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### On Disney's *Mulan* (1998): Honor and Feminism

Many American children grew up watching popular Disney movies like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) for entertainment, often enchanted by the depicted princess or damsel-in-distress heroine archetypes of Disney's older movies. At the time, people might not have realized that these films, which reflect the gender norms of their respective eras, could inadvertently cause children to internalize these outdated gender roles. Yet, as time went on, Disney's film production began to reflect the change in the cultural standards on gender norms. Rather than keeping to that static role, Walt Disney's more recent *Mulan* (1998) introduces a heroine that breaks away from the traditional narrative. Based on the 6th-century legend of Hua Mulan, the film follows Mulan, a young Chinese girl who wishes to bring her family honor through marriage. When she fails the matching ceremony, dishonoring her family in the process, she decides to redeem herself by disguising herself as a man to enlist in the army in place of her ailing father and fight the war against the Huns. While her journey into masculinity challenges the Chinese traditional gender stereotypes, *Mulan* (1998) ultimately reinforces the traditional gender roles over female empowerment as agency is only achieved when suppressing her female identity and adopting a masculine one.

#### HONOR TO US ALL

The lyrics of "Honor to Us All" accompanying Mulan's preparation for her meeting with The Matchmaker underline a rigid patriarchal system where a woman's only path to honor is

through marriage and motherhood. This is illustrated in the helping women's emphasis that for them (women), bringing honor is tantamount to a successful marriage:

A girl can bring her family

Great honor in one way

By striking a good match

And this could be the day.

By stressing marriage as the “one way” to bring honor—which has been placed on a pedestal and its achievement made a requirement for thriving, it traps women in a cycle of rigid conformity and highlights that there are no other alternative paths for women like Mulan while warning of severe consequences, such as bringing about familial dishonor and being shunned by society, if they fail to fall in line. For this reason, marriage becomes equivalent to their social and physical survival. And ultimately, women must maximize their worth in marriage to essentially survive under this system where physical appearance serves their primary form of social security.

As commented by the women in the song, in order to achieve this security, women must fit into this narrow ideal of having a “tiny waist,” “a great hairdo” and resembling a soft “lotus blossom,” possessing soft features, a pale face (as seen in the white-powdered makeup in the scene), and a slim yet elongated figure. These demands alone reduce women into being ornamental trophies that are meant to appeal to their prospective husbands. However, their physical appearance is only the entry point for social acceptance (and bringing honor), as seen in Mulan's meeting with The Matchmaker. The second layer of scrutiny, as added shortly after in the song, lies in their behavior: a woman must be “calm,” “obedient,” and able to “work fast-paced,” while meeting the expectation of bearing children. Despite the system treating women like a commodity or “trophy wife” for men, women must meet both conditions to obtain

honor under the patriarchal system and ensure their survival. They do not see a better alternative so they opt to conform with the patriarchal society as it is the best path they know. As a result, women continue to go through a screening or audition process with The Matchmaker in hopes of passing, of striking a match, and being socially accepted. And ultimately, the gender standards set by this rigid system serves to benefit men: while the brides are required to meet several conditions (physical and behavioral) just to survive, the men who receive the brides can elevate their status and possibly secure an heir through the marriage. The trade-offs in this marriage are clearly unfair and in the end, women are still required to play their part under the system.

#### I'LL MAKE A MAN OUT OF YOU

The training montage for “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” portrays the traditional Chinese patriarchal preference for men over women, which inherently excludes women like Mulan, by glorifying masculinity and framing it as a requirement for military success. Upon seeing the unskilled soldiers at the beginning of the montage, Captain Shang, who is in charge of whipping them into shape, remarks, “Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?” With Captain Shang being the embodiment of a masculine male, his remark echoes the societal gender norms. From his point of view (and by extension, the rest of society), the new recruits, seemingly all men, seem soft and weak, characteristics associated with women, and lack the expected masculinity displayed from men. In this comparison where femininity is linked to weakness and masculinity to military success, it implies that the solution for these men is to become more masculine.

The validity of this implication is confirmed in the four-line chorus Shang and the other soldiers sing that outlines their pathway to success (masculinity):

We must be swift as the coursing river

With all the force of a great typhoon

With all the strength of a raging fire

Mysterious as the dark side of the moon.

Using nature-related metaphors, “coursing river,” “great typhoon,” and “raging fire,” creates a stark contrast to the “feminine” incompetence the soldiers displayed prior to their training and what they want to avoid reverting back to. It also serves as a checklist for military success, conditioning the soldiers to adopt these masculine traits demanded by patriarchal society. If they fail to check the boxes to “be a man,” as continuously chanted in the background of the song, they risk facing military and social failure.

This consequence is realized when Ping, who shows no sign of improving into the masculine ideal like the rest of the group, gets dismissed from the army for not living up to the expectation. Shang hands Ping the reins of his horse, and declares: “You’re unsuited for the rage of war / So pack up, go home, you’re through.” As one can see through the two scenes (where Mulan is disguised as Ping), according to Addis et al’s “Social Norms, Social Construction, and the Psychology of Men and Masculinity,” there are advantages and disadvantages depending on whether the man—explored through Mulan’s male persona, Ping—conforms to societal masculine norms (85). If he fails to conform, he is turned away, dishonored and to be scorned by society, as seen in Ping’s dismissal from the army. On the other hand, if he conforms, he retains his honor and is respected as a fellow man under the patriarchal society. The audience witnesses the latter towards the end of the scene where Ping perseveres and succeeds to “conform” to the norm, thus gaining the respect of the other soldiers.

Over the course of the entire montage, it is shown that masculinity, or more broadly, gender roles, are performative. In their *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of*

*Identity*, Judith Butler asserts that it is the “repetition of acts” towards an idealistic version of femininity and masculinity that creates and reinforces gender identity. This is observed in Ping’s evolution of becoming (acting) more masculine through training. Before the training—which consists of repeated practice in martial arts (with the bo staff, archery, hand-to-hand combat), fishing with bare hands and launching cannons, Ping is doubtful on whether he can truly act masculine enough to pass as a man as Mulan is more familiar with the feminine role. However, through this repetition, Ping suppresses the femininity expected from Mulan and becomes more confident in acting out the masculine identity. Moving away from the individual towards a societal perspective, these acts are then considered appropriate to the male gender, which society normalizes and makes a requirement of that gender.

#### A LIFE FOR A LIFE

In the “A Life for a Life” scene, the discovery of Mulan’s female identity upon being wounded strips away the achievements she earned while cross-dressing as Ping, proving that gender outweighs merit under the patriarchal system. Prior to the reveal, despite Ping’s often reckless actions, he is respected and regarded as a hero, as seen in Captain Shang’s gratitude towards Ping for saving his life. His peers treat Ping as a fellow man, praising him for his actions. When Ping shows that he’s been wounded, the other soldiers clearly grow increasingly worried and rush to get him treated, unknowingly escalating the situation.

Upon receiving medical treatment, when it is revealed that Ping is a woman named Mulan, their attitudes completely change. Instead of continuing to see Mulan as the person whose actions have helped them, Ping’s achievements are immediately delegitimized in their eyes. Chi-Fu, the Emperor’s advisor, hurls insults, calling Mulan a “treacherous snake” rather than a hero, and accusing her of “high treason” and “ultimate dishonor.”

The contrast in how Mulan is treated before and after the discovery speaks to the flawed value system where conformity always takes precedence over one's competence. Under the patriarchal system, women are expected to be subordinate to men, who hold the power in society. This causes the belief that women cannot do what men can, which ultimately leads to society focusing on who (what gender) achieved something rather than what they have achieved (merit). However, once it is proved that a woman is capable of doing the same as their counterpart, the deed itself suddenly becomes a crime when done by the "wrong person." Butler argues that the continuous acts that are associated with a specific gender, whether a person is a man or woman, creates the "gender reality" or societal gender norm. For this reality to continue to be sustained, society must uphold the values that support it by encouraging the correct performance from each gender and punishing the wrong performance. Mulan's cross-dressing as Ping to earn those achievements constitutes as a wrong performance. Therefore, despite Mulan having achieved what a man has, once she is revealed as a woman, the same accomplishments no longer hold as acknowledging her merits would undermine the established rigid system. To prevent the collapse of the overall system, it is easier to blame Mulan and invalidate her achievements, and in the process, reinforce this gender reality.

#### COUNTERARGUMENT

Some may approach the film with the argument that Mulan is a figure of female empowerment for being named a hero for saving China and even having the Emperor bow to her. This is supported in "Disney's 'Mulan'—the 'True Deconstructed Heroine?'" where Lisa Brocklebank argues for Mulan breaking away from Disney's traditional archetype of heroines through cross-dressing, which disrupts social norms (273). While it is true that Mulan is able to break free from the mold and experience this newfound agency performing as a man, it is only

temporary, as observed in the “A Life for a Life” scene—once Mulan’s identity (of being a woman) was exposed, the performance is forced to end.

Following the same scene towards the end of the film, out of everything Mulan could have asked for—power or perhaps a change in the rigid system—she chose to go home, reinforcing her place as a woman in domesticity and ultimately giving up the agency she achieved while acting as a man. Once she returns home, her family does not care for her heroic deeds. Her grandmother retorts, “Great. She brings home a sword. If you ask me, she should’ve brought home a man,” once again, highlighting that the gender roles have not changed even if Mulan had cross-dressed and earned herself the title of China’s hero. Mulan had simply become the exception that challenged the system’s rigid gender roles but ultimately, the system prevails—it has not broken nor has it changed to allow women to enjoy equal rights with men. Honor is still placed above a woman’s worth and the society as a whole has not changed their values, as seen with the grandmother who still wants Mulan to get married.

## CONCLUSION

Although *Mulan* (1998) challenges traditional (Chinese) gender roles, they are ultimately reinforced in the patriarchal society. This idea was explored in “Honor to Us All,” “I’ll Make a Man out of You,” and “A Life for a Life” where the achievements earned through Mulan’s cross-dressing as Ping to achieve honor fails to change the rigid system. And despite her heroic status, the film perpetuates outdated gender norms by sending messages of “masculinity remains superior to femininity,” and the stereotype that a woman’s place is in the domestic sphere. When old films like *Mulan* (1998) are consumed by younger audiences, whose opinions are still forming and easily influenced, they may grow up to expect the gender norms depicted in the film to be their gender reality, which disconnects from the current times. Thus, if outdated gender

roles continue to be portrayed in the media, it may convince society to revert back to the traditional gender roles and ultimately undo the progress achieved towards gender equality. To avoid this outcome, the portrayal of gender roles in media must change to fit the current times where there is more gender equality—for example, the system to validate Mulan's achievements regardless of her gender. While people may still live under a patriarchal society, women should not be forced to give up to certain standards just for the bare minimum.

## Works Cited

Addis, Michael E., et al. "Social Norms, Social Construction, and the Psychology of Men and Masculinity." *APA Handbook of Men and Masculinities.*, American Psychological Association, 2016, pp. 81–104. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/14594-004>.

In this paper, Addis, Reigeluth, and Schwab define gender and the societal norms of masculinity as social constructs rather than biologically set in stone. Their research utilizes the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI)—a tool to evaluate how much men conform to the masculine norms—to discuss the advantages and disadvantages depending on whether men conform to societal masculine norms and how it shapes the male identity. However, Addis et al, having approached the topic from different angles (of social norms and social construction), argue that there are a multitude of masculinities—how the concept of masculinity differs culturally and historically. They conclude with advocating for a way to connect the two views to form a more cohesive idea of men and masculinity.

I believe this to be helpful in supporting my argument: I can use the background information on gender and societal norms to lay the foundation of my argument. I also want to lean into the idea of masculinity as social constructs but also the benefits and costs of conforming to masculinity (or being more specific, the societal masculine norm).

I think this would especially be helpful for analyzing the scene where Mulan, disguised as a man named "Ping," learns to become or act more masculine to fit in. When Ping finally does "conform," "he" gains the respect from the other soldiers at the training camp as they cheer for "him" when "he" becomes the first to retrieve the arrow from the top of the wooden training pole.

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1st ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>

Butler claims gender to be performative—where the image is built through the repetition of acts—towards an idealized version of what society expects of a man (masculine) and woman (feminine). The imposed societal gender norms are, in fact, unnatural and make such standards unachievable, “impossible to embody.” A person’s gender—Butler argues—cannot fully be internalized, creating a clash between the appearance of the gender (due to the performance to act the part) and the person’s biological gender. Without the sustained social performances that create the binary gender (whether someone is male/masculine or female/feminine), the notion of gender would not exist.

Judith Butler is an influential figure in American philosophy and gender studies, proposing gender to be a performative act as opposed to just a rigid part of one’s identity. They received a PhD (1984) from Yale University in philosophy and authored several works— one key work being *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler’s ideas are another aspect of gender to consider for the argument. This is heavily supported as Mulan (Ping) not being perceived as a man due to Mulan not knowing how to “act” manly. However, over the course of the montage, after training under Captain Shang, those “repetition of acts” have shaped Ping into more of a man (or what society pre-conceived notion of how a man should act).

Brocklebank, Lisa. "Disney's 'Mulan'—the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2000, pp. 268–83. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388562>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2026.

Brocklebank argues how Mulan breaks away from Disney's production of females/heroines and the damsel-in-distress or princess archetype through analyzing the film. Mulan's cross-dressing is a motif that undermines gender norms, suggesting that gender is a performance. As the male persona "Ping," Mulan achieves some freedom that she never had in her domestic-feminine sphere; she is allowed to own and celebrate her achievements as a man and gain the respect of others (masculine men). However, once Ping is discovered to be a woman (Mulan), all the achievements she's earned as a man becomes worthless. Brocklebank's nuanced points of view ultimately leaves the question of whether Mulan is a "true" deconstructed heroine open-ended for the audience.

Brocklebank's analysis of Mulan—while not directly aligned with my argument—offers another aspect on how to approach the topic as well as a lot of potential for a counterargument. While there are many points to be made in favor of Mulan challenging the traditional gender norms, the roles ultimately stay the same. They are not broken or reformed in any way despite Mulan's actions and achievements as her male persona Ping or the Emperor naming her a hero for saving China from the Huns.