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The construction of the young girl figure in cinema : analysis of the two Mulan's movies. Challenging or reinforcing gender stereotypes through girlhood representations

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CORNUMENT Célia

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Mémoire

Présentation du sujet et bibliographie

The construction of the young girl figure in cinema.

Analysis of the two *Mulan*'s movies:

Challenging or reinforcing gender stereotypes through girlhood representations

Sous la direction de Adrienne BOUTANG

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Summary of the Memoire: This study aims at analyzing the representation of genders and the notion of girlhood in Disney's movies: *Mulan* by comparing the 1998 cartoon and the 2020 live action which were released twenty years apart, in an everchanging society.

Key words: Mulan, girlhood, gender, Disney, female heroine, female warrior.

Introduction

“Ever since the sixteenth century, Hua Mulan’ story has been widely taken up, and with the success, the story has been transformed. Mulan changes of period, of birth, becomes Chinese, sometimes she remains a warrior, sometimes she returns home to get married, sometimes she kills herself for honor. Thus, the legend gradually drifts towards Chinese patriotism, even if it means betraying the original story of a young girl dressing up as a man to help her father.”

“A sort of Joan of Arc from China”

Derwell QUEFFELEC, France Culture, *La véritable histoire de Mulan*, September 6th of 2020

Translated by the author.

The story of the heroine Hua Mulan started with a legend. At the origin of this legend, there is a poetic ballad written during the fifth century by an anonymous author. Seven centuries later, this ballad became famous, when two poets decided to publish it again. The true story of the legend remains mysterious and blurred. Indeed, Mulan did not have a last name originally, she was not even said to be Chinese. All we knew was that she was a disguised woman that entered the army as a man and that she became an amazing warrior. Thus, the atypical character of Mulan has inspired many authors to tell their own version of her legend, and some of them still continue to do so nowadays. This includes the studio that we no longer present Walt Disney Company. As a matter of fact, Disney Studio has provided a peculiar attention to Mulan. First in 1998 when it presented its brand-new animated movie dedicated to her. The film was a success and focused for the first time on an Asian protagonist. The movie was praised for its message and its unusual heroine, embodying the girl power and directly questioning men and women’s place in society in ancient China. Some critics even dare to grant some feminist aspect to the cartoon. In this respect, the notion of feminism must be defined as it is such a large and changing subject. Indeed, Mulan is a character who take several ideas in each one of the three waves of feminism that must be defined in this study. She wants to be accepted and respected as a woman but also as equal to men. She disobeys orders and rules invented by patriarchy and her journey illustrates how men and women should work together in order to be stronger and

more efficient. In a way, Mulan shows that one cannot live without the other, femininity and masculinity are complementary.

The release of a new Mulan Disney movie in 2020, this time as a live-action film, with real actors and sceneries, implies a lot of things. Indeed, almost twenty years after the cartoon version, society has changed, so has women's condition. This is why it is necessary to devote a great importance to the production dates of those two movies and to the kind of message that they aim to share. The 2020 movie is inevitably more implicated in a more "frontal" way into the denunciation of the women's condition, thanks to the less censored period of the release of the film, especially after social movement that support women such as the very famous MeToo movement. It is probably necessary to give a definition for the word censorship. On strictly dictionary meaning, censorship is "the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security"¹. But in this case, the censure it is about is more societal, as it was never clearly expressed that women and people who were victims of abuses, sexual harassment or else were forbidden to talk about it, society in general was not very accepting and very judgmental. It will be very interesting to study the evolution of this empowering feminine heroine that is Mulan in the eyes of the same studio but with twenty years apart. The main objective of this analysis will be to study how genders are interrogated or enforced in Mulan and to question the notion of girlhood. To answer this question, it will be necessary to explain the legend of Mulan and the mysteries of this intriguing character. Then, we will focus on the global narrative differences in Disney's versions of the legend, what elements have been modified, added or erased. Finally, the way femininity is represented in the movies will be analyzed to better understand the notion of girlhood through Disney's eye.

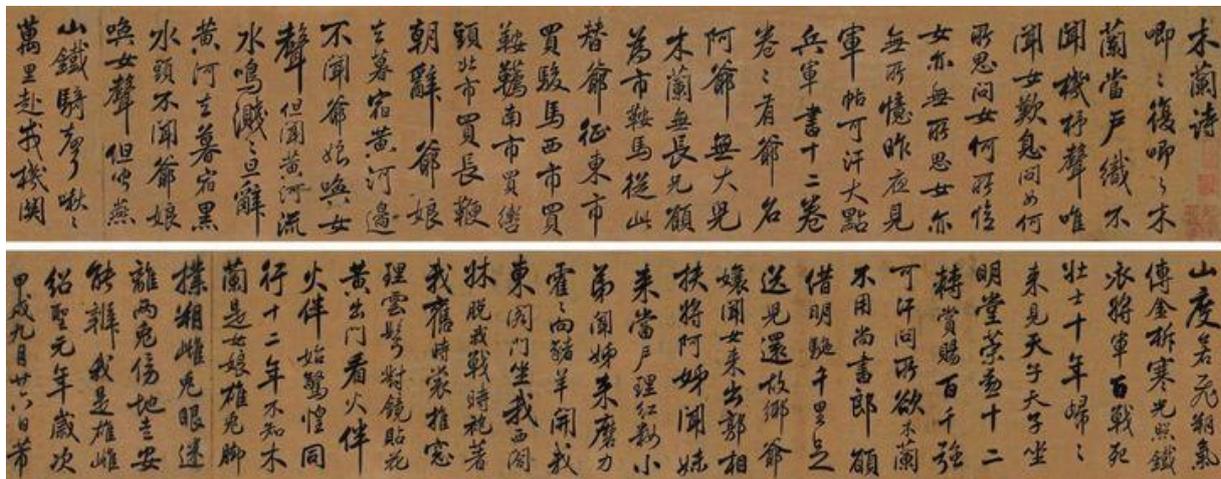
¹ Oxford Languages's definition

I) The legend of Mulan.

1) An uncertain figure: Mulan's ambiguous traits

The purpose of this part, which introduces this study, is to provide a general overview of Mulan. Indeed, her legend has faced many variations and murky areas that need to be explained and identified as a base to explore the way Disney worked to take over this heroine and her image, formatting it in the process.

As a ballad, Mulan's legend was, for a long time, told through oral singings. The first written record of Mulan's character is the *Ballad of Mulan*, a folk song believed to have been composed during the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535 AD) and compiled in an anthology of books and songs in the Southern Chen dynasty (557-589 AD).



Copy of the *Ballad of Mulan* by a calligrapher of the Song dynasty in 1094 AD (Public domain).

Overall, Mulan is a very mysterious character. There is something mystical and magical about her because nobody really knows when and where her story was told for the first time. Did she really exist or was she invented by some storyteller? The question remains unanswered. In general, the versions agree to depict Mulan as the daughter of an old man who used to occupy a great rank in the army. When a man from each family is called to come fight in the war, Mulan, who has no older brother, decides to replace her old father, some versions seem to say that the man actually agreed with her decision and that she did not need to leave secretly. The story then continues, Mulan becomes one of the greatest warriors, while hiding her gender, and ends up returning home after the war.

The young girl from the legend did not originally have a name but the numerous versions of her story, reinvented and modified through time, gave birth to the name Mulan, which is not

randomly chosen because it literally means ‘magnolia’ in Chinese. This Chinese flower bears many significations, all of them depend on the culture and the period but it is no coincidence if magnolias were considered as a symbol of beauty, perfect femininity and feminine softness in ancient China. With this information, the choice of her name is clearly meant to be a clue and evidence of her true identity. The reference to the magnolia is made in the cartoon version when Mulan and her father are sitting under a magnolia tree and the man expressively compares his daughter to a flower that has not blossomed yet but when it does it will “be the most beautiful of all”. Mulan’s male identity and female identity are really the extreme opposites and antipodes: girl-Mulan is supposed to be the perfection of what a woman is while man-Mulan is the perfect skilled warrior.

Nonetheless, her physical appearance is not very clear in the different poems and ballads, such as the original *Ballad of Mulan*, she is told to be very feminine as a girl, wearing make-up and dresses, but still, nobody suspected that she was indeed a girl and not a male warrior. Yet, her supposedly perfect femininity did get impacted by the years she passed serving as a man in the army:

“I take off my battle cloak,

And put on my old-time clothes.

I adjust my wispy hair at the windowsill,

And apply my bisque makeup by the mirror.”

Extract from the *Ballad of Mulan* (6th century) from Northern Dynasties China. Its author and exact date of creation are unknown but it was translated by Jack Yuan in 2006.

Moreover, Mulan’s original age is still a mystery nowadays. Several stories agreed to say that she was a teenager when she enrolled into the army. The word teenager is worth picking because teenagerhood is a quite recent concept: this ‘in between stage’ which separates childhood and adulthood was only named and identified during the nineteenth century in Occidental societies. In a way, Disney chose to define and make Mulan as a teenager whereas she used to be described as a “young girl”. This information shows that Disney modified its heroine to make her modern and appealing, even though some changes were anachronistic.. Additionally,

regarding the period and the fact that she was not married, she must have been quite young because young girls were quickly married or at least engaged at a very young age. Let us not forget that she successfully hid her true gender without any suspicions so we could assume that her teenage body was not very developed and made it easier to unload.

Furthermore, the most detailed version of the ballad gives a very important information about Mulan's age, while keeping it mysterious:

“We travelled twelve years together,

Yet didn't realize Mulan was a lady!”

Mulan would have stayed twelve years in the army without being discovered. Obviously, she was not a teenager anymore when she finally left. But she might have had an androgynous body to be able to keep her secret for so long. Still, the author does not give any clue about her age when she left.

Given these statements, Mulan's story is even more puzzling when we know that she left without really disguising as a man. Indeed, the whole idea of cross-dressing is not really expressed in the original story because the big revelation of her gender being secret is only announced at the end of the ballad. This revelation is more of a story twist element than a real important and underlined information. For the rest of the story, there is no mention of cutting her hair or wearing her father's armor. Actually, she only cared about her horse-riding equipment when she left:

“She buys a fine steed at the east market;

A saddle and blanket at the west market;

A bridle at the south market;

And a long whip at the north market.”

Extract from the *Ballad of Mulan* (6th century) from Northern Dynasties of China. Its author and exact date of creation are unknown but it was translated by Jack Yuan in 2006.

Nonetheless, in the end, her cross-dressing is one of the things that made Mulan's story stands out and be remembered. This is why so many versions have been reinvented but also why there are so many visual representations of this young heroine.

What is interesting about these works is that Mulan's main traits are different according to each author. The antipodes are clearly illustrated within these iconographic documents.



Painting of Hua Mulan, 18th century, housed in the British Museum



Mulan, by Zhou Wenju (周文矩), 10th century, Freer Sackler collection

These representations : a painting of Hua Mulan from the 18th century, inked and colored on silk following the style of Qiu Ying 仇英 from the Ming Dynasty and housed in the British Museum (the dimensions stay unknown) ; and a another illustration on silk called Mulan by Zhou Wenju in the 10th century, housed in the Freer Sacker collection. chose to highlight Mulan's femininity and beauty. She is represented wearing a dress and several girly accessories. Her face is pale, her hair is dark and tied up with ribbons and jewels. The intention is clearly to make her appear beautiful and young, but not as young as a teenager.

Moreover, she looks very gracious and her pose is quite elegant. She could easily be compared to some noble young woman. Here, she embodies the signification of her name 'magnolia' as the perfect girl.



Hua Mulan enters war (Kung Fu Tea)



On these illustrations, on the left a traditional painting of Mulan, oil on silk the painters focused on the warrior aspect in Mulan's life. She is wearing an armor and is holding weapons (bows, arrows, sword). She looks powerful and determined, femininity is not really represented even though the face is still quite soft and delicate, the features are thin and she looks like she may be wearing some red lipstick.



Identified as He Dazi (赫達資). The Art and Aesthetics of Form: Selections from the History of Chinese Painting (exhibit). Taipei: National Palace Museum.



Lastly, these pictures are mixing both ideas. The one on the left is taken from an album called *Gathering Gems of Beauty* (畫麗珠萃秀) from He Dazi. It is a leaf album with ink and colors on silk and it is housed at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. The picture on the left is a part of a Chinese handpainted album on silk, c. late 19th century (30,9 x 41,1 cm). Mulan is wearing women clothes and make up but still holding weapons. Furthermore, the fact that nature is represented might be a way to symbolize freedom and the fact that Mulan is not trapped in her role of good daughter and girl.

2) A multifaceted tale: Mulan's numerous narratives

Despite the numerous versions of the story, some aspects have been kept and cleared in the general idea of Mulan's legend.

First, her young age is always mentioned as she is repeatedly described as a 'girl' and not as a 'woman' in the *Ballad of Mulan*. She is said to be a teenager, at least that is what has been deduced by the modern studies of the legend, or a very young girl. One of the reasons is practical, it is easier for her to hide her female attributes, but it is also a way to allow her growth as a person, she is still searching for her identity as a person.

Additionally, Mulan's family is always prevalent in the stories. Her whole story is based on the fact that she wants to save her father from death. Therefore, the relationship between her and her father is an important matter that must be mentioned whether it is positive and loving or stricter and controlled. Furthermore, the *Ballad of Mulan* and its rewritings usually mention Mulan's mother and sometimes she has siblings (older sister, younger brother and sister) but they express the fact that she does not have any older brother, hence her 'sacrifice' to enroll in the army. This shows that family and its relationships are very important to understand the story of Mulan. There are some comparisons between Mulan and her sisters to highlight their differences. Mulan embodies freedom and power when her sisters play their role of good daughters.

"Elder sister hearing her sister returns,

Adjusts her rouge by the doorway.

Little brother hearing his sister returns,

Sharpens his knife for pigs and lamb.”

To continue, let us focus on the romance in Mulan’s life. In the original story, romance is not really the main subject of Mulan’s tale, but the rewrites tend to add some male love interest or romance. Still, Mulan is never interested. In some versions, one of the reasons why she left is to avoid a marriage that she does not desire, in others, she has to refuse marriage proposals from important people such as the emperor or the Khan. Contrary to the Disney adaptations, there is not a love story between Mulan and another soldier, especially not when she is still known as a man. All the romances regarding Mulan in the old versions take place when people know that Mulan is a lady and not a man.

In *Romance of Sui and Tang* by Chu Renhuo (隋唐演義, 1695), a subplot of Mulan’s story, we learn that in this version, the girl decided to kill herself in order to avoid a forced marriage and to stay with her late father forever. Philip Naudus, in his article from 2020 on the website *Mulanbook*, summarize the end of Mulan’s life in this particular version as such: “Mulan arrives home but is devastated to find that her father has passed away, and her mother has already remarried. When the khan hears that Mulan is a woman, he no longer feels that he owes her his life; instead, he is determined to take her as his concubine. Mulan asks to see her father’s grave before submitting to the khan’s demands. There, she slits her own throat, declaring that she will be loyal to no man other than her father.”

After gathering that information, Disney kept some aspects such as the gender and young age of Mulan, the importance of the family, especially the father-daughter relationship or the cross-dressing revelation which the studio chose to romanticize even more and make it the central element of their version. This choice had a huge impact on the modern representation and image of Mulan because it is now the first trait of her story that the public think of when they think of Mulan.

3) Cultural context: twenty years apart.

Finally, the cultural context should be mentioned and explained because it has a real impact on the way *Mulan’s* story is told. Indeed, the two works are twenty years apart and society has evolved and changed simultaneously.

To start this explanation, the creation of the cartoon in 1998, which is the period between the end of the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s marks the emergence of Girl Studies and the start of Girl Power but also the third wave of feminism. As of 2021, three waves of feminism have

been defined. The term 'feminism' exists since the end of the nineteenth century and its definition evolved with the changes of society but also its sociopolitical context. According to Johanna Dagorn de Goëtisolo in her book *Les Trois Vagues Féministes: une construction sociale ancrée dans une histoire*², the three waves of feminism arrived and have followed one upon another as time and history went. As I attempt to show, the reappropriation of Mulan occurs during the Third Wave and bears its main traits. The first one is mainly represented through the Great Britain's Suffragettes movement. This movement fought, among other demands, to obtain the right to vote for women and to be considered as equal as men. The author calls this wave "The equality feminism". Then, during the 60s, a second wave appeared. This time, women and their supporters wanted to gain more freedom regarding their body and the way they should use it. The question of sexual liberty was very important, as much as the conservative role of a woman who was meant to be a mother and a wife, or to have a feminine job, ... The general oppression of men and the patriarchy were also seriously criticized. One of the most famous representatives of this movement is Simone de Beauvoir with her work on sex genders. Finally, the third wave, the still active one, is a more modern version of the previous wave than started in the 80s. Feminists use their voices to defend diversity in society. They claim the importance of men and women working together and want a united society. Mulan is a very interesting character regarding these ideas of feminism because Disney decided to tell her story during the third wave.

Significantly, Mulan has been remembered as an important figure during an era which put to the fore the notion of "girl power", especially in cultural industries and entertainment. This is this idea that girls can now occupy powerful roles in reality and fiction without putting their femininity apart. Jessica K. Taft questioned the notion of "Girl Power", and wondered especially "whether or not Girl Power [was] good for girls and young women"³. She analyzed the influence of the pop culture: popstars, journalists, ... in the making of this notion and concluded that there are four versions of Girl Power:

The first version is Girl Power as anti-feminist. It makes a big distinction between feminism and girl Power: which is seen as negative, as a bad influence on girls regarding their role in

² Dagorn de Goëtisolo Johanna, « Les trois vagues féministes : une construction sociale ancrée dans une histoire », 2011.
Laboratoire EA 4140 (Laboratoire Cultures, Education, sociétés), Université Bordeaux Segalen Observatoire International de la Violence à l'École.

³ Taft Jessica K, *All About the Girl*, "Girl Power Politics: Pop-Culture Barriers and Organizational Resistance" (chapter 6), 2004.

feminist politics. She gives the example of the Spice Girls, promoters of girl power. They are described as “tools of patriarchy”. The band is promoting Girl power but at the same time they willingly differentiate it from Feminism, mocking the word and calling it “dirty”. Because assimilating too much to feminism could be dangerous for their carrier and success and create a bad public image. The image of this peculiar Girl power appears “softer, sexier, less active than feminism, [...] emphasizing beauty and appearance”. The Spice Girls’ definition of GP is not about equality of genres but more about personal qualities and passions. Example: girls can play football. Marketing aspect of girl power (sports, World Cup Soccer).

The second version compares Girl Power as a postfeminism. Jessica K. TAFT explains the main idea of this version by stating that “Girls and women are doing fine, feminism is unnecessary, and the movement is over”. Basically, girls should be content with their actual situation because they have made all the progress they could regarding female empowerment. She gives the example of Sabrina the Teenage Witch and says that she “doesn’t need feminism; her life is great as it is” because she grew up in a world where “feminism [is taken] for granted”. Another idea is that Girl power is too “dominant”, the movement would have taken too much attention, more than needed. As a result, “real” matters, considered more important than equality of gender, are disregarded such as African Americans. Moreover, postfeminism insinuates that Girl Power is only about gender equality and completely omits all other aspects (racial, sexual, class politics, ...).

Then, the third version of Girl Power is seen as an individual power. The global message is that it is up to girls to take responsibility to change and be better rather than society. This version uses ads and publicities “you too can be a celebrity”; “step one: create a new you”. Even though it comes with good intentions, there is still a lack of inclusion, for example, some motivational and inspirational quotes such as “you can be a leader” absolutely forget that other factors must be taken into consideration (social class, races, injustices, ...).

Finally, the fourth version assimilates Girl Power as a consumer power. The main point of this version is a marketing aspect, the use of Girl Power to make profits. Brands want to influence young girls into buying their products: for instance, they promote their products with quotes like “With these shoes, you’ll run faster than boys”. It creates a need for girls to own objects that will make them stronger. This also implies the hidden message that you can’t succeed only by yourself.

Now the objective is to link Mulan with these different forms and definitions of Girl Power. It is quite complicated because the document does not treat GP through a fictional character in a movie, nor to a female warrior. Mulan's Girl Power is indeed inspired by some of the ones defined here, for example her character was created to sell and make money in the theaters. To go further, the Live action belongs even more to the 'consumer power' because the studios chose to remake a film that was already appreciated and successful. The goal is to seduce old fans and new ones with a more modern vision of Mulan, character who is loved by the viewer for different reasons. Mulan also bears some of the 'individual power's ideas in the way she, as a daughter, is the one who take the decision to be a warrior. She is the one who changes but still adapts to the army system and to the Chinese society. The government finally accepts and praises her for her decision but does not intent to reproduce it. Indeed, there is no new rule allowing women to enroll in the army, Mulan is an exception. She becomes a sort of role model for young girls but doesn't open the path for them. Moreover, Mulan, especially the one from the live action, shares some similarities with the individual Girl Power because she is represented as exceptional, one in a million. She is different from other girls because she was born with a superpower, a chi, that gives her uncommon capacities.

Furthermore, the notion of girl studies was already examined when the cartoon came out. In 2004, Harris A. wrote that "to be a "good girl" you had to master "boy things." That girls should do this while rejecting femininity. Go to work, play sports, be tough, but don't do it while wearing nail polish, pink uniforms, or crying."⁴

Moreover, cinema was also impacted by these changes of ideas and had to adapt to fit the new role and representation of women. Davis Amy M testifies of these modifications by saying that "by the time *Mulan* was released in 1998, seven years after *Beauty and the Beast*, a number of changes had occurred in the studio's characterizations of women. Stronger, tougher women had begun to appear, both within Disney films and in the larger arena of Hollywood cinema, as more women began to move in such key movie-making roles as producer and director. [...] It is interesting to note that *Beauty and the Beast* was released in the same year as *Thelma and*

⁴ Harris, A. (Ed.). (2004). *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203492567>

Louise (1991) and that the two films were both nominees for Academy Awards during the same year.”⁵

Twenty years later, at the time the live action was released, those evolutions had continued to grow and the representations of women in popular culture is now criticized with attention. Indeed, partly due to movements like Me Too, feminism is not so taboo anymore and the way women are depicted in audiovisual works is closely analyzed. The vision of the female heroine and female warrior is clearly not the same as before. Nowadays, a female heroine is more appreciated and praised if she embodies modern ideas such as being a marvelous fighter, a smart and ingenious analyst, a powerful sorcerer, ... no more weak kidnapped princess or pretty but silly girlfriend.

This context is important regarding this analysis of the two versions of *Mulan* because it is partly responsible for the narrative differences and changes between the two works.

II) Global narrative differences in Disney’s versions.

Contrary to the old legend of *Mulan*, which sole purpose was to be entertaining and poetic so that it would amuse the people listening to the ballad, Disney studios needed to target a certain audience and adapt the plot accordingly. Indeed, since its creation in 1923, The Walt Disney Company’s first public has always been children and teenagers (we can mention movies like *Peter Pan*, *The Jungle Book*, *Cinderella*, ...) In general, this kind of public does not seek the same elements in entertainment than a more mature public would. The poetic aspect and ambiguity are not always the most important as children, nowadays in particular, are considered a delicate audience who cannot deal with certain topics, such as sexuality or violence. Children want to laugh and feel close to the characters, these cartoons are meant to make kids dream and teach them some morals: for example, respect your family, believe in yourself even when people want to bring you down, and so on. Furthermore, children and adults watching cartoons are a completely different public than the one listening to the ballad centuries earlier. The story and comedy need to be more visual and easier to understand. Hence the creations of scenes like the matchmaker one or the apparition of Muchu and cricket as animal sidekicks. Also, telling a

⁵ Davis Amy M., *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation, 1937-2001*, “Disney films 1989-2005: The Eisner Era”, 2007, John Libbey Publishing.

story must bring economic profits, especially for a brand as worldwide known as Disney. These are some of the reasons that pushed the firm to make some modifications in their own narration of Mulan's story in a cartoon adaptation. Yet, when they decided to produce another version of it, twenty years later, Disney also understood that they needed to reinvent their own creation to fit the actual criteria of society. Indeed, in a world in perpetual evolution, the way women are represented in cinema is always commented and analyzed. Given the period in which Disney introduced its revisited vision of Mulan, the studio had to be in adequation with the evolution of feminism. According to Johanna Dagorn de Goëtisolo's definition of the three waves of feminism⁶, Mulan' story by Disney could be seen as belonging to the third wave. The character's goal is to be considered as equal to men, just like the wish of feminists of the first wave. She also defends the freedom and the liberty of women in what they choose to be, not only good wives and daughters, forced to obey patriarchal figures. And then, in a more general way, Mulan's message is to show that men and women can work together and achieve great things if they recognize each other's capacities and strength. Moreover, Mulan's 2020 version appears in a society where the notion of girl power and the gender studies are more discussed than ever before. In this regards, 2020 Mulan had to fit the new definition of what a girl power heroine is : powerful, strong minded, skilled, ... These differences between the two works from the same studio are interesting and relevant to compare in order to better understand the notion of gender and girlhood in Disney's *Mulan* productions.

1) Elements added or erased.

To start this comparison, it is important to spot the elements and ideas that were added, modified or erased from one version to the other and explain the reasons, either logistic, artistic or simply to give a fresher view, more modern about an aspect of the story.

The romance in *Mulan*.

Firstly, the romance must be discussed. Indeed, *Mulan*'s transcription of romance is quite special, both in the cartoon and the live action because it is meant to be secondary to the main story. Mulan's growth as a person, as a woman, as a warrior is more important than her potential love story with a man. Yet, because romance is actually a selling point in a story, it is still present in its own way in each version.

⁶ Dagorn de Goëtisolo Johanna (2011), op cit p.14.

The principal question is to see how it is written and shown within the movies. Is it concrete or more ambiguous? But also, who is interested or watching who? Because as said before, Mulan is supposed to be focused on her own evolution, her progression and keeping her secret hidden. Yet, the two Disney versions go on two different paths in the way they set Mulan's position toward romance.

In the cartoon, Mulan seems to have a tiny crush on Shang, her captain in the army. She is the one who looks at him with interest and attraction. It is similar to a sort of love at first sight from Mulan's point of view, even though her affection is very discrete. Mulan's first look at Shang is symbolic of the hierarchy of their relationship and the way she admires him: she is on the ground and he is leaning over her while she is beneath him, which is visibly underlined by a low angle point of view. The way she observes him is even more distinguishable when compared to how she looks at the other male soldiers when she arrives at the military camp. Her gaze is full of disgust and incomprehension. She is dubitative while listening to them and constantly raises her eyebrows in shock or disbelief. She clearly expresses her opinion of them with the quote "they're disgusting" to which her dragon sidekick answers: "No, they're MEN". On one hand, Mulan only wants to fit in with her comrades, to not be noticed in order to keep her secret, but on the other hand, she wants to impress Shang and she wants him to accept her as a warrior, even though she has to fail several times before starting to improve and be respected. Also, Shang is different from the other men for Mulan but for the viewers too. Indeed, his outfit, posture, colors palette is willing to make him stand out from the rest. He fits the general codes of beauty standards for men: he is muscular and tall, he is also one of the very few men who do not have a beard. The viewer can feel his charisma just the way Mulan feels it.

However, Mulan's crush seems unrequired for the majority of the movie because Shang sees her as a man, he does not seem interested in her in that way until he learns that she is a girl, which is at the same time as all the other soldiers, after more than one hour of watch time. And still, Shang's gaze on Mulan changes after the revelation of her being a girl but the betrayal feeling is stronger than any obvious interest for a moment. One of the popular interpretations of Shang's character describe him as a queer icon, thinking that he may be bisexual and in fact attracted to Ping, Mulan's fake boy name, which would explain the deception he shows after learning the truth. Despite this popular theory, Disney never confirmed it so the mystery and the choice of interpretation still depends on the viewer.

Furthermore, by the end of the cartoon movie, Mulan and Shang's relationship takes an obvious turn when they finally accept their attraction to one another and when a marriage between them is clearly implied by Mulan's grandmother. A marriage that actually happens and that is the main plot of the sequel movie from 2004 which is completely fictional and does not refer the *Ballad of Mulan* anymore.

Moreover, in the live action, Shang does not exist, the role of the captain is attributed to another character who became a commander-officer. Still, a new male love interest is created by the writers. This time, Chen Hong Hui is an equal to Mulan. He arrives the same day as her as a new enrolled soldier. Nonetheless, his introduction to Mulan is similar to the cartoon: she is pushed and falls on the ground and he lightly mocks her while looking down on her and giving her his hand to stand. Contrary to the cartoon, Mulan directly picks a fight with him and absolutely does not seem attracted to him in any way. On the contrary, he quickly shows an interest for her, smiles at her and observes her. He talks about women with her and even asks her: "are you matched?" which could be a way to ask if she is single, and which is another proof of his interest in her. Even so, Mulan is a bit defensive towards her comrades but seems open to a cordial relationship. Eventually, Mulan will accept Chen Hong Hui as a close friend and a reliable ally in her quest to stop the villain of the story. Furthermore, the end of the movie offers a deliberate ambiguous 'goodbye scene' between the two of them: The settings, a well-known trope in romantic scenes that is a meeting alone on a bridge, the soft music, the sunset colors, the tender looks, and so on, are meant to create a really intimate atmosphere.



Hong Hui is quite honest in his feelings, he seems to be very fond of her and does not try to hide it. While Mulan also shows some interest in him, she is a bit less open to an eventual evolution of their relationship. She does not close every door to this eventuality, as she takes his hand, but she puts it on standby for now and end the scene by leaving.



We can compare this scene to the one in the cartoon because there is also a sort of ‘goodbye scene’ between Mulan and Shang. This one is very different, one because it does not take place in private, it takes place in front of the Imperial Palace and the huge crowd, Mulan’s friends and even the emperor who intervene to give his thoughts and advice to Shang after Mulan’s departure. Moreover, the scene is rather awkward and does not bring a real closure between Mulan and her captain, which is probably intentional and a way to justify the real last scene between them when he joins Mulan at her house. While the live action leaves the interpretation of the future between Mulan and her love interest to the viewer, the cartoon expressively announces the big probability of a marriage between Mulan and Shang.

These last interactions bring us to the last point of the study of romance in Walt Disney’s *Mulan*: the way romance is set.

As a cartoon, the 1998 work is-centered on humor and comedy. The Disney cartoons of this period were mostly watched by a young public, who needed an ‘easy to understand’ story telling. That is why comedy is such a strong aspect of cartoon-*Mulan*. The characters are funny caricatures and Mulan is accompanied by two non-human sidekicks, a little red dragon and a cricket, during almost the whole movie. These secondary characters are in charge of the comedy

and make perpetual jokes to light up scenes. However, their presence in the movie retains the love story to be taken too seriously. Indeed, a lot of scenes between Mulan and Shang are punctuated with comic elements, some are even shot to be ridiculous and awkward. On the other hand, the live action is completely different regarding its interpretation and creation of romance. In fact, Mulan and Hong Hui share several intimate scenes where they are alone on the screen. Most of these scenes convey love and sexual tension as they are staged in the dark, at night, with a lot of shadows. The intimacy is amplified by the private whispery talks and the exchange of looks. The scene in the bedroom and the conversation about love is quite a good example:



“HONG HUI: What if she doesn’t like me? MULAN: (whispering) She will.”

Furthermore, the intimacy reaches its climax during the bath scene. Once again, all the elements are gathered: Dark shades and lighting, whispers, soft music (even though it only starts in the middle of the scene). The fact that they are both naked gives more depth to the intimacy and the tension. As said before, there is no music for a moment and it gives the impression that time has stopped and underlines the privacy of the interaction.



While the cartoon is more concrete about the love story between its heroine and male-lead, the live action is more focused on the details and credibility of Mulan and Hong Hui's link, even though they do not concretely end up together at the end.

The negative female counterpart: the witch.

Let us move on to the next change between the two Disney films, which is the creation of a brand-new character, never mentioned before, whether it is in the ballad and legend, nor in the cartoon.

The live action introduces the character of Xianniang, a mysterious woman described as a witch. Even though she is a totally made-up character, her presence in the movie is interesting because she takes the role of the negative female counterpart, who is put in comparison to Mulan. Indeed, they share similarities such as the possession of a power, called 'the chi' by many characters. This power is difficult to define because it seems different for both female

characters. While Mulan's chi helps her to be the greatest warrior of all and to show almost magical fighting skills, Xianniang's seems limitless: she fights, she can transform into a hawk, another person or even into hundreds of black birds. Nevertheless, because the notion of chi is never completely defined, we can imagine that Mulan's youth and lack of experience are what keeps her from having the same magical type of powers. Indeed, Xianniang appears like an experienced witch who can perfectly use her gift but also who is now only defined by this power.

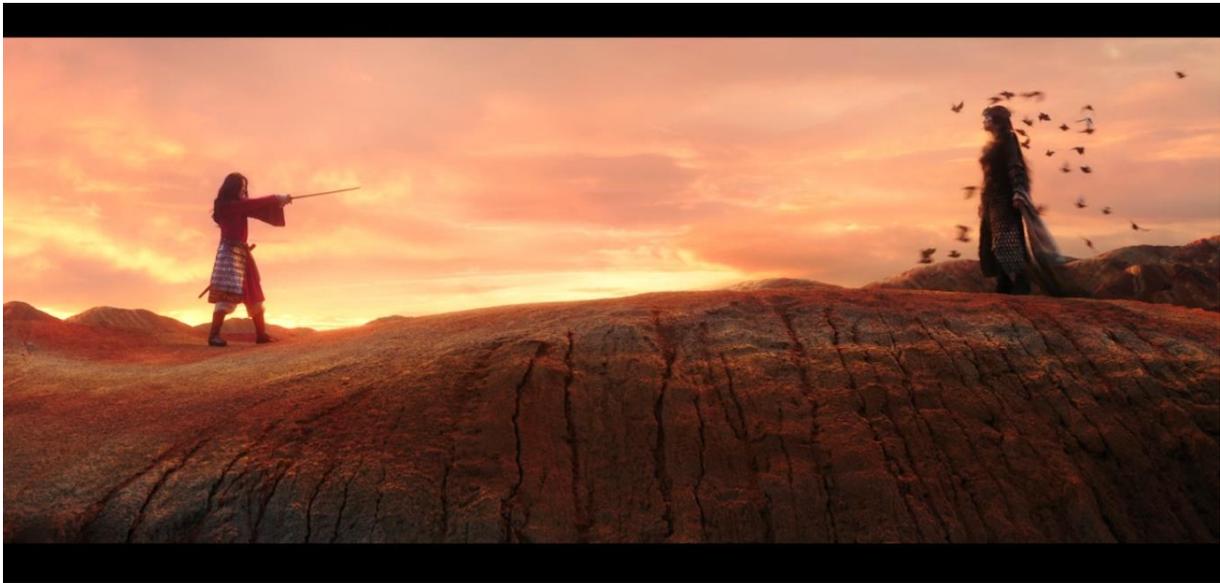
In fact, she follows the popular representation of an outcast witch: she wears dark clothes, threatening makeup and ornaments, her hair is very long and dark, so are her nails. She is an ally to the bad guy, which makes her a villain too in the eyes of the viewer and Mulan. She is very often represented looking over a landscape from a higher spot. Her outcast past is what led her to be closer to nature. A. Boutang confirmed this idea as she wrote that this "intimacy with nature has, in the past, been one of the features of archetypal negative female figures, such as the witch" (p.143)⁷



She perfectly embodies the role of the negative female figure who mirrors the heroine and helps her decide who she actually wants to be. Indeed, the dynamic between Mulan and Xianniang is special because they should be enemies as they are in opposite sides, but the witch quickly

⁷ Boutang, A. (2020). "Girls against Women: Contrasting Female Violence in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias". In C. Maury & D. Roche (eds.), *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-feminist Era* (pp. 134–153). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved April 27, 2022, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350150799.0014>

shows some motherly affection towards Mulan. They are different and yet so much alike. Xianniang sees herself in the young girl even though this one is wary around her. The witch wants to take Mulan under her wing and create a bond with her because they share the same curse/gift. Moreover, both have been abandoned because of this chi and are seen as pariahs.



“We are the same”

Thanks to this scene, the viewer understand that Xianniang is in fact what Mulan will become if she accepts to be treated as different by her peers. Yet, Mulan can still change her path while Xianniang knows and says “it’s too late for me” when the young girl asks her to join her. The need to be accepted had never disappeared in Xianniang’s mind and she thought that it was impossible. However, by the end of the movie she witnesses Mulan’s link with her comrades and feels relieved to see a “woman, a warrior, not a scorned dog” leading an army. Then, she dies, taking an arrow instead of Mulan. Her sacrifice is a mean to tell that she is done accepting to bow under people who talk her down for what she is. To summarize Xianniang’s character, we could say that she represents a stage of femininity that Mulan is not.

The family members.

Another point in the modifications of the live action is that the writers erased the character of the grandmother from the cartoon to replace it with another family member: Mulan’s little sister, Xiu. She is also another stage of femininity, another version of what Mulan could have been.

From the very beginning, Xiu is everything Mulan is not: feminine, quiet, shy and obedient. For instance, the first time she is showed on screen, she is very young, and she is weaving with

her mother in the house while child-Mulan is outside with her father, chasing a chicken and attracting all the attention to herself. Later, she admits that she is scared of spiders, this information is relevant when contrasted with Mulan who seems never to be afraid. Additionally, while Mulan's meeting with the village matchmaker turned out to be a disaster, Xiu's was a success as the first thing the little sister tells Mulan when she returns home at the end of the film is that she is matched to a man. Even though Xiu appears very happy about this news, it is interesting to interpret this scene as a reminder that it would have been Mulan in her place if she had not left to enter the army.

Besides, the differences between the two sisters never were a problem in their relationship, they get along pretty well. Already when they were children, Xiu used to look at Mulan with pride and admiration. And this opinion never changes, or even became stronger after Mulan proved to the world that she was a true heroine.

Age.

To continue, once again, the live action added new features to its reinvention of the cartoon. Mulan's age is not represented similarly in the two works. The question of age is very important, especially in this analysis which focus on the notion of girlhood. Given the fact that the original story is quite blurry regarding Mulan's age, Disney has the liberty to choose its main character's age. This choice is impactful because a female child is not seen in the same way than a female teenager or a young woman. Indeed, a little girl should always be regarded as such and so she is not sexualized in any way. Also, the question of gender is harder to spot with a little girl because she has not yet completely entered girlhood. Whereas a young girl or a teen girl is actually sexualized. Puberty has changed her body and consequently introduced the question of gender.

Indeed, Mulan's age is still approximatively the same when she enrolls in the army, she must be around 15 or 16. However, unlike the cartoon which never shows a younger or older Mulan, the live action begins with several scenes in which the viewers can see Mulan as a child, much younger, to better help the understanding of her childhood and background. These scenes serve as a prologue but there is no such thing in the cartoon: Mulan is frozen at a precise age. The reason is still very mysterious and depends on all individuals own interpretation. One of them could be to stay true to the original legend which always stayed blurry concerning Mulan's age. This way, cartoon-Mulan cannot be compared to a younger version of herself, and so it is harder to define where she is in her youth. Whereas the live-action presents a past-Mulan who seems

to be around 8. In comparison to this younger image of her, the viewer can notice that present-Mulan looks much older and so imagine how old she is based on this information. Furthermore, the choice of showing Mulan as a child, in addition to the story's background elements, allows the concept of time to work on Mulan: during the ellipsis, she evolved, and most probably gained more experience forging her fighting skills while keeping it hidden from the villagers as her father ordered. Indeed, the prologue is a story-telling technique which permits the viewer to complete and imagine what happened during the unsaid timelap.



Death: is Mulan ready to kill or reluctant?

Furthermore, there is another question to ask regarding the movies: as a warrior, is Mulan ready to kill or reluctant? Indeed, Mulan's character is a figure of girl power, she is a heroine and she is a female warrior. We must not forget that the producer of these movies is Disney and so, as explained earlier, the target audience is mostly young. However, by creating a remake in a live action, Disney clearly wanted to attract a larger public audience. Indeed, those who came to

watch the movie were not only fans that were already seduced by the story, but also adults who did not find an interest in the cartoon version because they maybe thought that it was a bit too childish and not their taste. Additionally, the marketing and advertisement were intentionally giving a more mature image to their film. Now, let us go back to the question of killing or not killing. Initially, cartoon-Mulan children-friendly, in fact the age rating in the United States is age 8, which is already special for a Disney which is usually “all audiences”. In this regards, 2020 Mulan sets the tone of a darker movie with an age rating of 13 in the USA.

Death is present in the two works but rather differently. In the cartoon, it is quite taboo as the viewer must be old enough to understand when it is referred. It is quite softened to please a larger public. For example, the scene where Mulan and her friends arrive on the rest of the battlefield where Shang’s father and his army have been defeated, corpses are shown from far away. Instead of directly showing the body of Shang’s father on screen, his death is implied by his helmet. Moreover, the staging prefers to focus on the reactions and faces of the characters rather than on the object of their shock.



This taboo about death in the cartoon makes it difficult for the writers to show violence in their movie. Indeed, contrary to the live action, there is not a huge scene of battle between two armies. When it is about to happen, the scenario spares Mulan and her comrades from crossing swords with the enemy. This way, Mulan's fighting skills are not shown during an actual fight. In fact, even the last fight between Mulan and Shan-Yu, the cartoon's villain, is not really a fight as it only lasts a few seconds and, for most part, Mulan runs away from him and ends up trapping him on one of the roofs of the Imperial palace. This proves that Mulan's skills are mostly agility and smartness rather than strength. Actually, the only time her fighting capacities are really transcribed on screen is when she is trained by Shang. In addition, it corresponds to Adrienne Boutang's work which says that "Even though the films show that the girls adapt fast and easily to more masculine behaviors, their combat skills are hardly presented as innate qualities. Because this ability for violence is generally coded as male, the narratives try to minimize the young characters' violent impulses. The narratives attempt, rather contradictorily, to underline both the natural gifts of their characters, in accordance with more general patterns of young adult fiction, and the difficulties they encounter, which lead them to be put under close protection of male mentors. [...] in at least two cases, the ultimate stage in the requisite training process under the tutelage of a male mentor"⁸

On the other hand, the authors of the live action film decided to change this representation of Mulan. Instead, she repeatedly shines through her fighting competences and so from her childhood. Indeed, a multitude of scenes show how good of a warrior she is. She crosses swords with a lot of enemies and even defeats the villain in a real difficult fight at the end.



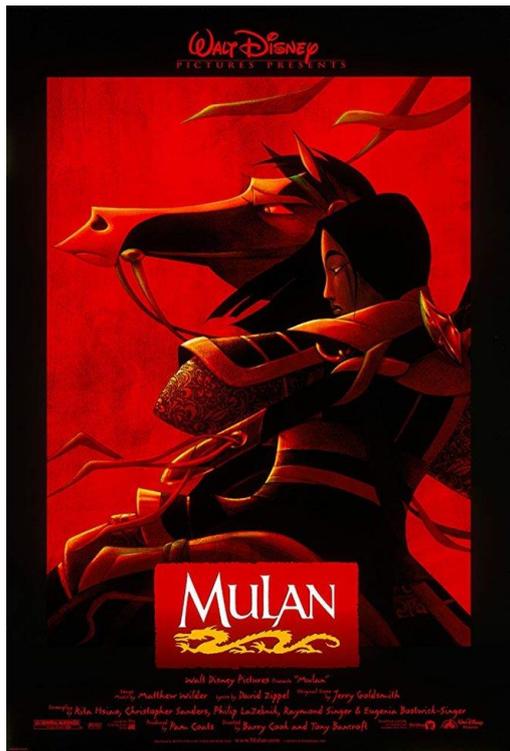
⁸ Boutang (2020), *op. cit.*, p.18

Furthermore, in the live-action, death is clear as Mulan kills the bad guy without any hesitation, she shoots an arrow into his heart. In contrary, 1998-Mulan has to stay children-friendly and correspond to a Disney heroine from that period: she does not kill the bad guy. Mushu, her sidekick, invisible to others, is the one who shoots fireworks at the villain and implicitly kills him. His death is ambiguous and you must read between the lines. It fits the expectations of the audience who do not want Mulan to be a killer even though it lacks realism as Mushu is not supposed to exist for anyone except Mulan. Nevertheless, the cartoon still presents one scene where Mulan implicitly kills hundreds of enemies by triggering a snow avalanche, but because death is not directly represented, the viewer can pass over this.



To once again quote Adrienne Boutang: “The desire to absolve the young girls from any attraction toward physical violence, while asserting their “toughness,” ends up producing somewhat contradictory portrayals, as the sagas both highlight and deny their abilities as warriors. Critics tended to downplay these contradictions, with analyses relying mostly on the iconic static images displayed on the promotional posters”⁹

⁹ Boutang (2020), *op. cit.*, p.18.



These official posters are good examples for this quote, especially the cartoon's one. Indeed, it is interesting to notice that the cartoon's poster looks darker and more mature than the live action's one whereas it has just been explained how this is actually the opposite. In this way, 2020 Mulan is loyal to its poster. Her toughness is not only used for promotional reasons which cannot be said about the cartoon.

The father/daughter relationship.

Moreover, it is important to examine the father and daughter relationship between Mulan and her father as the paternal figure is a bit different from one film to the other.

As a matter of fact, Mulan's character, regarding her father, named Zhou, is very similar in both movies. She loves him unconditionally and would rather give her own life than letting him go to his death by enrolling in the army. In both cases, she becomes a warrior in order to protect him. She also respects him and feels dutiful towards him. She is very affected and sorry when she disappoints him. This respect for her father is so important for Mulan that she prefers to refuse the offer to stay in the army or in the Imperial city and returns to her father to show her respect to him. She is typically the "good daughter" defined by Davis Amy M¹⁰: "The good daughter is, quite simply, a good daughter. A traditional motif and archetype within fairy tales

¹⁰ Davis Amy M (2007), *op cit* p.16

the world over, the good daughter is (usually) a young woman who, out of loyalty to her good but naïve father, finds herself in a potentially threatening situation and must use all her personal resources to survive, an exercise which usually ends in personal triumph for the heroine. [...]” About the examples of Mulan, Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) and Jane (*Tarzan*) the author adds “They all have in common certain traits: none fits in with the society surrounding her; none is initially interested in finding romantic love; none is initially interested in pursuing any particular goal; all, in some way, take care of their fathers and support their fathers’ goals rather than having goals of their own; each, in her quest to serve her father’s best interests, ends up both saving her father’s life and finding a life of her own.”

In contrast, Mulan’s father is not exactly the same. Even though he also loves his daughter to pieces in both films, the way he expresses this affection is depicted differently. In this regard, the cartoon Zhou is simpler to understand. Indeed, his role is important because he is the triggering element that make Mulan choose to put her life in danger. But his character is softer and lighter. He is very calm and reassuring for Mulan, he consoles her with a soft voice and even the scene where he raises his voice against his daughter is not that violent. In a general matter, we could say that his character, while being essential for the scenario, remains secondary. This is a little bit different in the live action.

First, Zhou in the live action occupies two roles in the film as he is Mulan’s father, but also the narrator of the story, his voice is the first one we hear in the movie, it appears even before the first apparition of the very young Mulan. He also concludes the story like a storyteller would: “The girl became a soldier, the soldier became a leader, and the leader became a legend”. The tone is very serious and lyrical, as the narrator, he does not hint his link with Mulan, qualifying her with “the girl” or “a daughter” (at the beginning of the movie) rather than “my daughter”. It gives an impression of distance between the two of them, but the reality is different. In fact, Zhou shares a special bond with Mulan. As a reminder, he is a father of two girls but he clearly appears closer to the elder: he trained her when she was young, used to do the chores with her. The family is composed of four persons but the four are divided in duos. The beginning of the live action illustrates a father who is very proud of his daughter, he does not see her gift, her chi, as something bad and this is why he enjoys teaching her to use it. Unfortunately, the judgment and gaze of the other villagers win over his pride and he is the one to order her to

hide it. He also sounds scarier when he gives her orders, when he strongly hits the dinner table and vigorously scolds her.



Pride became shame after noticing the others' judgment:



These changes and similarities within the films and the evolution of Mulan's character as a heroine figure must be studied in a next axe focused on the representation of femininity.

III) **Representation of femininity in Mulan.**

The representation of femininity is a prominent issue in *Mulan*. Indeed, her own femininity is questioned all over the movies because she does not correspond to her society's definition of it. Indeed, we have to remember that the tale takes place in a fifth century China where women were more considered as breeding elements than as human beings by men. They were meant to obey their family, especially their fathers, and later their husbands, they had no choice on their own life and were expected to behave as good and quiet housewives. This society, although very archaic, is not that much different from the societies in which each work was released. Indeed, patriarchy is not as strong as it was in *Mulan's* period but it is definitely still a huge matter nowadays. This is most likely one of the reasons that made Mulan's character so popular.

Besides, there are many other feminine figures in both films who are there to underline Mulan's difference: she is clearly not like other girls. In the two works, this difference is not represented as a good thing in the eye of most characters because Mulan's need for freedom does not fit in well with what is expected from a young girl in this society. On the contrary, the contemporary Westerner viewer tends to feel sorry for Mulan and will most likely understand her point of view because the cultural context was not the same, even in 1998. That is why the viewers will support and appreciate Mulan's character and the message she embodies as a young girl living in a patriarchal society, who wants to be equal to men even though this wish seems to appear quite late in the story. Indeed, at the beginning of the story, Mulan is just a girl who wishes to be herself, she does not question her gender nor the notion of equality between men and women. The 'role' of the perfect woman according to the period she belongs to does not fit her but that does not mean that Mulan wants to play the role of a man. Actually, without the peculiar circumstances of the war and the high chances of her father dying, Mulan would probably not have left her family and disguised as a male soldier. In fact, the first part of the movie shows how desperate Mulan is to blend in and specially to bring honor to her father and the rest of the family. Even though the meeting with the matchmaker did not work, Mulan would have probably taken another chance to find a husband. In this regard, live action-Mulan is a bit more honest about the fact that she does not want to marry someone, she makes a sad face when she hears about the meeting with the matchmaker, yet she still obeys her mother. In addition, there are many other elements to study regarding femininity in *Mulan* in order to understand its link with gender and girlhood.

1. **Elements that make it look like a progressive story.**

In order to analyze *Mulan*'s representation of femininity, we shall start by naming the elements that make it look like a progressive story. Indeed, Mulan's personality and actions are often compared to feminist and progressist representations of women. The general idea that most people remember about Mulan's character in the cartoon, but also in the live action, is that she is a strong woman who made her way through misogynistic rules and took her fate in her hand to save her country. In fact, popular culture tends to put Mulan on the list of feminist female figures because most people fill their representation of Mulan with nostalgia and the way they felt when they first saw the movie and discovered her story. Indeed, her story counts many elements that make it progressive.

Analysis of the matchmaker scene.

Let us start with the fact that she refuses marriage. Yes, she accepts her family's will to make her meet the town's matchmaker. But in both films, the matchmaker scene, which is completely made up by Disney and was never mentioned in the original legend, ends up in a total chaos, letting Mulan free from marriage for a bit longer. As said earlier, those scenes are present in the two works and it is very interesting to compare the one in the movie and the one in the cartoon because as they share some similarities, they are also quite different in other aspects.

On one hand, the cartoon's scene is very memorable, it could even be described as emblematic because there are a lot of comedy and funny elements. On the other hand, the live action one has less comedy and the scene is important but in the end, it is forgettable. Moreover, in the cartoon, the matchmaker is alone with Mulan, there are no other women, while in the live action, there are more women in the scene, including Mulan's mother and sister. Furthermore, the cartoon matchmaker is turned into a fool after many comic situations. She ends up ridiculous, she doesn't have any presence or charisma left while Mulan remains beautiful as she was in the beginning of the scene. She even looks like a man at the end of the scene as she wears a fake inked beard. Additionally, when she looks like a man, her true personality is visible. She doesn't try to be gracious like she was before, she shouts a lot and doesn't try to control her emotions. Because men aren't supposed to suppress their feelings. The 2020 version of the scene reverses this as the woman falls from her chair but she remains the same. It is actually Mulan who ends up with messy hair and who is considered ridiculous. In the end, the outcome is the same but the cartoon's one is more powerful despite the less serious staging.



Mulan as a tomboy

Another progressive element is that Mulan is a tomboy, at least, in comparison with other girls. She is very energetic and runs around a lot while the expectations for girls her age are to be “quiet and demure, graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised, punctual” as cartoon-Mulan writes this list as a cheat sheet on her forearm. In fact, Mulan does not correspond to the description, she is smart, ingenious, energetic, she can ride a horse and so on. In addition, 2020 Mulan has been able to fight and escalate walls quickly since she was a child as seen in the prologue of the movie.



Explicit feminist speech: “I want a girl who is brave and intelligent” while men want pretty girls, good cooks, ...

Furthermore, Mulan is a progressive character because she speaks her mind and delivers explicit feminist speeches in both films. Indeed, there is a special scene where the young girl, already disguised as a man, is trapped in a conversation with male soldiers who express their criteria for a bride. These are proof of the misogyny of the society as they only concern beauty (white skin, thin fingers, “buxom”, “strong wide hips”, cherry red lips) and cooking skills: “I don’t care what she looks like, I care what she cooks like”.

The version of this scene in the cartoon is typically Disney as it is a song named *A Girl Worth Fighting For*. Once again, beauty is the main criteria: “I want her paler than the moon”, “eyes like stars”. Also, she must be head over heels for her husband: “my girl will marvel at my strength”, “adore my battle scars”, “my girl will think I have no fault”, “that I’m a major find”. In the end, a woman must at least be a good cooker if she is not pretty enough: “I couldn’t care less what she’ll wear or what she looks like. It all depends on what she cooks like.”

In both versions, Mulan feels awkward and not in her place but even though her goal is to be discreet and to fit in with the rest of the men, she cannot help but speaking her true mind: “My ideal woman is courageous, and she has a sense of humor. She’s also smart”. To the question “what does she look like?” she answers: “that’s not the point”. These statements make the men laugh in the live action, and they are even disgusted in the cartoon.

Criticism of patriarchy.

This element leads us to the next one which covers the criticism of patriarchy in *Mulan*. It is no secret that *Mulan*’s story takes place in a very patriarchal Chinese society from centuries ago. Women’s sole role is to be good daughters and then good wives. A young girl has to get married to bring honor to her family, this is her destiny since she was born as shown in the live action when Mulan’s mother tells the father that she knows their youngest daughter (who is approximately 6 in the scene) will be easy to marry in comparison to Mulan, the eldest from only a few years. On the opposite, men are meant to honor their family on the battlefield. The notion of duty and honor is very important for each gender but it is also completely different. In every way, a girl has to be obedient to a man: she must obey her father her husband but also the emperor. For instance, the live action matchmaker announces that “when a wife serves her

husband, she must be silent. She must be invisible”. So, a woman is not considered as a real person. For example, during the song *Honor To Us All* in the cartoon, Mulan is compared to a sow’s ear, which is an animal, before she has been dressed and wears makeup, that will be turned into a silk purse, an accessory, to be considered good enough for marriage. This is proof that women are dehumanized in this society.

Both movies are quite explicit regarding those rules, and the live action underlines it even more because Mulan’s father is more severe in his words. There is a fight scene during the dinner in the two *Mulan* and Zhou shouts “Learn your place” to his daughter in each work. Moreover, in both films, patriarchy is mainly embodied by Mulan’s father and the emperor, and sometimes by the army’s general. All those men are represented as old men, sometimes even disabled and incapable of defending themselves. It is the case for Mulan’s father, whose weakness is partly symbolized by his cane, which is present in both movies, and the cartoon’s emperor. It could be a way to criticize patriarchy and to show that it is an old vision, an old idea of how the world works and that it was instituted by past generations.



Mulan’s father cannot even stand properly when he tries to trade his cane with his former sword.



The emperor becomes a damsel in distress when he is abducted by the villains.

Feminist ideas: you can be a tomboy, you can fight like men, ...

To continue the list of elements which seem to characterize Mulan as a progressive story, Mulan's moral and message taught to children is that being a tomboy is not a flaw, you can be a girl and fight like men. Because in the two works, this is actually Mulan who saves the emperor and is acclaimed and recognized as a hero by the people. Indeed, she succeeded where men failed. In the live action, she is even depicted as the best warrior of the army, she can easily be described as stronger than every male soldier. This moral sounds like the promotional campaigns targeting girls in our society with slogans like "you can do it" or "do it like a girl" which resembles a lot to the definition of girl power by Jessica K Taft¹¹.

Female warriors

For these reasons, Mulan is also a progressive female character because she is a female warrior, a heroine.

The general idea of a female warrior in the world of cinema is quite romanticized. Indeed, most of the time, strong women, owning fighting or combat skills, are represented through the male gaze. This means that they are wearing thin, tight and revealing clothes (a lot of skin is visible, even though it is not very helpful when you are supposed to put yourself in danger, to fight weaponed enemies, ...) These women are also always conventionally attractive and correspond to the beauty standards. The list of examples is very long, here are some of them: Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, Alice, from the *Resident Evil* saga, *Charlie's angels*, ... The way these female characters are promoted is also intentionally seductive: their poses are not really natural, they pose like models, putting their appearance first and delegating their role of warriors to a less relevant place. To make it simple: a female heroine can be accepted, but she has to fit some fantasy imagined by the male gaze. These women are created in the same mold and are simple caricatures.

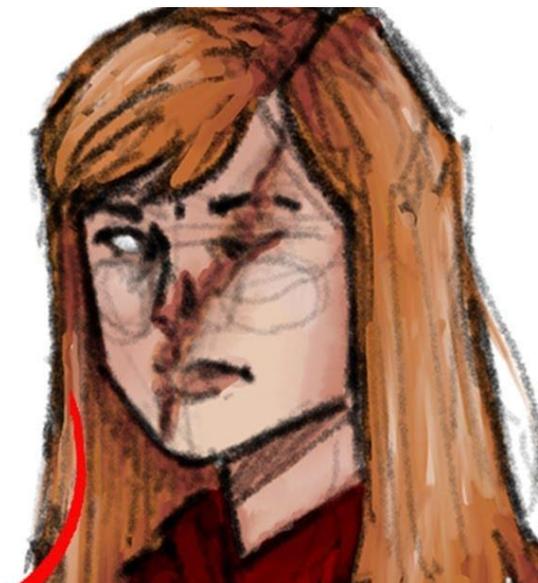


¹¹ Jessica K. Taft (2004) *op. cit.* p.14

Recently, this idea has evolved with the evolution of society and movement like Feminism and Me Too. Female heroines are not all represented the same way, especially in the way they dress. Their characters are less seductive and sensual because the goal is to focus on their personality and their evolution as characters even though their outfit can still be considered as sexy by some people. Furthermore, they are not wearing uncomfortable tiny clothes that are completely illogical given the situations they face and they do not pose like models. Nonetheless, it seems like society is not yet ready to let the appearance be more inclusive because the actresses are still conventionally young and beautiful. A lot of examples can be named: Katniss from the *Hunger Games* saga, Tris from the *Divergent* saga, Daenerys from *Game of Thrones*, ...



A good example of this code according to which female main character cannot be unconventionally attractive is the representation made of Hester in the movie *Mortal Engines*, adapted from a series of books. In the books, Hester, 15, is described with a huge scar crossing her face, on her eye, cutting the top of her nose. Yet, the movie adaptation could not assume such a different-looking character and chose to modify the scar.



Nonetheless, society is still shy concerning this representation of (more or less) desexualized women and most of the female feminist characters are still directed by a male gaze (*Black Widow*, *Wonder Woman*). Furthermore, female heroines are almost systematically accompanied by a male character, with whom they usually share a romance. Creating the idea that a woman cannot be the main strong and powerful character on her own. Additionally, the personality of a strong/ fighting woman is usually quite cliché. They are rarely smiling, funny or making jokes. Most of them are serious and solemn, independent, bossy, focus on the mission. This trope could be summarized as ‘a badass woman’.

On the contrary, powerful men can also be very funny and outgoing. Indeed, so many male characters combined the uninhibited personality with the skill in combat. A recent example of this type of character is Shang-Chi (Marvel). He is Chinese like Mulan, and a master in martial arts, he is very powerful and has to make hard decisions in his story, but he stays very lively and funny throughout the movie.

Having gathered all these pieces of information, the question is now to verify whether Mulan’s character follows the codes of a female warrior in cinema or not. The answer is mixed because some aspects of her character do respect these rules, for instance, she corresponds to the beauty standards: she is pretty, she has healthy hair, a clean face, ... Also, she is accompanied by a male character for most of the movie. Furthermore, her personality is very serious, she lets secondary characters be funny instead of her. However, she is not openly sexualized, especially the cartoon. Firstly, because the cartoon is made for children, secondly because she is clearly very young. In both movies, her body is mainly used to show her differences with the other warriors but not in an obvious sexual way, even though we cannot argue with the tension between Mulan and Hong Hui in the live action. Moreover, her outfit is hardly comparable to the other female warriors’ because she wears male clothes. Lastly, the promotional posters are meant to show her charisma and strength rather than her physical attributes.

2. Yet, not so progressive.

Yet, despite all those progressive elements, some others prove that this story has its limits and maybe it is not that progressive.

Ideal of masculinity.

Indeed, the tale illustrates a sort of ideal of masculinity in the character of Shang which is represented as muscular, strong, handsome, tall, and so on. While some secondary male

characters do not hesitate to be funny and contradict the perfect masculinity standards of the period: they show emotions seen as ‘feminine’ such as fear, sadness, or overjoy, Shang, on the other hand is mostly the same from the beginning to the end, he is never represented differently than as a skilled warrior. When the other men disguise as concubines, he is the only one who keeps his armor on and does not cross-dress. In fact, in the final fight with the bad guy, he is the one who crosses swords and fists with him, there is an actual physical fight whereas Mulan, as explained before, runs away to think of another method to defeat the villain.

Mulan’s first look at Shang is symbolic of the hierarchy of their relationship and the way she admires him: she is on the ground and he is leaning over her while she is beneath him. This hierarchy is reminded to the viewer in another scene from the cartoon when Mulan’s gender has been discovered. Shang has power of life and death over her, even after she has saved his own life. She kneels before him and the angle is a bit low to represent his power over her. It is a way to express that no matter how good of a warrior Mulan can be, there will still be a man above her. This idea is enforced by the high possibility of Mulan marrying Shang in the future which is implied at the very end of the cartoon.



Moreover, the notion of the powerful female heroine is contradicted. Indeed, Mulan is a female warrior but, as it is repeated to her several times in the live action, she has a gift, a chi which allows her to be the best at martial arts. This chi is represented like a sort of magic that you must be gifted with, as the witch also has one. It becomes a gift, and it is not a talent anymore. The question of merit, to deserve something thanks to hard work, which is a very American vision, is then asked. Indeed, 1998 Mulan learns to fight and to use her brain through hard work

whereas it is implied that 2020 *Mulan* just needs to use her magic to succeed, she is only strong thanks to it and she never loses it within the movie. This way, some might think that she deserves less the recognition for her hard work than her male companions. She can be seen as a heroine who receives passively her role.

Performance: acting like/ as a gender.

Otherwise, the notion of performance is also tarnishing the progressivity of the story in the way it is staged.

In fact, the way gender is approached in *Mulan* is interesting because *Mulan* is a young girl who switches from one gender to the other and sometimes influences some of her peers to do the same, but the way this cross-dressing is presented can be a bit clumsy. Indeed, *Mulan* is performing, she is acting like or as a gender. There is an idea of disguise because *Mulan* never openly says that she feels like a man. She wears boy clothes but she knows that she is a girl, that is one of the reasons that make her feel so different from her mates. That is why several scenes, especially in the cartoon, are directed so that gender is caricatured. To go further, *Mulan* might be the main performer of the story, but more generally, girls caricature boys, boys caricature girls, and even boys caricature boys and girls caricature girls. Indeed, when *Mulan* wants to blend in the army, she observes the men with attention. They are shown shouting, loud, rude, improper and she tries to be similar by spitting awkwardly. On the other hand, when *Mulan* is overly disguised as a woman, to meet the matchmaker, she tries to imitate the other girls who are very classy, elegant, quiet.

At the beginning, femininity and feminine look is accentuated, *Mulan* is disguised into a more “feminine version” of herself: she wears a lot of makeup, accessories and jewels, fancy and inconvenient clothes, ... Her father compares her to a flower, which has always been a symbol of femininity. At this moment, *Mulan* does not feel sincere and feels like she is playing a role. She questions her real identity by looking at her reflection in the water. The lyrics of the song which she sings in the cartoon are quite explicit of her questioning, as we can hear:

“Who is that girl I see,

Staring straightly back at me?

Why is my reflection someone I don't know?

Somehow I cannot hide who I am though I've tried.

When will my reflection show who I am inside?"

The notion of reflection is very important in the cartoon as it appears several times when Mulan is uncertain about something or when she is about to take a huge decision.



Moreover, these questions and reflections are rarer when she is disguised as a man. We might think that she feels less awkward playing a man than playing a woman. Additionally, she feels more at ease with men as she does not have any female friend out of her family.

Otherwise, Mulan is not the only one to perform and use cross-dressing in the cartoon. Indeed, the matchmaker, looking like a bearded man has already been mentioned but there are also men dressed up as women. At the end of the movie, Mulan's male friends disguise themselves into women to be able to enter the palace (because women are not considered as dangerous or as a threat). The scene is interesting because the soundtrack in the background is the same as the song *I'll Make a Man Out of You* played earlier in the movie when boy soldiers were trained to become men warriors. Mulan also dresses with woman clothes but she is not as extravagant as

her friend (because she doesn't need to, she already looks like a woman (face) but also because she now knows that she is not comfortable with so many accessories, ...).



In addition, both movies use several symbols to represent genders. For example, the blue hairpin is present in the two works, it is given to Mulan when she prepares for the matchmaker and she gives it back when she leaves her family, symbolizing her abandon of the life that was pre-written for her. Also, another symbol of femininity can be read in the fans. In fact, fans keep appearing during the movies, especially in the cartoon. At the beginning it is a simple feminine accessory but its utility switches when the characters use it as real weapon to fight the bad guys. Actually, Mulan would have not been able to trap Shan Yu without her fan. On the same note, there is a strange repetition of fruit, particularly round fruit, assimilated to girlhood. Indeed, Mulan is given an apple when she is dressed as a woman by her female family member. The apple may be a biblical reference to Eve but it also resembles to a cherry, which is a popular



metaphor to speak about virginity. Moreover, fruit is once again represented by the end of the movie when Mulan's male friends use it to disguise as women and replace female attributes.

The banana is probably ironic as it is very often used in pop culture to symbolize the male organ.

By contrast, males are represented through another symbol: The sword. Let us begin by mentioning the phallic shape of this weapon, which is clearly linked to masculinity in both movies. Indeed, Mulan really becomes a male soldier when she steals her father's sword. The object symbolizes the switch from a gender to the other. Moreover, the sword is even more symbolic of masculinity than the armor, which also is one, because there are several similar scenes staged to emphasize the power of the message behind the blade. In the end of the tale, the sword is once again used to symbolize victory: the emperor gives it to Mulan so that she can prove that she saved China, which also implies that an object is more trustworthy than a woman's words.



In the end, Mulan returns home, back to her father.

Cynthia Watkins Richardson spoke about the making of feminist heroines by saying that “the making of feminist heroines is tricky business. To be heroic, the woman must prove exceptional for her time, in many ways more advanced than her female contemporaries. Yet to be a feminist heroine, she must continue to view her own destiny as intimately, even inextricably, linked to the fates of those same contemporaries. In other words, even as she charts out a path that implicitly critiques the choices of her female peers, she cannot look down on them or even openly distinguish her own fate from theirs.”¹² Mulan’s character can correspond to this definition of the feminist heroine because she is indeed different from the other women represented in both movies. She is more independent and less submissive. Her ambitions are different from what is expected for a young girl during the period in which she lives. Mulan is indeed ‘exceptional for her time’ because she expresses her need to possess more freedom. We could even add that she is even more exceptional in the live action because she owns a ‘chi’ that gives her some magical powers, allowing her to excel in martial arts.

Yet, Mulan is still a young girl in a patriarchal society in the end, and she cannot completely escape her fate. That is why the notion of marriage is still evoked by the end of the films and even though she saved the whole country and was actually recognized as a marvelous warrior by the emperor, she chose to return to her father as a good daughter should do.

Amy M. Davis summarizes this idea in her own book quite efficiently as she writes: “In the end, however, Mulan willingly gives up all the power she has gained, rejecting the offer of a seat on the Emperor’s council, and returns home, where her first act is to bow to her father and present him the sword and crest, saying that they are “gifts to honor the Fa family”. It is also implied, shortly thereafter, that Mulan and Shang will be married, which means that Mulan will, in the end, follow the traditionally prescribed right of passage for a woman of her society, moving from her father’s house to her husband’s. The assumption is that, now that she is able to be herself, at least within the private sphere, she will be happier. Yet [...] nothing has changed about Mulan -or her parents’ views of her – during her absence or as a result of her achievements, mainly thanks to the fact that they always allowed her to be herself. The only change is her having (probably) found a man to be her husband who would be equally tolerant

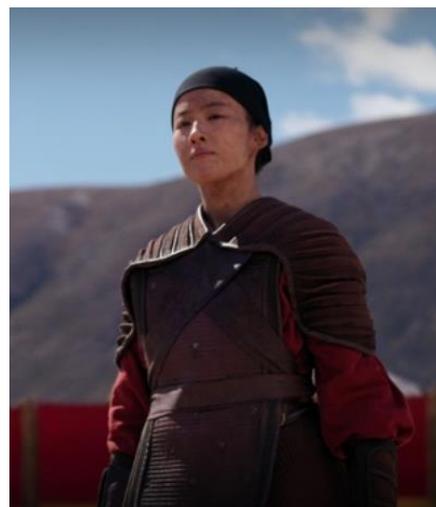
¹² Richardson Cynthia Watkins. Review of Taylor Barbara: *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, published on H-Women, March, 2004.

of her ways. In other words, the successful blending of her masculine and feminine sides, while a personal achievement for Mulan, has not necessarily changed anything for her in the world in which she lives.”¹³

3. **Representation of the body.**

To finish this analysis, we must study the representation of the body in Disney’s *Mulan*. On account of the fact that one of the movies is a cartoon and the other is a live action, the way this representation of the body is brought must be compared as the angles, staging, framing, lights and shadows, and so on are not chosen by chance. Additionally, while the live action is more modern and mature than the 1998 version, it is still a product of the Disney company, which usually targets a young audience. That is why the films still share some similarities and are both a bit reluctant to show bodies on screen.

First and foremost, Mulan’s age is never revealed in both movies but considering her meeting with the matchmaker and her appearance we should assume that she is around 14 and 16 years old. Yet, her body looks quite androgynous, which makes it easier and more credible to cross-dress. Indeed, in the 2020 movie, it is difficult to tell that Mulan is a girl when she is in her soldier outfit, even when compared to a “real” man: they are approximatively the same height, same built, same color palette. Another reason is that she doesn’t have any visible female attribute like breast or defined hips. It would have been difficult to hide her true gender if she had had much “generous” feminine attributes or morphology.



¹³ Davis (2007), *op. cit.* 16

On the contrary, in the cartoon, Mulan is smaller and without her armor she is way less built than other soldiers. Mulan is actually different and she stands out from the group. The goal is clearly to make the situation funny, even though her credibility is not strong. Moreover, even when she actually is taller than some men, her whole body is thinner and more delicate. She has thin hands, small shoulders, and so on.



Furthermore, the symbolic of the hair is very important in *Mulan*. The length of her hair is a hint given to the viewer to read the scenes. Indeed, there is a transition between Mulan's hairstyle before she dresses as a man and after. In the cartoon, this transition is a very memorable scene where Mulan cuts her long dark hair with her father's sword. It marks a switch in the way Mulan is depicted and also her rejection of femininity. As mentioned, the length of the hair, but also the hair style, has a meaning. For example, there is a comparison when Mulan

is supposed to look like a real woman, good enough to be a bride, her long hair is tied up but when she leaves her “woman’s costume”, she comes off her hair. In result, she looks younger, more innocent and freer. Also, she is described as having a childish appearance, which is considered as not ladylike. It also shows that Mulan is not an adult yet.



Adult women must have their hair tied up.

Moreover, still in the cartoon, some similarities can be interpreted between Mulan’s appearance and the one of the little girl’s doll: for instance, the hair color is the same, same for the dress. Maybe it is a way to represent the fact that Mulan is still a young girl or even a child despite being forced either to marry or to enter the army.



In the live-action movie, the transition with the hair is present too, different but still noticeable. Mulan’s hair is unattached when she is a little girl and even when she is considered as a young girl. But when she has to encounter the matchmaker, she has perfectly tied and decorated hair but it ends up down once she is not accepted and considered as a respectable bride. And it makes her look quite similar to a child who would have been told off because she did a bad thing or she acted unreasonably.



Young Mulan



Teenage Mulan, before she has to meet the matchmaker

Moreover, she also has to tie her hair up when she is disguised as a man. The haircut is way simpler, but it is supposed to help her hide her true nature. Because her face might look more feminine with her hair down. By the way, it is important to say that Live-action's Mulan never cut her hair, she just ties it back, which might ease the empowering scene where she leaves her home to become a male soldier. She recovers her hair down too once her gender is discovered.

Furthermore, there is a parallelism between the first scene of adult-Mulan riding her horse, with a feeling of freedom conveyed through the wind and the speed. In a way, Mulan has found her true/ original self again. She is not wearing a “woman costume” not a “man costume”, she is just Mulan, free and independent, no matter what her gender is.



To continue, it is interesting to spots the ways bodies are visually represented in the movies before deepening the composition of the scenes.

The female breast is Mulan's main obstacle in her hiding of her actual gender. Indeed, 2020 Mulan has to hide her breast to not be discovered. There are quite many scenes where she is shown hiding and covering her breast with a belt and fabric strips. On the contrary, cartoon Mulan completely ignores this problem. Moreover, it is relevant to describe the body hairs in the two works. In fact, it is inexistent in both movies. But in the cartoon, this is probably because it was easier to represent the characters without body hair. Indeed, the majority of the characters, men included, do not have body hairs except for facial hair (beard, moustache).



Additionally, we can notice that most of the men in the live action do not have body hair (for example on their torso or legs) which is quite rare for men. It is mostly noticeable in the bath scenes. So, we may assume that this was a choice of the director. In order to help Mulan to blend in more easily.



In addition, Mulan modifies her voice. She takes a deeper voice to sound manlier. But even when she doesn't do it, she is not necessarily unmasked because as a teenage boy, the voice could just not have molted and changed yet which is a direct consequence of puberty. Also, to bounce back on puberty, there is absolutely no mention of Mulan's periods in either of the movies. The question is simply avoided for directing and scenario facilities but probably also because the matter is still taboo for a lot of people and cultures. Considering that Mulan is supposed to be in between 14 and 16 years old, but also presented to be married (so, good to produce children) she must have already experienced puberty and so she must have had her period in real life. This shows the limits of feminism and female representation, even in the more recent movie, some subjects were still not ready to be depicted in a Disney production. As a matter of fact, Disney's first ever mention of periods was only released a few months ago in the cartoon *Turning Red* (2022).

Let us go on with the explanations of facial features in *Mulan*. Indeed, It is no secret that Mulan is a woman disguised like a man in the films. But it is interesting to note how her face is transformed when she is supposed to look feminine or masculine. For instance, Cartoon's Mulan is visibly different, especially the details in her face, when she is Mulan (the 'Chinese Orchid', a very feminine name) or when she is Ping (her borrowed name as soldier).

When Mulan is a woman, just before she takes her decision to disguise as a man, she is represented with apparent and long lashes, pink lips and skin, her cheeks seem to have some blush:



However, immediately after she put her father's armor on, and became Ping, her skin looks dull, she has no lashes, there is no color on her lips or cheeks:



But as soon as she is discovered and when the men gaze on her has changed too. She immediately recovers her previous features (long lashes, pinkish lips and skin/ cheeks):



In the L-A, less efforts are made to physically change Mulan's features as the actress is still recognizable by the viewer and yet, there still is a parallelism: When Mulan's identity is not hidden anymore, the viewer can notice that some makeup magically appears on her face to make the reveal more obvious. She switches from a bare face, not wearing any makeup or female accessories to a cleaner face more defined: eyes, brows, reddish lips, ...:



Concerning the composition of images featuring bodies, we can start by mentioning the fact that the camera seems to censor itself. Indeed, the angles are always conveniently avoiding the actual genitals of the characters. The goal is to keep the movies children friendly. In fact, the cartoon takes more liberties in the representation because it uses the comic tone whereas the live action sounds more timid, shy and conscious of the body. Yet, this censorship is not completely equal as the men's upper bodies are quite often intentionally shown on screen in both films while Mulan's upper body is always offscreen or hidden by a prop when she is naked. Here is another proof of the hypocrisy of the progressive and feminist tone of the tale.

Moreover, in the two versions, the lights are always quite weak when nudity is implied in the scene. This overuse of shadows and darkness is a way to emphasize the intimacy and the bashfulness which appears when showing nudity of some sort. This bashfulness feels stronger in the live action because the goal is not to be funny. Indeed, Mulan is honestly embarrassed by her nudity but also the men's. She is fully conscious of the human body. The bath scene in the live action is representative of this idea because Hong Hui faces the camera, but she never turns to face him, she spends the whole scene facing the camera too and hiding her breast as a defense.

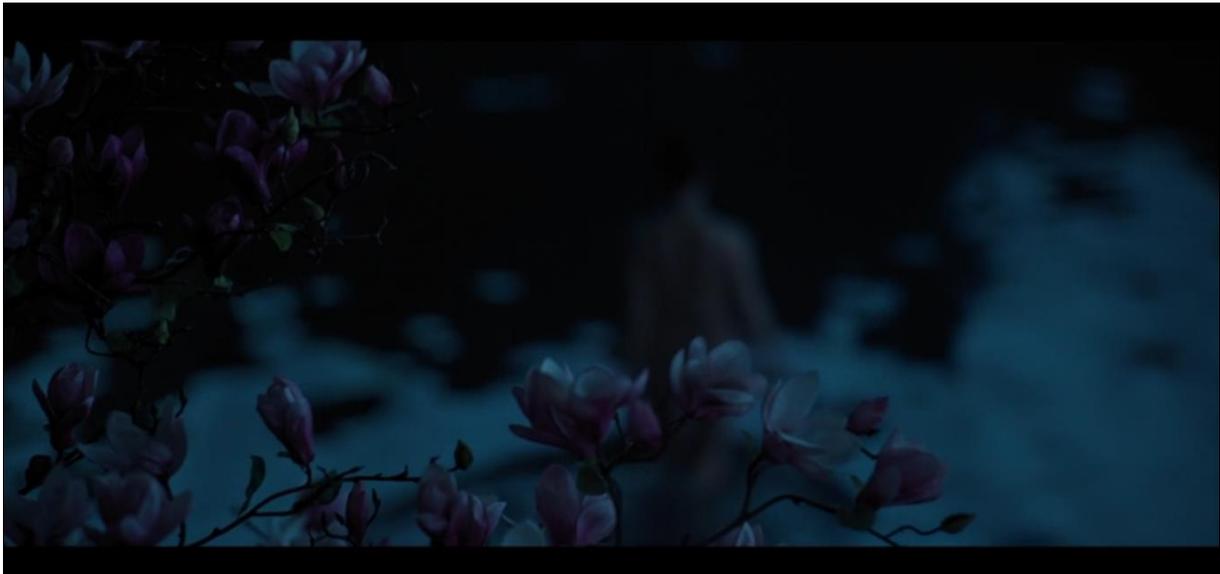
It shows that Mulan is conscious of her female body and her breast. Besides, the frame is focused on Mulan's face, the rest is not shown while Hong Hui's upper body is clearly visible and he is even highlighted as he is in the center of the frame.



Her body is never inside the frame, it is the viewer's job to imagine what is offscreen.



Once again, Mulan's naked body is hidden by a prop in the foreground. Indeed, this is the only time the young girl's body is that much visible inside the frame. In this scene, she is not wearing any disguise, she is as authentic as one can be. And yet, the camera focuses on the flower, and it is no coincidence if this is the symbolic orchid again, which represents Mulan's femininity at its peak. This focus consequently blurs the background and conveniently censors the female's nudity.



To finish, the makeover scene is very representative of Mulan's transition between a woman and a male soldier.

Firstly, the term must be defined. Elizabeth A. Ford wrote that "A continuing fascination with the transition from woman to goddess holds us in thrall. Cinderella-like tales, dating from an 850 AD Chinese version, show that the spell is neither recent nor located in any single culture. Apparently, the pull has never lessened; modern American women are inundated by and obsessed with images of becoming. Our language even provides a word for the act of transforming one's surface appearance: *makeover*".¹⁴

There is indeed a makeover scene at the beginning of the two works. In fact, Mulan's female family members are turning her into a perfect lady to marry so that the matchmaker supports her and find a suitable husband for her. The scene is staged as a typical makeover scene, with

¹⁴ Ford, Elizabeth A., and Mitchell, Deborah C.. *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941-2002*. (p.1, 2) Royaume-Uni, McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2004.

a focus of the camera on the beauty products, the dresses, ... Mulan is dressed up just like a child, somebody even put her shoes on for her, same with her makeup and hair.

In comparison to the definition, Mulan's case is a bit special because she absolutely does not enjoy this makeover, it almost seems painful for her. It is not her choice, she just endures it because she wants to bring honor to her family but also to fit in and be like other girls her age. On the contrary, there is a sort of reversed makeover when Mulan transforms herself into a boy. Her goal is also to be unrecognizable, this is why she cuts her hair and changes her clothes. However, this makeover is actually her own choice, nobody forced her and this is why it appears so fluid and easy. Moreover, the cartoon makeover of Mulan becoming a soldier is very famous and appreciated in its staging. Indeed, the message is very strong and emphasized by the memorable music piece. On the other hand, the live action's makeover (into a soldier) is very short compared to its predecessor, also, the music is not that important in the scene. Yet, Mulan's determination is visible with her gaze and her posture. To go further, it would be very interesting to study if Mulan's discomfort during the first makeover is due to her rejection of femininity while the makeover into a male soldier is more appreciable for her because she feels closer to her masculinity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, we must mention how genders and the notion of girlhood are not depicted in the same way in both movies. Indeed, though the cartoon is not scared to denounce the misogyny of the society in which Mulan lives by underlining the differences of treatment between men and women and sometimes proving that it is nonsense to see a person only for their gender, the everlasting comedy and humor make it difficult to be considered completely seriously. On the other hand, the live action adopted a more mature vision of these inequalities of gender. The studios were most likely influenced by the evolution of women representation in cinema. Moreover, it was quite difficult to understand where Mulan situates herself within the notion of gender and what is her own representation of gender. Both Mulan feel like impostors when they embody a perfect bride, yet this does not seem to be a trigger for questioning her gender. Mulan only becomes a man for practical purposes and understands later the advantages and disadvantages of genders. Furthermore, live action Mulan is more aware of her female body and maybe her sexuality, even though this matter is not central in the movie. Additionally, many elements prove that Mulan is indeed a female heroine who can also be seen

as a female warrior, yet, her competences are always questioned as cartoon *Mulan* is intelligent but in the end she cannot physically win a fight while live action *Mulan* could and is also smart but her whole fighting capacity seems to be justified by a chi for which she never had to fight for, it just magically appeared within her since birth. This example is one of the hints that show that *Mulan* tries to be a progressive story, the studios are willing to appear feminist, but the shadow of patriarchy is still there. In the end, *Mulan*'s character is still a male gaze's creation even though the movie maker is a woman. She fits the expectations of a strong female character through male gaze: like others, her whole personality is summarized in the fact that she is strong and willing to help people, there is no depth to her character, her deep feelings and own emotions, especially for 2020 *Mulan* who stays impassible for most of the movie, which is quite ironic because in the scene where she is about to meet the matchmaker and she wears a lot of makeup, she complains about her emotions being invisible, yet, even as a man, she hardly changes her facial expressions. As a results, the viewer does not feel a lot of empathy for *Mulan*, she is less likable than some other secondary characters who appear more human because they show emotions, they have flaws, and so on. Besides, the comparison between these two films from twenty years apart is interesting to evaluate the evolution of societies and morals. But in this regard, it would be useful to add other versions of *Mulan*'s legend to the comparison. Indeed, there are other recent movies and work that focus on *Mulan*'s story with their own interpretation such as the Chinese film *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* directed by Jingle Ma (2009). Additionally, it would be very interesting to compare another version of *Mulan* from Disney in a few decades from now if it was ever remade, as the society would once again be different and maybe impacted by other matters unknown or unrecognized as of today.

Partie didactique du mémoire.

Présentation de la séquence.

Le thème de ma séquence est FEMALE HEROINES, qui s'appuie sur mon mémoire qui étudie la représentation de la jeune fille au cinéma, avec l'exemple du personnage de Mulan repris par les studios Disney à travers deux films qui illustrent son histoire. Il s'agit de pousser les élèves à utiliser les documents qui leur sont fournis ainsi que leurs connaissances personnelles pour comparer des héroïnes créées par les studios Disney à plusieurs décennies d'écart et de voir en quoi les représentations ont changé et quelles en sont les raisons. Contrairement à la partie recherche qui se concentre sur le personnage de Mulan, il me semble préférable de faciliter un peu le travail de comparaison en étudiant deux personnages féminins de Disney que tout oppose, en l'occurrence, Mulan, première héroïne asiatique de la franchise, qui est apparue chez Disney en 1998 et Blanche Neige qui vient du dessin animé du même nom, sorti en 1938, et qui a la particularité d'être la toute première héroïne de Disney. Cette comparaison permettra de guider les élèves dans leur étude des Female Heroines.

Je prévois cette séquence pour une classe de Première générale, du cycle terminale (visant le niveau B2 du CECRL) et elle s'inscrit dans l'axe DIVERSITE ET INCLUSION car elle vient questionner la façon dont les femmes sont représentées dans la culture populaire, que ce soit les films, les livres, les séries, les jeux vidéo, ...

La tâche finale est un travail individuel qui devra être fait en classe après avoir été préalablement expliqué pour que les élèves aient le temps de la préparer et de réfléchir au contenu. C'est une expression écrite (EE) dont l'intitulé est le suivant :

“For the International Women’s Day, you’re participating in a writing contest and the theme is the representation of women in pop culture. Use a female heroine from a story that already exists but who is the opposite of a strong woman and rewrite her story to make it more modern and progressive. BE CREATIVE.”

A l'occasion de la journée des droits des femmes, tu participes à un concours d'écriture sur le thème de la représentation des femmes dans la culture populaire. Utilise un personnage féminin qui existe déjà mais qui est à l'opposé de l'image de la femme forte et remet le au goût du jour. SOIS CRÉATIF.

(ex. Snow White who is hired by the dwarf to defend them from a dragon, ... or Sleeping Beauty who decides to escape her fate to fall asleep and who trains to be able to defeat Maleficent, ...).

Les productions pourront être exposées au CDI ou dans le hall de l'établissement à l'occasion de la Journée des Droits des Femmes.

Objectifs de la séance :

<p>Culturels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - L'évolution du personnage féminin dans les films d'animations, au cours du temps. - La représentation des <i>Female Heroines</i> dans la culture populaire. - La notion de <i>perfect housewife</i> (ref à <i>The Angel in the House</i> de Patmore).
<p>Linguistiques</p>	<p><u>Grammaticaux :</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Faire travailler la comparaison : SUPERIORITE/ EGALITE / INFERIORITE. <p>Ex : <i>Mulan is stronger/ more courageous than Snow White.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Éventuellement, expliquer le SUPERLATIF. <p>Ex: <i>Snow White is the oldest Disney princess.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rebrassage de la méthodologie de la description (There is /are). <p><i>There are male soldiers/ There is a housewife cleaning the kitchen.</i></p> <p><u>Lexicaux :</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Champ lexical lié aux Female Heroines : <i>main character, female warriors, femininity, feminism, ...</i> - Champ lexical lié à la notion de Angel in the House : <i>wife, husband, housewife, to devote, to please, ...</i> - Champ lexical de la description d'image: <i>in the background/ in the foreground, in the middle/ at the top/ at the bottom/ on the</i>

	<p><i>left/ on the right/ on the top-left hand corner, on the bottom right-hand corner/...</i></p> <p>- Adjectifs de description : <i>strong, powerful, brave, courageous, skilled, determined, fearless, provocative, intriguing, ...</i></p> <p><u>Phonologiques</u> : accent, intonation, mise en voix, ...</p> <p>+ la prononciation des mots transparents (<i>heroine, Disney, cartoon, representation, popular culture, ...</i>)</p>
Citoyens	Prendre conscience des différences de traitement entre un personnage féminin et masculin.
Pragmatiques	Savoir réécrire un conte/ une histoire en gardant certains aspects et en modifiant/ ajoutant d'autres éléments.

La tâche finale, sera évaluée selon les critères de notation suivants qui prennent en compte le CECRL et qui sont inspirés par l'une des grilles d'évaluation proposées par l'Académie de Poitiers :

- **La qualité du contenu** : l'élève peut produire un écrit clair, détaillé et globalement efficace.
- **La cohérence de la construction du discours** : l'élève peut produire un récit ou une argumentation.
- **La correction de la langue écrite** : Bonne maîtrise des structures simples et courantes, les erreurs sur les structures complexes ne donnent pas lieu à des malentendus.
- **La richesse de la langue** : l'élève peut produire un texte dont l'étendue du lexique et des structures sont suffisantes pour permettre précision et variété des formulations.

Quelques points seront également dédiés à la **pertinence** du personnage féminin traité ainsi qu'à l'**originalité et la créativité** de la production.

Mise en œuvre de la séance.

La séance se déroulera comme prévu dans le tableau ci-dessous :

SÉANCE	SUPPORTS	ACTIVITÉS LANGAGIÈRES / OBJECTIFS TRAVAILLÉS	DÉROULÉ DE LA SÉANCE
1	Annexe 1 : Brochure (booklet) des années 1950 pour expliquer aux maris comment ‘dresser’ leur épouse.	CE + EOI (description, interprétation, lecture à voix haute (phonologie). + Linguistiques. + Culturel.	Anticipation à la séquence Discussion avec la classe pour voir ce que la brochure inspire aux élèves. Brainstorming sur le thème ‘ <i>housewife</i> ’.
2	Illustrations de <i>Mulan</i> et <i>Blanche Neige</i> à comparer.	EOI Objectifs culturels + Linguistiques (gram ; lexique ; phono).	Anticipation à la séance + Activité de comparaison des deux illustrations. + point linguistique sur les adjectifs de supériorité/ égalité / infériorité.
3	Annexe 4 : réplique d’Eloise Bridgerton dans la série Netflix <i>Les Chroniques de Bridgerton</i> . Annexe 2 : Strong female characters.	EOI Objectifs phonologiques (lecture + description et interprétation à l’oral).	Anticipation à la séance : projection de l’image ‘quote from Eloise Bridgerton’ → <i>A female character can be powerful too.</i> Description et interpretation de l’annexe 3 : <i>A woman can become a heroine, there are strong female characters / Female heroines are AS brave AS males.</i>

4	Annexe 4 : <i>Once Upon a Time</i> , extrait où Blanche Neige confronte La Méchante Reine (Evil Queen)	CO + EE	CO PUIS Atelier écriture / invention : écrire un synopsis assez détaillé (au moins 10 lignes) en s'appuyant sur l'extrait de <i>OUAT</i> .
5	Annexe 5 : article Internet de Brandon Coon.	CE	Activité de CE pour permettre aux élèves d'avoir les outils pour réécrire une histoire pour la tâche finale.
6	Consignes et barème de la tâche finale.	EE	Explication de la tâche finale : consignes et barème.
7		EE	Séance dédiée à la tâche finale.

Déroulé de la séance 2.

La séance précédente aura permis aux élèves de comprendre le thème très général de la séquence.

Grâce à l'exploitation de l'annexe 1 et la mise en place d'un brainstorming sur la notion de 'housewife', les élèves ont déjà une base lexicale pour remettre en contexte ce qu'ils ont appris dans l'activité qui va suivre.

En effet, les connaissances globales qu'ils sont censés avoir acquis pour le moment concerne tout ce qui décrit la femme au foyer (le vocabulaire/ Champ lexical de *Housewife*, ...), la manière dont les femmes étaient vues et utilisées à l'époque (dans ce cas à les années 50).

Ensuite, je pensais commencer la séance avec le rituel qui aurait été mis en place depuis le début de l'année. Par exemple, l'entrée en classe se ferait avec un PASSWORD qui varie en fonction de la leçon en cours.

Là je pourrais demander du vocabulaire vu à la séance précédente, en l'occurrence : VOC HOUSEWIFE.

Puis, après les petits rituels de salutation on passerait à la REACTIVATION. C'est également quelque chose dont les élèves ont l'habitude. Cette réactivation prend souvent la forme de

question : ici : WHAT DID WE LEARN LAST TIME ? Cela permet à toute la classe, y compris les potentiels absents à la séance précédente, de refaire le point et de se remettre en contexte.

Pendant la réactivation, je projette le booklet (annexe 1) au tableau (booklet qu'ils ont aussi en format papier dans leur cahier).

J'attends des réponses comme “*we read a booklet about how perfect women were supposed to be*”, “*the man treats his wife like an object or an animal*”, “*This vision of women is quite old fashioned*”. J'accepte même des mots comme ‘macho’ ou autre.

Ensuite on passe à la nouvelle activité. C'est d'abord un échange à l'oral entre les élèves et la prof. Je leur projette une phrase au tableau et je leur lis et leur pose la même question :

Representation of female heroines in fiction

→ In cartoons and ‘children’ movies

Do you have any example in mind?

J'attends des réponses comme ‘Cinderella’, ‘Snow White’, etc (je suis ouverte aux propositions, car ils auront sûrement des références que je ne connais pas forcément). Cette question sert de mini-anticipation à l'activité.

J'enchaîne en projetant d'abord l'image de Snow White, qui colle parfaitement à ce qu'ils imaginaient.



Les consignes sont : DESCRIBE / WHAT CAN YOU SEE ON THIS PICTURE? / WHAT CAN YOU SAY ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

Ici j'attends de la description simple, comme par exemple : *This is Snow white, there are lots of animals...* Mais également un peu plus poussée : REBRASSAGE DU BE + ING : she is wearing a dress ; she is cleaning the house, ...

Ensuite je ferai apparaitre la seconde image, celle de Mulan, avec les mêmes consignes.

Je veux des proposition comme : *She is a soldier, she is wearing an armor, she's riding a black horse, ...*

La transition se fera avec la comparaison entre les deux dates : *There are 60 years between the two movies. The female representation has changed a lot.*

Je leur explique ensuite que l'enjeu de cette activité est de faire la comparaison entre Snow White (première Princesse Disney) et Mulan (Première héroïne Disney qu'on a qualifié de 'féministe' même si ce propos est contesté). Le délai entre la sortie de chaque film est aussi très important.

Par la suite, je fais distribuer le tableau ci-dessous, VIDE (seules les cases en jaune sont déjà données) en expliquant les consignes : EN ANGLAIS : Par binôme ils auront quelques minutes pour essayer de compléter un maximum le tableau avec leurs idées.

	Snow White	Mulan
COMMON POINTS	They are both girls / They come from Disney cartoons/ They are young girls, women/ They are smiling/ they look happy → Mulan is as happy as Snow White.	
DIFFERENCES	She is a princess. She is alone She is inside the house, in the kitchen. She is wearing a dress. She's a housewife. The movie was made in 1938.	She is not a princess (commoner). She is surrounded by men. She is outside. She is wearing male clothes. She's a soldier. The movie was made in 1998 (60 years later).

The picture is darker.

SW looks weaker than M.

SW is **less** independant/ **free** than M.

UTILISATION DES COMPARATIFS:

Mulan is stronger than SW.

M is **more** courageous than SW.

The picture is lighter.

Je leur impose d'utiliser quelques phrases comparatives en projetant les règles du COMPARATIF au tableau (ils sont sensés l'avoir déjà vu mais on fait un rappel). J'ai préparé également une feuille qui réexplique la leçon, prête à être distribuée si besoin :

PRL/ Leçon sur les COMPARATIFS :

SUPERIORITÉ : Pour dire *plus ... que*.

Adjectifs courts (une syllabe) :

Il faut ajouter **-er** à la fin de l'adjectif + **THAN** (= que)

EX : Short → He is **shorter** **than** his brother.

EXCEPTION : Les adjectifs en DEUX syllabes qui finissent en -Y deviennent

-IER à la fin.

EX : funny = **funnier** ;

pretty = **prettier**

Adjectifs longs (deux syllabes ou plus) : **MORE** + adjectif normal + **THAN**

EX : intelligent → He is **MORE** intelligent **THAN** his brother.

EXCEPTION : les adjectifs irréguliers : (ex: good, bad)

GOOD → **BETTER**

BAD → **WORSE**

ÉGALITÉ : Pour dire *autant que*.

AS + adjectif + AS = aussi ... que

→ He is **as funny as** his brother.

AS much AS = autant que (*pas quantifiable - on ne peut pas compter*)

→ I love my cat **as much as** my dog.

AS many ... AS = autant que (*quantifiable - on peut les compter*)

→ Tom has **as many toys as** John.

INFERIORITÉ : Pour dire *moins ... que*.

Toujours la même règle. Pas besoin de compter le nombre de syllabes.

On dit LESS THAN.

Ex : beautiful → LESS beautiful THAN (moins beau que)

Big → LESS big THAN (moins gros que)

Cette fiche est utile pour faire un rappel et les élèves peuvent la garder sous les yeux. Ensuite je verrai en fonction de la réaction des élèves si c'est un point que je dois vraiment retravailler avec eux ou non.

Pour en revenir à l'activité, je laisse environ 6 ou 7 minutes à la classe pour travailler sur ce tableau en passant dans les rangs pour aider/ surveiller/ conseiller, ...

Ensuite on passe à une mise en commun des idées, j'aimerais arriver peu près à ce type de propositions (contenu du tableau en rouge) d'ici la fin.

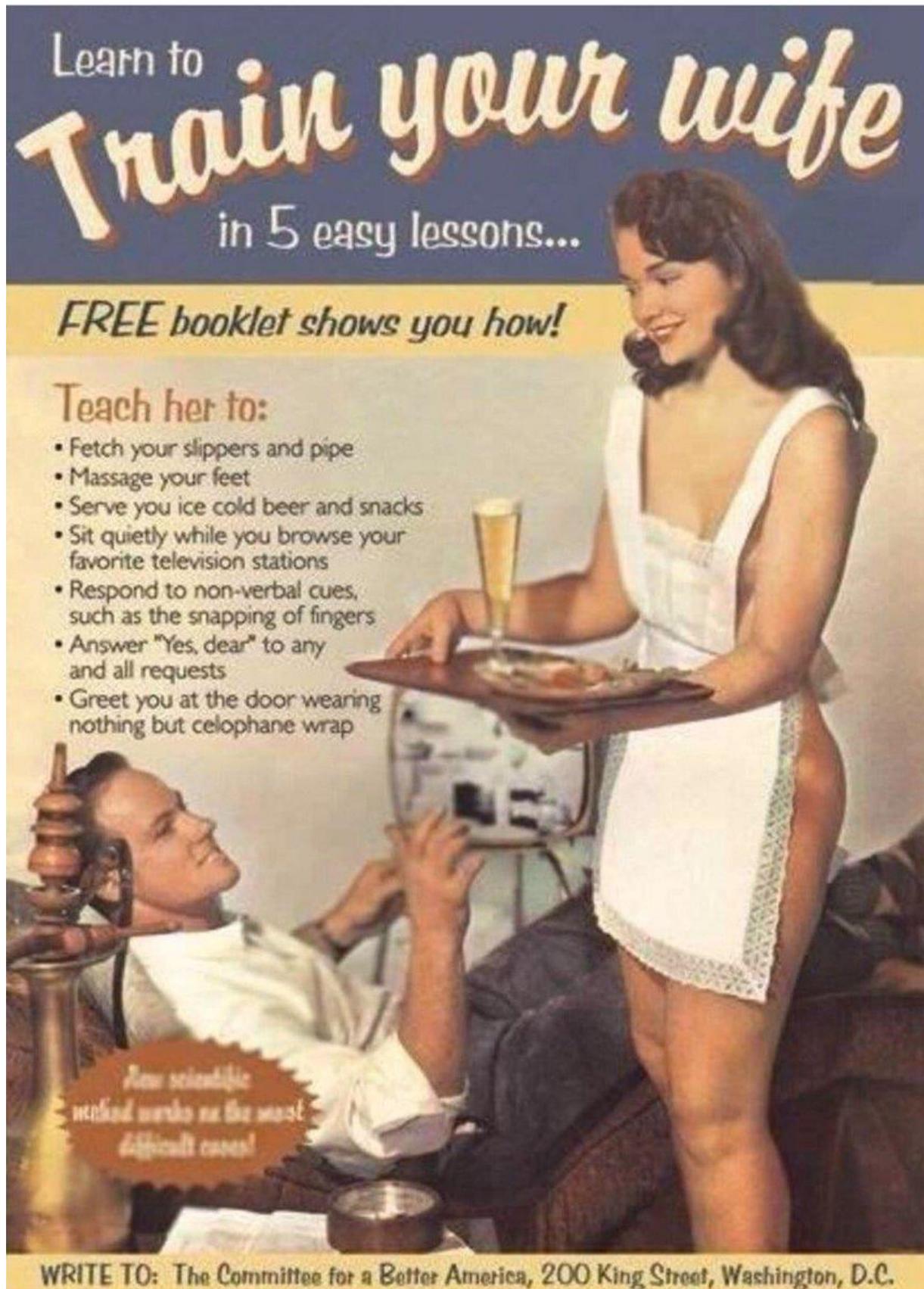
Pour finir, s'il reste du temps à la fin de la séance, on commence à rédiger un recap/ une trace écrite où cette fois-ci je demanderai plus d'interprétation en guidant les élèves avec des

questions telle que : Why is the Snow White picture darker than the other? What could this mean? What could be the impact of the dates on these differences? Etc.

Enfin, la séance touchant à sa fin, j'explique le travail à faire pour la prochaine séance à la classe :

HOMEWORK : Pour la prochaine fois : Apprendre et réviser ce qui a été fait lors de cette séance + Préparer des phrases (au moins 4) pour expliquer pourquoi Mulan et SW sont si différentes alors que ce sont deux héroïnes Disney.

Annexe 1 : Brochure (booklet) des années 1950 pour expliquer aux maris comment 'dresser' leur épouse.



Learn to
Train your wife
in 5 easy lessons...

FREE booklet shows you how!

Teach her to:

- Fetch your slippers and pipe
- Massage your feet
- Serve you ice cold beer and snacks
- Sit quietly while you browse your favorite television stations
- Respond to non-verbal cues, such as the snapping of fingers
- Answer "Yes, dear" to any and all requests
- Greet you at the door wearing nothing but cellophane wrap

Now scientific methods work on the most difficult cases!

WRITE TO: The Committee for a Better America, 200 King Street, Washington, D.C.

Annexe 2 : Images de ‘strong female characters’ or ‘female warriors’. Katniss de *Hunger Games*, Triss de *Divergente*, Carole Denvers de *Captain Marvel*, Daenerys de *Game of Throne*.



Annexe 3 : Une réplique prononcée par Eloise Bridgerton dans la série Netflix *Les Chroniques de Bridgerton*.



Annexe 4 : Vidéo extraite de l'épisode 2, saison 3 de la série *Once Upon A Time* - 'Snow White Faces The Evil Queen': "This is MY kingdom, and I will fight for it".



Annexe 5 : Article de Brandon Coon (2018), conseil pour réécrire un conte en le modernisant.

<https://www.bulbapp.com/u/refreshing-fairy-tales>



As we have seen from *The Little Mermaid*, the origins for some of our favorite stories can be a bit dark. What is acceptable for children changes with every generation, and the stories are often updated to be more marketable for parents and children. This is reflected in the current movement in film and television to both modernize fairy tales and return fairy tales to their dark roots.

YOUR TASK: Take a fairy tale you grew up adoring--one near and dear to your heart-- and go back to its origins. Then, considering the original text, retell the story in a modern setting. You can make it lighter and "Disney-fied" or go as dark as is appropriate to the task, just as long as you put the story in a modern setting with the same characters and moral as the original.

Step One: Pick a story and read the original

Your original story must be a fairy tale or Greek myth. Stay away from other religious myths, historical legends, and full narratives ("Adam and Eve," "John Smith's Account of Pocahontas," *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, etc). Here are some popular fairy tales that would work: *Cinderella*, *Little Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Little Red Cap (Riding Hood)*, *Little Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)*, *The Snow Queen*, *The Little Match-Seller*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Juniper Tree*, *Pinocchio*, *Iron Heinrich (Frog Prince)*, *King Thrushbeard*, *Bearskin*, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, *Puss in Boots*

Step Two: Plan your changes

Next, you will need to retell the story in a modern setting. Decide where you will set the story (school, city, etc), the roles characters will take (instead of a king, maybe a character is a businessman or top athlete), and the shape the story will take. Feel free to substitute elements that don't work for better adaptations so long as they are true to the original story. Oh, and make sure your adaptation is original: no *Once Upon a Time* knockoffs.

Step Three: Draft your fairy tale

Write your adaptation down. Remember, fairy tales are short! **Try to keep to between 750-1800 words.** Also, don't hesitate to use fairy tale tropes, like starting with "Once upon a time..." or ending with "...and they lived happily ever after." Focus on simple characterization and incorporating archetypes.

Step Four: Edit-Revise-Repeat and Publish to Bulb

Make sure you follow all the rules of grammar and mechanics.

Make sure you incorporate **bolded high-level vocabulary words throughout.** These words should be consistently placed throughout (like one, say, every three paragraphs) and should be used correctly.

When you publish to Bulb, make a creative title for your page and, at the bottom, add the word count and the MLA citation for the original tale (with a hyperlink if you found the story digitally).

Add a photo to make it nice, making sure to source that photo.

Publish it with the summary "Refreshing Fairy Tales" and the date.

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