

Transforming Gender Representations: Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Maleficent I, II* (2014, 2019)

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Abstract

The Walt Disney Company has produced both animation films and live-action adaptations of classic fairytales which reflect transforming gender representations. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of changing gender representations in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Maleficent II* (2019). In the light of feminism, the 1959 animation film is to be critically re-examined by comparing with the Charles Perrault fairytale and paying attention to the role of Princess Aurora. In contrast, it argues that the 2014 live-action adaptation was influenced by feminist philosophy and investigates the role of *Maleficent* and the depiction of male characters in the film. This research moreover analyzes the 2019 live-action adaptation with a view to scrutinizing the changing gender representation as feminist revision by the Walt Disney Company as a major media company that has shaped the global media culture in the world.

Key words: Aurora, Feminism, gender, *Maleficent*, political correctness, *Sleeping Beauty*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sleeping Beauty (1959) is an American animated musical fantasy film produced by the Walt Disney Company. The original fairytale of the animated film is commonly considered as *Little Briar Rose* (1812) of the Brothers Grimm, but it is a modified version of a fairytale, *Sleeping Beauty* (1697), by Charles Perrault, a French author who wrote other famous fairytales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella*.¹ Based on the European fairytale, Disney's animated film has the same storyline as follows. A malevolent fairy (*Maleficent*) was snubbed by the royal family at the occasion of the birthday ceremony of a princess (Aurora). *Maleficent* casts a curse on Princess Aurora which only a prince can break by his "true love's kiss".²

The animation film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) by Disney has been reviewed by critics with both accolades and criticism. Ren Grevatt called the film a "Disney best" in a film review of *The Billboard* on February 9, 1959.³ Also, it was reviewed as "magnificent achievement, offering suspense, action, and happy humor, in a truly giant-size package" in *Miami Herald* on February 12, 1959.⁴ At the same time however, some critics provided negative comments, noting that although the 1959 film is "unquestionably superior from the viewpoint of the art of animation, it lacks comedy characters that can be compared favorably with the unforgettable Seven Dwarfs".⁵ However, it is an undeniable fact that the 1959 film is regarded as a significant Disney princess movie. Based on the popularity of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), a live-action

adaptation of the 1959 animation film, *Maleficent* (2014), was created and released by the Walt Disney Company.⁶ The protagonist of the 2014 live-action film is Maleficent who was antagonist in the 1959 animation film. In this way, it is fair to describe Maleficent as “reborn” and it was observed that Disney’s fairytale view of gender reached “puberty”.⁷

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis on changing gender representations in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Maleficent II* (2019). In the light of feminism, the 1959 animation film is to be critically re-examined by comparing with the Charles Perrault fairytale and paying attention to the role of Princess Aurora. In contrast, this article argues that the 2014 live-action adaptation was influenced by feminist philosophy and investigates the role of Maleficent as well as the depiction of male characters in the film. This research moreover analyzes the 2019 live-action adaptation with a view to scrutinizing changing gender representations as a feminist revision by Disney as a major media company that has shaped the global media culture in the world.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS: FEMINISM AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN DISNEY STUDIES

As analytical frameworks, this article employs “feminism” and “political correctness” to investigate Disney’s animation and live-action films *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Maleficent II* (2019). According to *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term feminism is defined as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state”.⁸ Since the heroine of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is a princess and the protagonists of *Maleficent I and II* (2014 and 2019) are two heroines, it is meaningful to examine the influence of feminism in the Disney princess films. Moreover, this article scrutinizes the influence of “political correctness” which can be defined as “the act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex, gender, and race”.⁹ These two key frameworks are imperative to analyze changing gender norms in the Disney animated and live-action films.

Literally countless number of researchers examined Disney animation films from interdisciplinary perspectives. There are numerous research outcomes in the field of Disney studies, and moreover, an academic journal, *International Journal of Disney Studies*, was established, and the inaugural issue was published in 2025. As Robyn Muir and Rebecca Rowe noted, many Disney scholars examined “how Disney represents various identities and how those representations may affect people, especially children”.¹⁰ One of the most important book publications in earlier studies is, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (1995), written by a number of researchers.¹¹ It examined the political, cultural, and gender issues, including feminism. Another previous research pointed out that the Walt Disney Company portrayed the Middle Ages, forming so-called “medievalism” in the filmmaking culture.¹²

In the field of Disney Studies, Robyn Muir conducted a “feminist analysis” in analyzing Disney princesses and conceptualized the term “Disney princess phenomenon”.¹³ From the feminist perspective, Muir articulated components of a “film analysis framework”. Specifically, she explored the following seven questions: “1) In what time period were these images created?, 2) What is the image of woman?, 3) How is the image of woman described by others?, 4) How do people discuss the

situation/wellbeing/future of the woman?, 5) How often is the woman featured (especially if the film is about her)?, 6) What roles do women have to play within this film?, and 7) What do these images suggest about women?"¹⁴ Although this article does not explore all these questions, it seeks to investigate the gender representation of Princess Aurora in Disney's animated *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and that of Maleficent in the live-action remakes, *Maleficent* film series (2014 and 2019) in terms of feminism as an analytical framework.

Although Disney has valued so-called "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI), there exists critics who argue that Disney's DEI policy as well as its stance on "political correctness" could be problematic. For instance, Brenda Ayres, a professor at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, pointed out that Disney had attempted to validate "multicultural diversity" but Disney's version of "multiculturalism" could perpetuate "racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes" in the end.¹⁵ The critical review by Ayres is to the point to a certain extent, and academically meaningful in considering Disney's endeavor to promote DEI policy based on the notion of political correctness.¹⁶ More recently, Ayres and other researchers eventually confirmed that Disney's recent films tend to be more "inclusive, tolerant, and affirmative" than previous works on the basis of so-called "neo-Disneyism".¹⁷ Likewise, this article argues that recent Disney films are more inclusive based on its policy toward DEI as well as political correctness. Accordingly, it is important to re-examine Disney's animation films as well as the live-action remakes in the light of political correctness. Furthermore, this article aims to highlight representations of gender and peace in the 2014 and 2019 live-action remakes.

3. FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF DISNEY'S ANIMATION FILM, *SLEEPING BEAUTY* (1959)

Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is based on the Charles Perrault fairytale, *Sleeping Beauty* (1697),¹⁸ which was revised by the Brothers Grimm as *Little Briar Rose* (1812).¹⁹ Therefore, some earlier research focused on the analysis of the Brothers Grimm fairytale from a feminist perspective. Shuang Yi argued that the *Sleeping Beauty* fairytale "is a specific representative of the passive victim in patriarchy".²⁰ Likewise, it was reviewed that the 1959 animation film as "the reinforcement of sexist stereotypes and domestication of women through the elements of the curse, the prince's and princess's relationship, and the three good fairies".²¹ Based on the original fairytales in France and Germany, Disney's animated adaptation, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), still reflects the "media portrayal" of gender stereotypes in the 1950s.²² In particular, it has been reviewed that the "post-World War II cultural milieu in which women returned to the domestic sphere following a period of liberation during the war" was reflected in the film.²³ In short, the 1959 animation film by Disney visualized traditional gender norms in the original fairytales, although there were some slight modifications in the filmmaking process.

In the first place, the title of the fairytale and film represents a typical gender stereotype, placing an overt emphasis on "beauty". To be more specific, Aurora is granted "beauty" rather than intelligence or courage as a gift by good fairies by their magic. The young audience automatically receives particular information based on the traditional gender stereotype that it is important for women to be "beautiful" and the young audience would assume that it is the first priority for women. Princess Aurora's waist looks so tight that she would have an eating disorder to remain the shape if she

were a real person. Moreover, the society of *Sleeping Beauty* is based on patriarchal and male-dominated culture where women are expected to do household chores, such as sewing and cooking at home. Given the arranged marriage of Aurora as a baby princess as well as the relationship between Aurora and Prince Philip, it is evident that the storyline contains a gender stereotype that men make decisions and women follow the decisions made by the men.²⁴ In essence, it has been observed that the gender stereotype of this film is that women are dependent on men and need support or help of men in solving their problems in their lives.²⁵

As a gender stereotype of the protagonist, Princess Aurora is depicted as a typical “damsel in distress” princess who is powerless and helpless without a man who saves her. One of the most problematic scenes in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) from the feminist perspective is when Prince Philip kisses Princess Aurora. Philip physically subjugates Aurora to his power with the kiss without a consent by Aurora. Here, Aurora is depicted as a female object of male desire. Understandably, the romantic gesture in this film represents the traditional heterosexual romance.²⁶ This can be perceived as a romantic moment for audiences, but this scene would give young audience the impression that women are always dependent upon men and cannot protect or save themselves without a help from men. Therefore, Disney’s animated adaptation reinforced gender stereotypes on women who are expected to be more passive and weaker than men.²⁷

4. DISNEY’S *SLEEPING BEAUTY* (1959) AS A FEMINIST FILM?

Despite the gender stereotypes succeeded from the 1697 and 1812 fairytales, Disney’s gender representation of the prince is different from the original version. It is noteworthy that Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) has feminist elements and passed the Bechdel test.²⁸ For example, in the Perrault fairytale, *Sleeping Beauty* (1697), the prince is depicted as young, gallant, and “always brave” representing masculine traits based on traditional gender norms.²⁹ Likewise, gender representations in the Brothers Grimm fairytale puts the female protagonist in passive roles that comply to the traditional gender norms.³⁰ Still, the prince in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is not necessarily as brave or capable as the one in the original Perrault fairytale. Indeed, the prince is captured by Maleficent and is left helpless until good fairies rescue him. The fairies are female characters and they provide him with a sword and shield, therefore, the fairies conduct all the brave, adventurous, and heroic acts, whereas all the prince did was only kiss Aurora.³¹ In short, the good fairies are more contributive to the rescue of Aurora than the prince, representing the significance of female characters in the animated film, i.e. the influence of feminism.

Moreover, Prince Philip shows a different viewpoint in romance from his father King Hurbert. When Philip tries to convince the king to allow him to marry Aurora as he wishes, the prince says “Now father, you’re living in the past. This is the 14th century!”.³² This line by Philip indicates that traditional way of thinking on romance based on patriarchy became outdated even in the royal family. Thus, the gender representation in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is “not as patriarchal and empowering of men as they have long been assumed to be” as analyzed by Grace Duger.³³ As briefly explained previously, the role of the three good and seemingly middle-aged fairies, Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather indicates that women can be powerful enough to empower the prince in the film,³⁴ and the three fairies as well as Maleficent make all the critical decisions in this film.³⁵ Accordingly, it has to be noted

that the gender representation of the original fairytales and that of Disney's animation adaptation differ from each other, and obviously, feminist elements can be seen in the 1959 animated version.

Having said that, the feminist elements represented in the 1959 animation film are still elusive and limited, which might be dubbed a "pseudo feminism" or "faux feminism" that "contributes to the sexist, patriarchal structures of society and does not advocate for equality as it reaffirms gender roles and gendered social structures".³⁶ Prince Philip's royal status, love at first sight, and the kiss on the lips of Princess Aurora without her explicit permission should be regarded as sufficient grounds for violating the body autonomy of the princess in the film.³⁷ Plus, Maleficent is demonized in the 1959 film and turns into a dragon that is to be defeated by Philip in the end. This depiction of Maleficent is considered to "preserve the gender hierarchy" in the patriarchal society.³⁸ Given the male-rescuer archetype, the image of innocent persecuted heroine as an object of desire based on a heterosexual male gaze, it is no exaggeration to argue that Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is a less feminist film, although feminist influence on the animated film can be observed to a certain extent.

5. DISNEY'S LIVE-ACTION FILM *MALEFICENT* (2014) AS A FEMINIST REVISION

The Walt Disney Company produced a live-action adaptation of the 1959 animation film as *Maleficent* (2014). Notably, it is a noteworthy fact that "the filmmakers are cognizant of basic critical gender theory".³⁹ According to an analysis of Vocativ, movies with strong female roles and characters tend to become more lucrative and the 2014 live-action film is not an exception.⁴⁰ However, what the audience expects from this film is feminist messages for gender equality and women empowerment. Through the observation of the 2014 live-action adaptation, therefore, audience will notice the influence of feminism, as the 2014 film focuses on women's empowerment in the male-dominated world.⁴¹ Maleficent as a protagonist in the 2014 live-action film is not portrayed as a passive, dependent, submissive, and weak woman, but as a strong and courageous woman as if she stands up against the male-dominated culture and patriarchal society.⁴²

As observed in earlier studies, the 2014 live-action adaptation deliberately includes the depiction of woman oppression by men where women tend to be controlled by men.⁴³ In particular, "betrayal" is one of the critical keywords as a form of woman oppression that caused psychological damages to Maleficent, while generating negative sentiments, such as anger, sadness, hatred, depression, and irritation.⁴⁴ By depicting the gender oppression, the 2014 live-action film was designed to challenge and crush patriarchy as a belief system in which women are inferior to men, and hence, it can be viewed as a feminist movie produced by the Walt Disney Company.⁴⁵

One of the strongest feminist messages in the 2014 film is that men tend to resort to violence against women. Indeed, Maleficent in the 1959 animated film is depicted as a typical Disney villain, but the 2014 live-action film provides an explanation why and how Maleficent was forced to become a villain. The 2014 live-action film explains that Maleficent was betrayed by Stephan with whom she had fallen in love. However, the man betrayed Maleficent for his political ambition to succeed King Henry and cut off the wings of Maleficent. It has been observed that this scene is a symbol of sexual violence against women by men, reminding audience of a "date-rape narrative".⁴⁶ Moreover, Maleficent in the 2014 live-action adaptation is "not only a rape

victim but, at the same time, a rejected lover”,⁴⁷ and hence, the audience of the 2014 film may well feel sympathy for the protagonist who is a villain and hero at the same time.

Disney's live-action film, *Maleficent* (2014), therefore, can be regarded as a “feminist revision” by an American screenwriter, Linda Woolverton, as a retelling of the original fairytale as well as the 1959 animation adaptation.⁴⁸ This live-action film attempts to subvert traditional gender stereotypes and conventional binaries, because Maleficent in the film possesses dual nature: protagonist and antagonist, innocent and guilty, powerful and vulnerable, revengeful and loving, and good and evil.⁴⁹ Despite the fact that Maleficent cast a spell on a baby princess, Aurora, the villain saves the little princess who is about to fall off the cliff, and eventually tries to nullify the spell. Still, Maleficent's spell was so powerful that she cannot nullify it even by herself. By the time Maleficent attempts to break the curse on Aurora, Maleficent comes to realize that she cares for Aurora so much as if the princess is her goddaughter.

One of the most significant feminist rewritings in the film is that a kiss by the prince results in vain, and Maleficent's kiss awakens Aurora as a true love's kiss. It has to be noted that the 2014 live-action film contains some elements of “ecological feminism”, because male characters in this film cause not only physical and psychological violence against Maleficent, but also the oppression of nature including the destruction of plants, animals, and surrounding environment by waging a war against the female protagonist.⁵⁰ On the contrary to the male characters, Maleficent in this film can be regarded as a ecofeminist protagonist who protects creatures and nature from the violence caused by the male characters.⁵¹ Thus, the 2014 live-action film contains feminist messages on the basis of feminist philosophy which has been socially constructed and represented in the contemporary media culture.

6. GENDER AND PEACE IN DISNEY'S LIVE-ACTION FILM MALEFICENT II (2019)

The gender representation and feminist narratives in the 2014 film are basically continued and subverted to another live-action film, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) (*Maleficent II*).⁵² The 2019 live-action film placed a further emphasis on maternal love rather than heterosexual romance by the influence of feminist philosophy.⁵³ Some critics provided a negative review of this film, concluding that it “completely failed to build on any of the strengths of its predecessor... Even the most hardcore Disney fans probably don't need to add this one to their watch list”.⁵⁴ On the positive side however, the 2019 film was reviewed as “one of the most political films of the year”,⁵⁵ and it surely reflects gender politics and feminist leadership by depicting the issue of war and peace between human beings and non-human beings.

In the 2019 live-action film, female characters are more empowered than the 2014 live-action film, and there are three female political leaderships in this film, namely, Maleficent, Queen Aurora of the Moors, and Queen Ingrith of Ulsted. In the opening of the film, Maleficent expels human intruders by exerting an overwhelming power, and Aurora delivers a speech in front of fairies, symbolizing female leaderships based on empowered feminism. The influence of ecological feminism also can be seen in this film as reviewed: “warnings about the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources also underlie the story”.⁵⁶ Indeed, the depiction of nature and non-human creatures in the 2019 film is evident, and Aurora attempts to harmonize the relationship between the nature and human beings.

Aurora as a queen of the Moors thinks about the way for an amicable relationship between the Moors and Ulsted so much that she nearly ignores a marriage proposal by Philip as a prince of Ulsted. Notably, Aurora accepts the proposal by Philip not only for themselves but also for the people of the Moors and Ulsted. This storyline shows how Queen Aurora becomes politically responsible as a female leader for her own kingdom. In other words, their marriage symbolizes a peaceful alliance between the two kingdoms. Moreover, the marriage of Aurora and Philip is not based on traditional arranged marriage based on political calculation, but on their free love, indicating the autonomy of women in their decision-making on romance and marriage influenced by feminist philosophy rather than patriarchal stereotypes. Since fairies live in peace in the Moors, the marriage can be seen as a “promise of forging everlasting peace between the fae and the humans hanging in the balance”.⁵⁷ This film thus places an emphasis on “peace through love” and “happily ever after” not only for the couple but also for other people in the world.

Hence, it is no doubt that the main female characters in the 2019 film are empowered by the philosophy of feminism.⁵⁸ Having said that, the 2019 live-action film contains a certain degree of violence, and Australian Council on Children and the Media pointed out that this film would scare children aged 5-8, and upset children aged 8-13 due to the violence and scary scenes.⁵⁹ A war between the fairies and humans depicts mass killings and destruction. This film includes a near-genocide scene where fairies are killed by poison and iron-based weapons/arrows that turn them into dust or lifeless plants.⁶⁰ These violent scenes would negatively influence the mentality of young audience. The most powerful violence, however, is conducted by a female character, Queen Ingrith who is depicted as being hungry for power. Ingrith attempts to kill Aurora in the end of the movie, and Maleficent saves Aurora by sacrificing herself. Again, not male characters but female characters obtain power to wage a war and crack down on the violence. Although Maleficent at first opposes the marriage between Aurora and Philip, and Queen Ingrith points to fragility of peace,⁶¹ this film intends to send a message that love and peace are ultimately desirable and achievable.

On the basis of the empowered feminism, *Maleficent II* moreover showed racial inclusiveness and diversity by the multicultural casting. As reviewed in earlier research, racial diversity can be seen in the 2019 film, especially “winged fairies who are Black, Asian, and other racial backgrounds who were noticeably representing different cultures in the fantasy world”.⁶² In terms of the cultural diversity, this film sheds light on the dark fey “who have all been living in exile from the human world, and digs further into Maleficent's origins” and the dark fey seems to have formed their own “civilization”.⁶³ Again this can be comprehended as Disney's DEI policy on the basis of the idea of political correctness. In this way, the 2019 live-action remake visualized the significance of love, peace, racial and cultural diversity, and harmony with nature based on the ideal of feminism as well as political correctness.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has conducted a comparative analysis of changing gender representations in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Maleficent II* (2019) in the light of feminism and political correctness. First, a feminist critique of Disney's animation film, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) was examined in comparison with the original fairytales authored in France and Germany. Understandably, feminist observers criticized that traditional gender stereotypes can be seen in the original novel versions

and Disney's animated film, especially for the sexist and patriarchal elements. As a background, it was confirmed that Disney's animated film reflected the postwar media culture of the 1950s. From a feminist perspective, moreover, it was reaffirmed that Prince Philip's kiss without a permission by Aurora could be regarded as outdated. Although this research rediscovered feminist elements in the 1959 animation film, this was still denounced as "pseudo feminism" by some feminist critics.

On the contrary, Disney's live-action film, *Maleficent* (2014) was investigated from the feminist perspective. As a result of a feminist revision, the 2014 live-action film provided an alternative explanation why Maleficent turns into a wicked fairy. The 2014 live-action remake provided a background information that Maleficent was betrayed by Stephan physically and psychologically. Maleficent lost her wings while being asleep because Stephan cut them off, and the scene was viewed as a date-rape narrative and violence against a woman by a man. Stephan betrayed Maleficent so that he can become the king, and therefore, Maleficent cast a spell on a daughter of Stephen for her hatred. Still, Maleficent shows her femininity and have ambivalent feelings towards Aurora. In the end, Prince Philip's kiss does not awaken Aurora, but Maleficent's kiss deriving from maternal love breaks her own spell and saves the life of Aurora. The storyline change indicates the influence of the feminist revision in the 2014 live-action adaptation.

Disney's another live-action film, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) was also examined through the lens of feminism. It was clarified that feminism in the 2019 film was empowered compared to the 2014 film. Yet, the 2019 film contains more profound implications for war and peace and the relationship between human beings and nature. In the 2019 film, three female leaders are depicted as more powerful, and they seek to pursue power and peace respectively. The true love's marriage leads to the peace of the two kingdoms, and hence, the importance of heterosexual romance is diluted in the 2019 film, which could be viewed as the influence of feminism. In addition, ecological feminism was succeeded and strengthened in *Maleficent II* because the 2019 film placed an more emphasis on the harmony between humans and non-human creatures including nature. Furthermore, the 2019 live-action remake represented racial and cultural diversity, indicating the significance of the DEI as well as political correctness. In conclusion, therefore, Disney's 1957 animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and the two live-action adaptations, *Maleficent I and II* (2014 and 2019) convey transforming gender representations in the changing media culture in the history of feminism as well as political correctness.

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