finds herself alien to her status quo and her mother--the main source of her oppression. She runs away and follows will-o'-the-wisps and arrives to an old cottage inhabited by a witch. Merida encounters---in Campbell's words-- *the supernatural help*, an object of great importance to begin her quest: a cake with a magic spell that will change her mother. The fourth step is her *crossing the threshold*, symbolized by a circle of stones that physically divide the world into the real and the magical. Merida abandons her world, and offers the cake to her mother, making the magic enter the story. This step is characterized by the *getting into the unknown*, the magic performed when Elinor eats the cake and turns into a bear. They both feel disoriented facing this new unknown realm. In Warner's words, fairy tales as a genre is foregrounded in the protagonist's discovering the *unknown*, and "when women tell stories" she argues, "they contest fear, they turn their eye on the phantom of the male Other" and they must destruct it by transformation (276).

The second stage, the hero's *ordeal*, is marked by tests and victories (Campbell, 97-192). Now, Elinor has turned into a physical threat to Merida, her realm, and herself --for bears are in the story hated and hunted by the men. As argued in this essay's section "ELINOR AS A BEAST-MOTHER HERO", Elinor represents female otherness in a patriarchal state, therefore posing a double threat to Merida; The bear becomes the symbol of the beast that causes the same devastation in the realm as patriarchy does in a girl, highlighting the particular anxiety arose from female experience in the conjugal institution. At this point, the hero must face a series of obstacles and an *ultimate goal*. Merida must reverse the spell to get her mother back, so they return to the witch's cottage, heading *the road to the challenge*. The witch gives them the wise advice they must follow: "Fate be changed, look inside. Mend the bond torn by pride." Merida takes it literally and resolves to stitch the familial tapestry that Elinor made and which Merida ripped down in the wrath of an argument.

The *inmost cave* is a concept in the second stage that represents the hero's unconscious, the locus where they face distress and inner conflicts. This cave is the reification of the hero's fears and it helps to understand the magnitude of the hero's anxiety. In *Brave*, this is properly represented by the underground ruins of Mor'du (the most feared bear in the kingdom). Merida falls down the ruins where she encounters the incarnation of a patriarchal proud regime, represented by Mor'du's aggression and mindless destruction. Her confrontation with the monstrous bear represents the anxiety she fights due to her political, social context. The confrontation almost destroys her, and only the help of her bear-mother manages to restore her to safety. This portrays women's sisterhood and survival while counteracting the effects of patriarchy. Now, the heroes are aware of the real threat they must defeat, but first Elinor must be restored to her human form before she too transforms into another incarnation of the hyper-masculine monster.

The next phase is the *reconciliation with the father*. The traditional narrative is challenged again as *Brave*'s plot focuses on female relations, and it is Merida and Elinor who reconcile and fight their quest together. This positive female outcome is a motif absent in traditional fairy tales, where female characters find rivalry and wickedness—as in “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” or “The Little Mermaid.” In the *ultimate boon*, Merida distracts the men in the hall with a speech for her mother to fetch the tapestry. In her speech, Merida feels giving up to patriarchy, when her mother finally acts and prevents her daughter from assuming her passivity as a commodity in marriage contracts. Now, Elinor becomes an agent in her own quest and guides Merida to break tradition and empower herself. It is clear then that Elinor is unfolding her own rite of passage.

In this monomyth's third and last stage, Merida finds two bears that the men want to annihilate. Merida and Elinor escape from the castle but the bear mother is caught by them. Then, Merida's archery skills—which Elinor always disapproved—save her life and make the men focus on the real threat, Mor'du. After an epic battle, Elinor kills Mor'du but results badly injured; Merida runs to her rescue and covers her with the mended tapestry just before the second sunrise touches them. She manages to prevent Elinor's full transformation into a bear, supposedly by the mended tapestry, although it is suggested that it is their ultimate union that reverses the spell. The mother returns to her human shape while they are hugging. The two women are symbolically reborn, an ultimate experience characteristic of the last stage, *the return and the reintegration in society*. Up to this point, Merida has managed to get her mother understand her and strive to change society; the patriarchs and the other people agree with Merida's claims, and the hero is *the master of the two worlds*: Merida is presented as self-assertive and owns the real and the “bear” worlds, the society she faced, challenged and renewed. *Brave* offers a revision of traditional narratives and values with such departure from traditional heroism and female narratives.

Brave's rite-of-passage form makes the story rely on its symbolic function: “myths and fairy tales [. . .] give symbolic expression to initiation rites or other *rites de passage*—such as metaphoric death of an old, inadequate self in order to be reborn on a higher plane of existence.” (Bettelheim, 35) This recurring rite has the power to shape the universal puzzles in the psyche (36), thus in making these heroes undergo their own *rites of passage*, Merida and Elinor are definable as modern type-models that face the same real-life quests for identity and determination.

MERIDA'S RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHY

Merida grew in a representative patriarchy where her mother is the foremost oppressive force. However, Merida's father is portrayed as a benevolent figure rather than the traditional repressive head of the realm and family. The male

characters in *Brave* are represented as protective and proud, recounting their fighting Mor'du. In the comfort of that protective environment, Merida grows unaware of the dangers of passivity. As Kate Millett notes, masking sexism and misogyny by means of persuasive discourses on receiving love and protection is a strategical patriarchal approach to male dominance. It came into force since the merging of Medieval courtly and romantic love, which disguises women's subjugation and turns it "grants which the male concedes out of his total powers." (37) Having been re-adapted as the romantic code, it "had the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and, in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women" that finally confined the female in a "narrow and often remarkably constricting sphere of behaviour." (37) Contemporary society also observes this gallant love in sexist and misogynistic ideas through evolved archetypes, such as the princess phenomenon that brings conservative femininity to our time.

At the beginning, Merida is pictured as a happy girl who can give vent to her eagerness for freedom by riding her horse and practising archery despite her mother's attempts to instruct her sophisticated, lady manners:

QUEEN: (*Teaching Merida geography*) a princess must be knowledgeable about her kingdom; (*She snatches Merida's drawing*) She doesn't make doodles [. . .] (*Outside, while Merida is laughing out loud*) Princesses don't chortle. (*At dinner*) Doesn't stuff her gob! (*In the bedroom*) Rises early! (*In the kitchen*) Is compassionate, (*In the dining hall*) patient, cautious! Clean. (*With the King*) And above all, a princess strives for... well, perfection.

The universality of this scene draws the idea of high control over the nature of girls, who either live in a Scottish royal family or in any other context. Merida took for granted her expectations. These first scenes show Merida misbehaving (an acceptable behaviour for a male) and her mother's scolding her, but not her brothers. Merida complains:

(*voiceover*) I became a sister with three new brothers [. . .] Wee devils more like. They get away with murder. I can never get away from anything! I'm the princess. I'm the example. I've got duties, responsibilities, expectations. My whole life is planned out, for the day I become, well... my mother! She's in charge of every single day of my life.

Merida does not react against traditions until she is forced to get married. The betrothal means the realisation of her role in family and society, an undermined existence. She feels threatened to death: "I don't want my life to be over. I want my freedom!" This question does not only violate Merida's individuality, but supports male power upon women, as Adrienne Rich comments in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence":

the issue we have to address as feminists is, not simple “gender inequality”, nor the domination of culture by males, nor mere “taboos against homosexuality”, but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. (647)

Merida's disapproval is powerless as her duty is to obey, such as Elinor must have done. “Oh, Merida! It's marriage, it's not the end of the world” are Elinor's words that shows her own mother's indifference. Marriage is not an option, and does not lack power interests; to a great extent through the persistence of fairy tales, society has presented women's marital duties as a desirable weakness, as depicted in modern fairy-tales princesses who accept their role and hope Prince Charming to come. Nevertheless, if they rebel against this tradition, marriage will turn mandatory, as in Merida's story.

Elinor refutes: “Ach! You are acting like a child!,” an attitude that has always been a feminist issue: women's setting aside from authority and decision. The infantilization of princesses is also rooted on women's social and legal disempowerment, as well as the vice-versa issue of child sexualisation⁸. Also, the permanence of such polarized female archetypes –wicked monsters, passive, silent maids- through princesses nourishes the feminine devaluation in all spheres of life. Nevertheless, Merida rejects the lack of alternatives to the female experience rigorously within the bounds of marriage, power/economic plots, their placement as a passive ‘wanter’, or staying in a corner of the narrative.

Merida's quest for her identity and independence begins in a strife for recognition and autonomy. She turns to be the representation of a feminist plea, and she must confront the overwhelming beast that threatens to tear up her life expectations. As an allegory for her oppression, Merida is forced to wear an uncomfortable and extremely tight (but beautiful, her mother says) dress to the archery game through which the suitors will gain her. Again, it seems to be no other alternative for girls than sacrificing comfort for their beauty's sake.

As a legitimate fairy tale, the story offers a desirable solution: Merida must defeat the beast of oppression in her mother's mind. As Pearson and Pope point out in *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*,

[The female hero] embodies the power necessary to revitalize the entire kingdom — to rid it of dragons as her classical predecessor did. No matter how alienated she is from the larger society, the hope present in the description of her experience is that if one woman has made that particular journey beyond conventions, so can others. (260)

⁸ Further reading: Linn “A Royal Juggernaut: The Disney Princesses and Other Commercialized Threats to Creative Play and the Path to Self-Realization for Young Girls.”

“Her classical predecessor” (the male-hero type) has always blocked female heroism. Nevertheless, Merida’s bravery defeated those *dragons*, (or beastly bears⁹) to metaphorically and literally gain power.

MERIDA AS PRINCESS AND HERO

The existence of heroic women has been eclipsed by the persistent association of heroism and masculinity, as Pearson and Pope describe: “all begins with the assumption that the hero is male. This prevailing bias has given the impression that in literature and life heroism is a male phenomenon.” (viii) Pratt also complains that the lack of feminine “heroic ideals” (5) is rooted on gender social performance. The more heroic a woman proves to be, the more she digresses from the feminine norm, alien to society. On the other hand, the more masculine a man proves to be, the more heroic and honoured. Heroic women have been eclipsed and silenced –represented by the numerous attempts of the men in *Brave* to absorb attention with songs, pride and alcohol. Campbell assumes that the human soul is male and turns aside from the archetypal mode as flawed and useless in the analysis of women’s literature. (Pratt, 8) But how would Merida fit in the archetype? It is not that “heroic maleness” exists, but that heroes have always intentionally shared the same socio-existentialist background. Insisting on the idea of the ‘hero type’ as genderless, it is evident that heroism is not male, but that only males have been entitled to perform those roles of strength and protection, being properly recognized as heroes. The everlasting heroes and heroines of our literature helped the human psyche to perpetuate those values into fixed ones (male gender as ready for the public sphere, and the female for the private), being not accidental that these coincide with the dichotomy of gender roles in our society: passivity as feminine attribute, power as male. Moreover, human history has taken the male experience as the universal, excluding female participation. Without the male deeds bombardment in *Brave* (showing aggressiveness, enhancing Mor’du’s slaughter, drinking ecstasy and self-glory), Merida and Elinor’s quests would have been different and entitled to heroism since the beginning.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as a female (*The Second Sex*, 1949). This would explain why whenever a woman tries to behave as a human, she is accused of emulating men; the displacement of the feminine experience from *universality* is one of the most evident disinterests in female recognition. It is thus arguable that Merida does not behave like a male hero, nor she succeeds due to any male attributes (although she proves

⁹Campbell identifies the dragon with monstrous representations of the status quo. In this transgressive narrative, the bears would stand for the status quo. Slaying the symbolic bear means to rid the kingdom of oppression and dehumanization.

skills in traditionally male and female spheres: ridding her horse, archery, sword-fighting, while being a princess wearing a dress, and sewing--which helped to fix the tapestry¹⁰); yet, Merida and Elinor are heroes inasmuch as they bring about the satisfactory denouement. Merida and Elinor's story questions the fixed male hero model, as well as their traditionally central position to a fairy tale. As Pearson and Pope conclude, the lack of recognition toward female heroism is indeed greater if we consider that they not only "pursue their interior journey", but that stand up for themselves while successfully fighting oppressive forces that "strip [them] from birth of autonomy".

Critics have written against Merida's impact for being, "depressingly," a princess,¹¹ an unachievable model based on a bloodline privilege, icon of purity, delicacy and beauty; In other words, she is the embodiment of archetypal femininity--*princesses* of fairy tales and real worlds. However, as England, Descartes and Collier-Meek prove in their study, the Disney Princess phenomenon was created as a marketing campaign for encouraging young girls to identify with the princesses. They powerfully influence children and subsequently preserve a gendered girlhood. The study also reveals the negative stereotypical image of femininity in princesses while promoting dangerous body images --physically pleasant, weak, submissive, extremely emotional, nurturing, tentative, fearful, ashamed or victimized are coded qualities in Disney's femininity.¹² At first glance, Merida's *princessness* seems to play against her feminist agenda. However, she actually fights this pre-assumption of femininity as failure, weakness, limitation and silence. Merida would neither fit the archetype of *Princess*, as she does not follow canonical feminine beauty or behavior. We could say that her princess rendering is a double-edge sword: she is participating in the consumerist princess system, supporting their previous image, but on the other hand she is showing an alternative behavior to real-life *princesses* without going against womanhood. She shatters the grounds where contemporary femininity and masculinity are still based.

This is indeed significant at a symbolic level. She is a hero in a fairy tale, and they require fantasy and detachment from reality. Traditional archetypal studies argue that children are suggested in symbolic form the meaning of "self-realization" through fairy tales. (Bettelheim, 38) This allows them identify themselves with the character and unconsciously internalize the tale. Otherwise a logical, realistic rehearsal would provoke anxiety while confronting reality principles. Guattari defends that "unconscious figures of power and knowledge are [...] tied to reference

¹⁰ In addition she actually celebrates the importance of needlework in the story. Needlework is a recurrent symbol in women's literature as it reflects the overlooked work and knowledge of women inherited in a matrilineal course. It definitely became the symbol of female creation, such as the quilt in North American culture.

¹¹ Pols' "Why Pixar *Brave* is a failure of Female Empowerment" (2012)

¹² "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." (2011)

myths profoundly anchored in the psyche but can still swing around toward liberatory paths/ voices [...] into a universe of creative enchantments.”¹³ Also, magic is needed in this tale to outburst Elinor and Mor’du’s beasts, the beginning of Merida and Elinor’s journeys.

Merida’s performance as a princess can be considered as the writer’s intention to show commitment to femininity, using a long-established universal for girlhood. Heroes teach boys to be heroes, saviors and winners of *princesses*, while girls are from their very birth encouraged to be princesses and aim for the hero’s attraction and heterosexual reward. Disney’s princesses are supported within the family sphere naively offering traditional models to their girls, whose recurrence in everyday life normalize their own self-esteem and conservatism. In this, however, they are not the sole instrument. As Pearson and Pope argue that “a female is constantly bombarded with social images, rewards, and punishments that are designed to ensure that she does not develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity” in other words, women must restrict themselves to a “woman’s place” (19), a place outside the canon of heroism. Merida leads an internal rebellion against silence, thus her characterization as a princess breaks narrative and social traditions to encourage her viewers to recognize femininity as a potential source of power. Pearson and Pope write on Campbell’s hero theory:

As with the male, the journey offers the female hero the opportunity to develop qualities such as courage, skill, and independence, which would atrophy in a protected environment. Such qualities do not spring full blown from the hero’s head, but are developed as responses to the demands and challenges of experience. (8)

Merida’s actions are just heroic responses to the “demands and challenges” of her suppressing experiences in life. She is a hero, and the child should apprehend this new kind of *princess* that they can encounter in their world, which destroys correlation between femininity and weakness.

ELINOR AS BEAR-MOTHER HERO AND THE MOTHER/DAUGHTER DYAD

Elinor’s characterization as a bear-mother that at the end turns to be a hero gives us a second insight of the actual meaning of Merida’s narrative. Her transformation into a bear might symbolically externalize Merida’s anxiety to her forced marriage –relatable to women’s fears to rape and gender violence within the bounds of marriage¹⁴. This signification can be seen in Merida and Elinor’s quarrel.

¹³ Régimes, Pathways, Subjects’ tr. Brian Massumi, in Crary and Kwinter cit., 16-37. Qtd. Warner 418.

¹⁴ Warner refers to externalization of women’s terrors (279).

Merida tells her mother she behaves “like a beast!”, and Elinor answers throwing her bow into the fireplace. Merida stares horrified at her mother with the same expression when she sees Elinor-bear eating raw fish. This helps the reader to parallel Elinor’s authority and a beast’s nature. Later on, the mother-bear attacks Merida “Mom!? You changed! Like you were... a bear on the inside.” Elinor’s dehumanization is studied by archetypal studies as the projection of the impulses of the instincts (Bettelheim, 77) and tensions arisen from “rivalry”, “ownership, procreation and usurpation” (Warner, 321), destructive impulses opposite to *reason*.

Brave shows what it means to be a mother in a courtly medieval context: educate children according to their social constraints and protect them against the cruelties outside home, within society. However, it meant repression for Merida. She is the example of an ideal wife and protective mother when driven by human reason, but threatening and dangerous when driven by the id, as a bear. The split of the self by animal transformation is a recurrent myth for it allows heroes to recover their mothers “untouched” in a credible back-transformation (Bettelheim, 67). Also, traditional heroines agree in an outward change to abandon the problematic and desirable, carnal “envelope” as self-defense. However, in this transgressive narrative, it is Elinor who undergoes the change and, instead of waiting for the hero-lover to undo the spell and return her identity (Warner, 353), it is Merida who releases Elinor’s humanity. This echoes female homosocial bonds as counteracting their exclusion from and absorption by male-centricity. They need each other to destroy suppressive forces

In folk-tales studies the bear occurs as a symbol related to instincts and representing “the perilous aspect of the unconscious and as an attribute of the man who is cruel and crude.”¹⁵ Also, bears’ size, aggressiveness and strength have been often compared in folk tales to extreme masculinity, what would make evident *Brave*’s parallelism between bears and patriarchy. Jeffords would see this, as she says regarding “Beauty and the Beast” as a curse for hyper-masculinity (171). The curse is first experienced by Mor’du, who was a prince before. His beast nature is the result of an unfulfilled identity journey: he asked the witch for a magic spell to get the “strength of ten men”. However, Mor’du prince never achieved to resolve his literal hyper-masculinity and release himself from malediction. Then, we know that it is not Merida who is being punished, but Elinor, who is assimilating hyper-masculine (patriarchal) nature too deeply. Also, we can see that in the last fight, Mor’du’s target is not Elinor, but Merida, the one rebelling against the system. Elinor manages to slay Mor’du (and it’s worth commenting that every single man in the realm has been chasing Mor’du without success). It was not strength what slayed him but Elinor’s human intelligence. Mor’du’s human spirit thanks Elinor for his releasing, meaning salvation for the realm as “no one can be free until men are

¹⁵ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*

released from the curse of living under the burdens of traditional masculinities” (Jefford, 172). Other powerful images in the film also echo cultural bear-centricity, for example, a carving of Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam” portrayed with two bears, a critique to masculine universality. Also, Fergus the “bear king” and the whole nation are constructed around the imagery of the bear as strong, aggressive (again, hyper-masculine) men. .

Birkhäuser-Oeri analyses the motif of the metamorphosis in fairy tales; animals are bound with their whole environments, and “the mother as an animal can allow us to switch off our consciousness to such an extent that we can follow our instincts and so become whole, sacrificing a merely egocentric use of our powers (41), so Elinor’s transformation is justified as the representation of one’s engagement with the system and the primitive status of the psyche (42). Mor’du also insists on the idea of patriarchy as the most ancient system based on instincts and the physical justification of male dominance.

In short, the producers-writers seem to have rendered Elinor’s metamorphosis to prepare her for rebirth and advance. Birkhäuser-Oeri examines that rebirth must be preceded by sacrifice, which may rob one of “human dignity” but the regression makes possible the re-merging of the hero. (43) Elinor may be the parallel female hero of the story, for she fights against irrational instincts and finally regains her identity; Elinor rejects her alienation in a universally-male realm and strives not to lose her individuality. She overcomes the problems of womanhood and motherhood together in a world that neutralizes and passivizes her.

Traditional literary plots have rarely represented female relations fairly. The existence of female figures in culture has always depended on stereotypes, at the same time shaped by the male gaze. The representation of a mother-daughter relation in western culture has not been generally considered an extensive material for analysis out of alienated interests such as hysteria, for example. With the emerging of the Women’s Movement in the mid-20th century, a literary “virtual explosion” on the matter took place. (Werlock, 171) The records of literary compositions presenting the question of motherhood profoundly developed--without male dependence--increased¹⁶: Lassner exemplifies this with Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, a novel that illustrates a part of women’s literary creation centered on the feminine identity quest that escapes “the Father’s text”, as *Brave* does: its protagonists “rescue women from absorbing each other in acts of mothering” (101).

This fresh mother/daughter myth shown in *Brave* helps to displace the solidified male-hero theme in literature. Women have been considered “aliens in a

¹⁶ Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* analyses the literary mother/daughter relation from a psychoanalytic, feminist perspective.

man's world" (Rich, *Of Woman Born*), a male-normative realm where 'male issues' are universal and the female experience is expelled. Rich reflects on the significance of the mother-daughter dyad:

It is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad. Small wonder, since theology, art, and social theory have been produced by sons. Intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men. (226)

Elinor and Merida's unfolding as central characters is rich and complex. The special bond between both heroes may be considered as a domestic example of the cooperative relation between women. At first, Elinor seems reluctant, as her mother-queen nature drives her to be extremely authoritative. The conflict arises when Merida wants to separate herself from Elinor, so magic bursts Elinor's animal transformation for them to fight alienation. At this point, the story seems to follow the traditional heroine narrative—a subordinate princess that faces her marital duties and a wicked mother showing the female rivalry seen in most fairy tales (as "The Little Mermaid" or "Snow White"—Warner's work extends this issue.

However, the complexity in Elinor and Merida's bond lies in their striving together against traditional literary myths, as their relation would have never been regarded as heroic before, and mothers have never been recognized due to male heroes who gain all fame. In this way, Elinor's individuality is eclipsed by, first, her social commitments as queen, then her motherly issues, and her husband's heroic self-praising¹⁷: she is not only the mother of a teenager, but responsible for a whole nation, as she takes charge of the Dunbrochs' and the kingdom's welfare. Understandably, this causes a definite split in Elinor's personality. Similarly to Merida as an empowering symbol, the reader should have noticed Elinor as the abstraction of a working housewife, whose everyday duties in motherhood, the housework and her job does not leave her time for self-esteem. As Merida proved, Rich defends that the mother "stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" so our personalities are blurred and overlapped with theirs. (236)

The conflict finally bursts when Elinor's patriarchal authority surpasses her motherly part. Her own alienation almost suppressed Merida's individuality by silencing her in both society and their narrative. Patriarchy overflows Elinor's personality, and is represented by her turning into the dehumanized beast. Regarding the story of Merida from this perspective, Merida's quest is altered: she does not only strive for her identity quest, but to prevent Elinor's failure in her own identity journey. Merida and Elinor escape from their social, literary burial. It is not only Elinor who is reborn, but also Merida: "darling, we both have [changed]".

¹⁷ In the film we only see Fergus partying and singing, telling stories of his own bravery and heroism with the other men.

Afterwards, Elinor enjoys motherhood as it is implied by her riding a horse with her hair loose following Merida. As Pearlman puts it speaking of Sylvie and Ruth in *Housekeeper*, Merida and Elinor refuse “to follow in the footsteps of their mothers, sisters, and fathers, and drift beyond the conventions of our most hallowed literary traditions” (102). Their heroism not only determines their identity, but also subverts the traditional parameters in literature, those long-established myths where the female experience has been undervalued, however male heroism insists on drawing attention.

CONCLUSIONS

The maturation of contemporary children may be centered on finding new concepts to live *happily ever after* in their own realm, which might clash with social-restrictive autonomy. It has been discussed that the use of magic and fantasy is a useful way to bring them into a naturally equal world, eluding their anxiety for being suppressed. Tatar defends that tales provoke the child’s renounce of their “disempowered state” to mark the beginning of some sort of agency (63). Also, fairy tales offer veiled “lessons of the status quo” and, under a “childish façade [...] attempted to challenge received ideas” that is, fairy tales and protest are quite connected (Warner 411). It is important to re-argument the need to break silence to be empowered. Tatar argues that changes actually come “less through the force of magic wands than through spells” as the spells and charms delineate “the power of the mind over matter” creating illusion and “agency through words” (61-63). This not only echoes the animal spell on Elinor, but Merida’s continuous uproar. Merida also defeats tradition, which associates spells to heroines, and weaponry to knights (Warner, 412) *Brave* addresses this disempowerment, praises agency and fights the vicious bears around –never forgetting their bond with the family:

(in the games, revealing her identity) “I am Merida, and I’ll be shooting for my own hand!” (her dress doesn’t allow her moving, so she rips it. Aims and hit the first target). Elinor (angry): “Merida, don’t you dare to lose another arrow! I forbid it!” (Merida hits the two other targets dead on the center and tearing the last suitor’s arrow.)

A powerful public act that challenges established rules and subverts oppression. However, the adventure’s climax is evident when Elinor’s identity quest joins Merida’s: their individualities were being equally eclipsed by the oppressive forces of the hyper-masculine system. Their heroism is visible not only at a personal scale, striving for identity and the recognition of motherhood, but also at a literary level. They destroy the marriage plot presumed since the beginning--the androcentric literary myths that placed women against women and confined them-- and replace it with a fresher narrative developing womanhood and empowerment.

My conclusions can be drawn by Merida's last words: "some say fate is beyond our command, but I know better. Our destiny is within us. You just have to be brave enough to see it." Children are the ones in charge of slaying our bears with bravery, heroism, and empowerment.

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