

1-1-2021

## The True Feminists Were Hidden in Plain Sight: An Analysis of Disney Heroines Through a Fourth-Wave, Intersectional Lens

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### Recommended Citation

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Dr. Newman

ENGL 491

25 April 2021

**The True Feminists Were Hidden in Plain Sight: An Analysis of Disney Heroines Through  
a Fourth-Wave, Intersectional Lens**

As it is stated in one of the first Disney films produced, “A dream is a wish your heart makes when you are fast asleep;” however, the company does not acknowledge the influence they have on these dreams, how the characterization of people within their films reinforces certain social norms and ideals in the minds of the children who are raised watching these films (Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske). One would be hard-pressed to find a child that did not grow up watching at least one Disney film, which shows just how prevalent the company has been in so many lives, especially today, as Disney now owns so many other film production companies.

While the focus of this study will be to discuss feminism in Disney films, it will not look at the other companies which have been acquired except for Pixar, and it will only focus on animated Disney heroines. Because scholars often focus on Disney Princesses or villainesses, this paper will work to fill the noticeable gap in research on Disney heroines. I also make sure to focus my studies in a more limited way, as Disney films are so prevalent and, in many cases, have several sequels. For the purposes of this study, I observed heroines in animated films or in live-action remakes of animated classics, and I also only included sequels if the heroine demonstrates massive change within that sequel that allows her to pass The Blair Feminism Test when she would otherwise not qualify.

Though there are many strong female characters in Disney films, there are actually very few Disney heroines who are truly feminist according to obvious *and* less-discussed ideals of fourth-wave feminism.

### **How Does One Know if a Heroine is 'Feminist?'**

In order to argue how a heroine is or is not 'feminist,' one must create a set of criteria that describes what the relevant indicators of a feminist are according to the analyst of the texts. I have done exactly that with my criteria titled The Blair Feminism Test, which was inspired in part by the Bechdel Test.

While there are many waves of feminism, and thus many definitions of what a feminist is and what relevant ideals are, I decided to focus specifically on fourth-wave feminism and on intersectionality in my assessment, as both of these topics are relevant to those living and growing today, those who are affected directly by Disney films from all periods during the company's lifetime. According to Dr. Martha Rampton of the Pacific University of Oregon, the fourth wave of modern feminism is fairly new and still in progress, but as of this moment in time, it is associated mostly with "problems like sexual abuse, rape, violence against women, unequal pay, slut-shaming," and the idea that feminism should not be a movement "for women only" (Rampton). Instead, Rampton argues that in recent times, "fourth wavers" recognize that society "[faces] serious problems because of the way society genders and is gendered," and that "Feminism no longer just refers to the struggles of women; it is a clarion call for gender equity" (Rampton).

This leads perfectly into the idea of intersectionality and why it was such an important aspect of the criteria that were included in The Blair Feminism Test. Intersectionality is defined

by the Oxford English Dictionary as “The interconnected nature of social organizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise” (*OED Online*). It is understood now by feminists in the ‘fourth wave’ that intersectionality is part of feminism, or at the very least should be, and that feminism isn’t just about equity for women, but equity for *all*. Though previous feminist movements and waves were exclusionary towards people of color, trans women, women who were not strictly heterosexual, etc., modern “fourth wavers” have decided that this should no longer be the case and that we as a society must do better moving forward, which became a theme for this paper and the analysis of Disney heroines as they appear in film and as they are supported, or not supported, by the company after the fact.

With that, I have posted the criteria below:

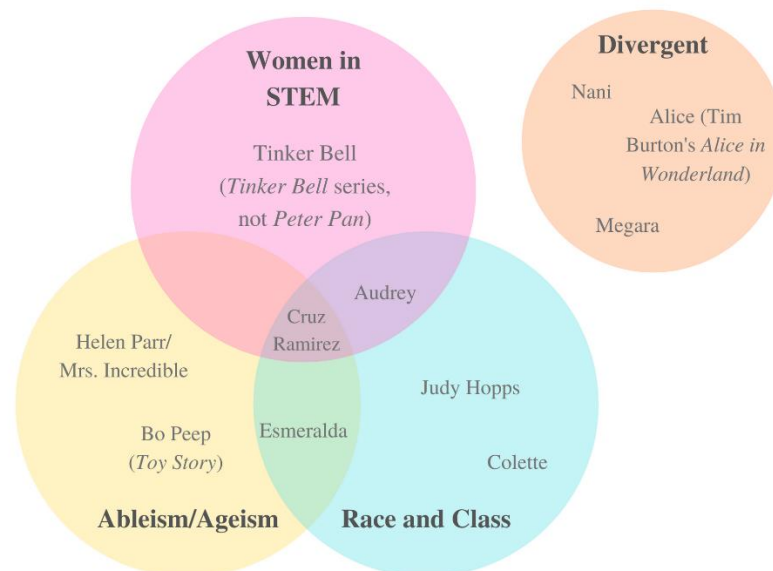
#### The Blair Feminism Test

1. She is not a recognized Disney Princess.
2. She has a notable speaking role. (See the Bechdel Test.)
3. She is not reduced to her romantic relationship with the main hero of the film if she is not the main hero herself.
4. Her actions do not encourage unhealthy relationships of any kind, nor do they promote issues with self-image.
5. She encourages change that affects more than one minority group within her society and/or ours (the audience’s).

Note: These criteria are meant to be applicable to all films just by taking out the first criterion, which relates to the Walt Disney Company. It is my belief that all heroines should be held to these standards if one wants to consider them feminist or not.

## The Categorization of Feminist Heroines in Disney Films

After applying The Blair Feminism Test to a total of 25 or so films that were examined for this study, I found that only 11 of the films had a main heroine who fit all the criteria. I subsequently split the women into four categories which apply to how they passed the test; this was done to ensure ease of understanding the types of stories Disney has been supporting and telling as of late. The following diagram was then created to show how these characters can apply to more than one category at a given time, as well.



### Women in STEM Fields

For the Women in STEM category, I placed Tinker Bell, Audrey, and Cruz Ramirez here because all of these women actively maintain a career in STEM fields in an obvious way throughout the film in which they appear.

The film *Tinker Bell*, though set in a heavily nature-reliant, as opposed to an industrial community called Pixie Hollow, shows the namesake heroine of the film to be a member of a

STEM field career. The community in which Tinker Bell lives rarely uses objects which are normal to children today, as the characters use ‘primitive’ tools and technology to create interesting inventions that are only slightly outlandish. That is until Tinker Bell arrives and starts using "lost things" from the "Mainland," or the audience's world, such as screws, coins, springs, and many other everyday objects and technologies in her inventions (Raymond).

As a “tinker” fairy, there lies the implication that Tinker Bell is building objects, much like an engineer would in modern society, and through her actions in the film, she proves this as well as how she became an inventor (Raymond). As it is said in the film itself, tinker fairies “help fairies of every talent with [their] creations,” as they “fiddle and fix... craft and create” objects to help change the seasons (Raymond 13:04, 12:42). Through her constant drive to create new technologies, no matter what stands against her, she pushes for social change. Tinker Bell challenges the societal norm within fairy society that tinker fairies are not allowed to go to the Mainland, whereas practically every other type of fairy within that society is expected to do so. Tinker fairies are clearly a minority group for this reason, along with the fact that they are often the butt of jokes in the film, such as through the physical characteristics of characters Bobble and Clank, two of the three main tinker fairies other than Tinker Bell herself. While Clank is a member of the tinker fairies’ guild, he is given a deeper, dopey-sounding voice which is meant to show that he is not the brightest according to the usual practices in cartoon voice-acting, much in the same way Patrick Star, SpongeBob’s intellectually-challenged friend, speaks in the show *SpongeBob Squarepants*. This is proven through Clank’s small mistakes, being called a “snail brain” by even his best friend, and awkward social interactions, which appear consistently throughout the film (12:24). Bobble is also made to be the butt of jokes as he clearly demonstrates the ‘nerd’ stereotype, a common minority in films and cartoons, through his thick-

lensed glasses, his wild hair, and his use of archaic words such as “elucidate” (12:39). They are hardly ever taken seriously, and the same can be said of their profession.

However, despite all this, the heroine eventually convinces the fairy queen to allow her and her tinker fairy friends to help the change of season on the Mainland, fighting the social structure set in place which holds some people back, particularly those within the STEM field in this given society, and women in the STEM field within the audience’s.

Audrey, despite being a minor character in the film *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, demonstrates one of the best examples of how a Disney heroine can be feminist because of her dedication to challenging societal norms as a Latina woman in the STEM field at a time in which women were rarely if ever, allowed to work as anything but a nurse, a maid, or a teacher. When Milo attempts to help fix the boiler in one of the trucks, she shouts “*No toques nada!*” at him, proving that she is meant to be a Latina woman, alongside her physical attributes as she was drawn in the film (Trousdale & Wise *Atlantis* 30:33). For this reason, along with the knowledge that car mechanics make a rather low-wage salary and that, especially in the 1900s, people of color rarely maintained successful businesses due to systemic racism, one can assume that Audrey is not a woman with much wealth to her name.

When Milo asks Audrey later, “No offense, but how does a teenager become the chief mechanic of a multimillion-dollar expedition,” she replies with her story about how her father raised her to be a mechanic and how she wants to open another shop with him (Trousdale & Wise *Atlantis* 34:44-35:10). This indicates that, rather than not needing to worry about work in the future or being able to pursue another career which she actually wants, Audrey actually enjoys being a mechanic, and this undoubtedly gave many girls watching the film the idea that it was alright for women to work trade jobs, or at the very least work in the STEM field, because if

this amazing character wants to do it and Disney made the film with this in mind, then they can become whatever they desire in the future. At the end of the film, when all of Milo's friends and team members are shown after acquiring great wealth, Audrey is among them wearing very European, expensive-looking clothing, which would normally not be owned, or more likely commissioned, by a racial minority in the United States in the 1900s, and yet Audrey does so as a demonstration of her acquired wealth (1:26:50). Through her acquisition of wealth at the end of the film, Disney is even further encouraging girls to pursue STEM careers because Audrey was successful in her career, so these girls watching the film can be, too.

Cruz Ramirez from the film *Cars 3* is perhaps the most obvious feminist of the three in this category, as she does not have a romantic partner, she challenges sexism in STEM fields and other male-dominated fields (i.e., racing), and she is a Latina main character in a major Disney film. While Audrey was also a Latina heroine, she was not a member of the main cast of characters in her film, instead of being a supporting character that could easily be ignored. Cruz, however, is crucial to the plot of *Cars 3*, and she later proves herself as a woman in the STEM field and a woman racer, as she not only manages to help train an older racer to combat technological advancements in his competitors, but she also becomes a racer herself, as she always wanted to be, by the end of the film.

### **Ableism/Ageism Feminists**

For the Ableism/Ageism category, I placed Helen Parr and Bo Peep here because these two heroines actively work to combat ableist and ageist societal norms and expectations through their actions in the films to which they belong.



Mrs. Helen Parr, otherwise known as Mrs. Incredible or Elastigirl, was present in the first film in *The Incredibles* series and was a strong heroine then, but in the sequel, *Incredibles 2*, she truly became a feminist. Through Winston Deavor's wording when he stated: "Elastigirl is [the] best play" for their "first move" into trying to normalize superheroes again, he demonstrates that he values her the most above her male counterparts and that he does not care that she is older (Bird *Incredibles* 20:23-21:24). As the film demonstrates later, he could have chosen any number of new supers to be the face of this movement, but he didn't; instead, he chose Elastigirl, or Mrs. Parr, to take that important first step. Disney is demonstrating with this aspect of the plot that women are just as important in the workforce as men and that older women in the workforce are just as capable as their younger counterparts. Mrs. Parr accepting this position only further solidifies this, and her dedication to doing the right thing and to maintaining her job as a superhero throughout the film shows how she is also dedicated to working hard for other women like her to be able to find work within her field in the future. Her prevalence as an accepted, financially supported woman in the workforce shows support for women who challenge ageist beliefs in work environments and shows that older women or women who have not been in the workforce for a while are still valuable on any team.

Bo Peep also plays the role of overcoming both patriarchal and ageist norms through both her clothing and her actions in the film. In animation, the way a character looks—such as their wardrobe—is incredibly important and very deliberately done; for that reason, it is worth noting how Bo Peep's costuming has changed since we last saw her in 1999, in *Toy Story 2*. Despite her silent cameo in *Toy Story 3*, which was clearly a flashback to the last time they saw her, presumably not too long after *Toy Story 2*, this is the first time we see Bo Peep in a different costume from the one she was given when she was manufactured. This costume change is

incredibly noteworthy, though, as she is now the proud owner of a pair of pants and a more casual, detachable skirt. This outfit shows how Bo has liberated herself by becoming a 'lost toy' and how she is able to be much more independent now as such. Historically speaking, women wearing pants was an important aspect of the fight for women's rights, and the vague bloomer style of Bo's pants only plays further into this history; "By 1850, Amelia Bloomer, a women's rights activist, popularized the "bloomer" pant," which became a political statement as much as a fashion one at that time (Mondalek). Because Bo's skirt is optional, and she is more often shown wearing pants, Disney animators and Bo herself are indicating that she is happily independent now after so many years and without a child.

Bo Peep also demonstrates this with her dialogue. While she speaks with Woody for the first time in years, she asks if he's a "lost toy," and then adds, "That's great," whereas Woody speaks at the same time claiming that it is "awful" that she is a lost toy, earning a strange look from Bo, where the observer is left to interpret that she is proud to be independent and confused as to why Woody would think otherwise (Cooley 36:35). She also tells her former lover that she has been "out on [her] own" for "Seven fantastic years," in her own words, then finishing with the claim "who needs a kid's room when you can have all of this" (37:24-37:29, 45:56). Through her act of deciding to happily live on her own, and to stop belonging to children—a statement that I am sure many mothers can relate to—she shows that older women, even mothers, can maintain their own lives independently and happily.

The animators also played with the idea that she is made of porcelain, which can be a metaphor for her age as much as it does her gender, and the potential for her coming to harm much easier because of it; however, the material Bo Peep was created from certainly doesn't stop her from being reckless for the fun of it. For example, when Woody pulls her right arm off, she

reassured him that it “Happens all the time,” and she just tapes her arm back on like nothing had happened (Cooley 45:00). Even though her life is dangerous, Bo is not discouraged, and instead rolls with the punches; if her arm falls off, she tapes it back on, and if she has to jump off of a building, she takes a running start. She also has the more action-cut scenes where she is gearing up and tells Woody to hold on to her, implying that she is the dominant one, the one who is in charge, the one who is the true daredevil that the less-powerful love interest should cling to (45:41). Through her lifestyle in the film, Bo demonstrates a potential life for those watching the film, where they do not have to have children and can still live whatever life they choose, with whatever career they choose, and at any stage in life.

### **Race & Class Feminists**

For the Race & Class category, I placed Esmeralda, Colette, and Judy Hopps here because all of these women actively work to promote the welfare and equity for racial and class minorities that they either belong to or that would benefit from another voice speaking in support of their struggles.

Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* frequently speaks out against injustice done to the Romani or “gypsy” people of France. One of her most notable quotes is when she states, “[Judge Frollo] mistreats [Quasimodo] the same way [he mistreats her] people [the Romani]. [He speaks] of justice, yet [he is] cruel to those most in need of [his] help,” as she points out both the injustices her people often face in Paris, as well as the ableist and otherwise discriminatory treatment Quasimodo, and more than likely many other people with “deformities,” or physical disabilities must face on any given day (Trousdale & Wise *Hunchback* 0:28:01-0:28:08). Esmeralda is clearly a strong female character and heroine in her

own right, as she fights off Phoebus in a physical battle as well as a battle of the wits before he proves to her that he actually wishes to help, but she also has proven herself to be a true feminist because she looks out for the wellbeing of Quasimodo and of the later-disgraced soldier, Phoebus, throughout the film. In helping her people, a racial minority; a man with physical disabilities; and a man that normally would be part of the dominant group but who became an outcast for helping other outcasts, Esmeralda has firmly solidified herself as a feminist Disney heroine.

Colette from *Ratatouille* is also a major feminist figure when it comes to race and class, though not as obviously as Esmeralda. At the start of Linguini's time in Gusteau's kitchen, she is shown to be rather coarse and almost rude, but after being told to teach the new member of the team, she starts to warm up. Despite Colette clearly working at a much higher capacity than Linguini, and despite not initially wishing to help him, she still agrees to teach the lower-class, less-educated newbie, and she takes him under her wing. While one might argue that Linguini was not lower-class because his father was Gusteau, the owner of the restaurant, but he states that he had lost many jobs prior to his as a "garbage boy" in the kitchen, both of which show that he must rely on odd jobs for a living, taking on work that is often only reserved for lower-class, uneducated members of the population (Bird *Ratatouille* 19:22). Linguini was also not actually aware of the identity of his father until after his mother's death, which indicates that he was raised without his father's wealth and status as a factor.

When Chef Skinner attempted to fire the man, Colette was the first and only one to stand up for Linguini, stating that "[Skinner cannot] fire him" because, despite him being a garbage boy, "he made something [LeClaire, a food critic] liked" and even cites Gusteau's "most cherished belief" that "Anyone can cook" while supporting her argument, showing that she also

believes these words, that despite a person's background they should be allowed to pursue the career they wish for (Bird *Ratatouille* 26:58-27:19). The film supports this acceptance of a person despite their background through Colette's later quotes and actions as well, as, despite the dark or otherwise unique pasts of her fellow chefs, she considers them something like a family; she refers to herself and them as "we," call them "artists," and says chefs are not "snooty," meaning they are not all high-class and should not look down on others that have different past experiences and backgrounds from theirs (Bird *Ratatouille* 45:54-46:57). And, last but not least, Colette is the only one willing to work with a kitchen full of rats, which Disney is using as a metaphor for both racial and class minorities, those who are often told they 'should not' be in an elite career because of their background and their socioeconomic status (Bird *Ratatouille* 1:35:00). Despite everyone leaving once Linguini comes clean, even herself, she goes back to help him and the rats because she cares about them, and she wants Linguini and the restaurant to succeed. She did not do it only because she loved Linguini, as their relationship was still up in the air at that time; instead, one can certainly argue that she did it out of her own sense of right and wrong and because of her desire to help minorities succeed, as she has demonstrated earlier in the film, which makes her a perfect feminist Disney heroine.

And then, we end with Judy Hopps of *Zootopia*. Throughout the film, she and her family make it very clear to the audience that prey animals are meant to be considered racial and class minorities in this fictional world, as in the past, "the world was divided in two: vicious predator or meek prey," or the dominant racial and class group, which corresponds to white people of middle- or upper-class status, and the minority racial and class groups, such as people of color and/or those living in underserved communities, as well as rural ones (Howard & Moore 1:42-1:53). As Judy argues in her childhood production at the start of the film, many might argue

about our current society that “over time, we evolved and moved beyond our primitive and savage ways” of discrimination and attacking those who are not in power; however, as Judy learns through her being discriminated against in the police academy and in her first couple days as a police officer, this is not the case (1:54-1:58).

Despite the clear discrimination she faces as a prey animal in the society to which she belongs, which would normally systemically work against her and others like her from becoming police officers and other jobs held in high esteem, Judy manages to solve the mystery at the end of the film and earn respect for her and other minority groups. She even goes so far as to discuss with Nick Wilde how some predators also have challenges they face, and she fights against racism, sexism, and classism, claiming Nick, and others like him, are “so much more than” the stereotypes held against them, just like other, clearer minority groups should be allowed to succeed in whatever circumstances (Howard & Moore 1:00:02). I argue this was an attempt to explain to younger generations the importance of learning about and recognizing intersectionality, as though Wilde is a predator, he is also a fox, which is seen as being “shifty and untrustworthy” and violent, in need of being muzzled in order to prevent them from harming others (59:58, 59:17). The film even shows an instance of hate violence against Nick Wilde when he was only eight years old, done to him by prey animals—other minorities—an important aspect of who he is as a character and why he has become so pessimistic and beaten down as an adult (58:50-1:00:01). Even Zootopia’s equivalent of pepper spray plays into these stereotypes that harmed Nick Wilde as a child and still continue to as an adult, considering how it is called “fox repellent,” an airhorn is called “fox deterrent,” and tasers are even called “fox Tasers” specifically in this world (Howard & Moore 8:57-9:11). The name “fox repellent” also plays into the long-standing tradition of referring to minority groups with terminology that is most often

associated with insects and other pests, as the most normal association with the word “repellent” is “flea repellent” or “bug repellent.” In fact, the word “repellent” is defined by Oxford Languages as “a substance that deters insects or other pests from approaching or settling” (*Oxford Languages*). Because Wilde is a fox, then he is automatically discriminated against by being associated with violent actions which must be stopped with brutal force, based solely on what species—or race—of animal he is and not the actions he has actually taken in his own life.

Disney's acknowledgment of intersectionality and race and class issues in such an obvious, deliberate way is historic and incredibly important, which makes Judy and her act of supporting not just prey animals but predators that are still discriminated against one of the most important and most feminist Disney heroines in this list.

### **Divergent Feminists**

And finally, for the Divergent category, I placed Alice, Nani, and Megara here because all of these women actively support other minority groups or are, in and of themselves, representing a misunderstood or commonly ignored group of people, with their inclusion in a Disney film being noteworthy and extremely helpful to those in real life that live similar lives.

In the first *Alice in Wonderland* film, which debuted in 1951, the Disney company presented a heroine who only wanders around a strange world rather than is truly feminist. However, the Tim Burton remake of *Alice in Wonderland* plays off the original, making it a prequel of sorts to this version of Alice. Now, she is fighting for the freedom of the oppressed in Wonderland, and she works to be an example of how a woman of her privilege can achieve more in society and life by challenging social and gender norms. Just as the film states, Alice is expected to fulfill a prophecy about Frabjous Day, “being the day [Alice slays] the

Jabberwocky” (Burton 21:22). Throughout the film, she struggles with wondering whether or not she is the ‘right Alice’ or not, with many in Underland claiming she is not, but, in a moment of great heroics and dedication, Alice makes a speech where she states:

"From the moment I fell down that rabbit hole, I've been told what I must do and who I must be. I've been shrunk, stretched, scratched, and stuffed into a teapot. I've been accused of being Alice and of not being Alice, but this is my dream. I'll decide where it goes from here... I make the path." (43:32-43:51)

This is the moment where she finally argues for her own independence, no matter what may be prophesized and what is not, because, as she claims, she makes the path that she treks.

What truly sold Alice as a feminist Disney heroine, though, is the profession she chooses and obtains at the end of the film. From the costuming, one can see that the film is set in the early 1900s, closer to 1910. For that reason, though Alice does not pursue a career in a STEM field as Audrey had done, Alice still manages through her own hard work and determination to become “an apprentice with [her late father’s and Ascot’s] company” (Burton 1:39:11). She speaks with her father’s friend, Lord Ascot, proposing the company start interacting with China, which she indicates is an innovative idea when she exclaims, “To be the first to trade with China, can you imagine it” (1:38:46-1:38:56). Lord Ascot then proposes she work with the company, and Alice is then shown climbing onto a boat to China after not only successfully avoiding an unhappy marriage but also inspiring children watching the film to not jump into a marriage if they truly wish to pursue a career that requires an independent lifestyle.

Nani from Lilo & Stitch is a unique case, as she does not actively work to support any largely recognized minority groups. She is a person of color—and a Pacific Islander at that, a people who are hardly ever given a voice in popular films and shows due to systemic issues with



hiring and speaking about the issues of Native American/ indigenous and Asian and Pacific American (APA) folks—but her actions do not demonstrate that she is working to inspire or otherwise help racial minority groups. However, she does cause audiences at home, as well as members of her community, to reconsider their definition of a family. Nani does this in two ways.

First and foremost, Nani works to ensure to social workers that Lilo is, in fact, very safe and secure while living with her as Lilo's guardian and should not be “taken away” and put into the foster care system instead (DeBlois & Sanders 20:41). The whole film, despite being focused on Lilo and her new pet, Stitch, also has many instances of Nani working to maintain, and later obtain, a job so she can support herself and her sister, such as the one where the infamous “Badness Level” image is drawn (32:43). Younger audiences may not immediately notice this, but adults and children who are living similarly to Nani and Lilo can see that Nani has brought Lilo to the restaurant and does so frequently because there is no one else at home to watch her and keep her safe. Nani easily could have left Lilo at home and hoped for the best, as some parents and guardians do when in similar situations to Nani's, but instead, she cares too much about her little sister's wellbeing. Nani is ensuring that she is able to watch over Lilo while also earning the both of them enough money to live on, or she was until her boss fired her. By openly working against the system that wants to take Lilo away from her, Nani is both fighting her society's expectations of what a family should look like but also the audience's.

Nani also argues for the acceptance of adoption as a potential factor in families that should be more normalized, as she and Lilo adopt Stitch. At first, they thought of Stitch as a pet, but once it became clear that he was sentient and as much a person as anyone, it suddenly became clear to both the characters and the audience that Stitch either needed to be adopted into

Nani and Lilo's family, or he would go off to live in a system. At the end of the film, though, Nani's earned acceptance of Stitch and his acknowledgment that she and Lilo are "[his] family" shows that he has been adopted, both unofficially and officially (DeBlois & Sanders 1:15:05). With this in mind, Nani not only supports and fights for nontraditional guardian roles but also adoptive guardians. Though she is not the idealized, expected mother figure because she is Lilo's older sister and guardian, as well as Stitch's adoptive mother or sister, Nani is no less important as a family figure in both Lilo and Stitch's lives. Through this characterization of Nani and the nontraditional family roles she supports, Disney has shown young audiences that it is alright if one's family is not what might be expected, thus working to help another form of a minority group.

And, last but certainly not least, Megara from the film *Hercules* was placed in the Divergent category because, though she does not represent a traditional minority group, she is one of very few, if any other Disney heroines who represent the struggles of women who have survived and thrived after enduring sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. As stated previously, fourth-wave feminism focuses heavily on "problems like sexual abuse, rape, [and] violence against women" (Rampton). While Megara is by no means a minority out of women—considering how "As of 1998, an estimated 17.7 million American women had been victims of attempted or completed rape,"—she does represent one of fourth wave feminists' main goals: to survive abuse if one is unlucky enough to be a victim of it, and to support others who have done the same.

One might argue that the audience is not given enough information about Megara's past to know if she has been sexually assaulted or raped, but this is not actually the case; rather, when the viewer first sees Megara, he or she is watching a scene of assault. At the start of the scene,

one sees Megara in the process of crawling away from her attacker, and then she is scooped up by him, indicating through body language that she did not wish to be touched by the villain (Clements & Musker 32:11). Then, she demands to be “put... down,” giving verbal confirmation that she is not giving her consent (32:14). Of course, this only causes Nessus to state a phrase which many victims of sexual abuse might recognize: “[he likes] ’em fiery” (32:19). Finally, the scene ends with Nessus attempting to kiss Megara and with her holding her arms up to defend herself, once again giving nonverbal indicators against consent while trying to hold off her attacker (32:31). Though the scene is not explicit to the effect that body parts are shown, this still is a scene of not just physical but sexual abuse, with a man attempting to force himself on a woman. When Megara simply shrugs it off and tells Hercules to "Have a nice day," thus telling him to leave; she also later states that “men... think that “No” means “Yes,” and “Get lost” means “Take me, I’m yours,” which shows the audience that she has already experienced something like this before and that she is pessimistic about actually receiving help in that moment, which is sadly common among victims of abuse (35:54). For this reason, Megara is most definitely a victim of sexual abuse. That is not the only form of abuse Meg is a victim of, though.

Hades is also abusing Megara, economically speaking; he openly manipulates Meg when he claims to add another two years to her sentence because she refused to put Hercules in harm’s way, initially, which is part of emotional and other forms of abuse (37:45). Alongside this, he also demonstrates controlling behavior not only in his threats and commands based on his 'ownership of her soul,' but he also controls and abuses her by forcing her to put herself in harm's way to lure Hercules in, multiple times, like when she was being assaulted by Nessus and all the other times she was in danger in the film while seducing Hercules (52:41-53:47).

She did not want to be assaulted, nor did she want to deliberately put Hercules in harm's way through seduction. As far as the audience knows, she might not have wanted to seduce Hercules in the first place, thus turning this into a scene of sexual or physical abuse as well.

The fact that Megara even exists, with all of those scenes full of clear indicators that she is a victim of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse without being a definitive villain, is historic. Victims of abuse and other minorities are often characterized as villains across many children's films, Disney included, so to make Megara a heroine who earns the ability to be seen as such is noteworthy and defines why she still passed The Blair Feminism Test, despite not actively and obviously fighting for the rights of victims of abuse. Hardly any children's films or books address the histories and struggles victims of abuse face, especially women, as their lives and struggles are considered 'taboo.'

With the inclusion of Megara as a heroine, she shows young audiences that one can survive and endure beyond abuse of all kinds and still have a happy ending, still become strong and independent without losing the healthy, worthwhile relationships in one life. Encouraging victims to survive and thrive even after so many years of blatant abuse, as Meg faced, is a vital step in fighting systemic issues in society like rape culture, and the earlier one introduces a difficult and complex topic like abuse and rape to their children, the easier it is for them to learn more about how to keep themselves and others safe.

### **The Disney Company's Merchandise Reaction**

For companies like Disney, money is everything. After the initial release, one can track how Disney allocates its money to support certain films the company values more than others through the production and selling of merchandise.

In recent years, most merchandise related to each of these heroines is either nonexistent, which is the case for Audrey and Colette, or breaks one of the Blair Feminism Test's main rules: the product's depiction of the heroine reduces her to her romantic relationship with the main hero of the film. This is certainly the case for Megara, who is nearly always shown either doting on Hercules or his statue (*Dismerchandise M*). For the very few times Megara appears on her own, she is over-sexualized through how her dolls are designed, which is also consistent with merchandise for most other heroines who are depicted alone, such as Esmeralda and Tinker Bell (*Dismerchandise E*; *Dismerchandise T*).

While it is true that some of these heroines have become incredibly popular over the years and have a rather extensive amount of merchandise, like Elastigirl/ Mrs. Incredible and Tinker Bell, those ladies are the exception to the rule. Sadly, the rule is that Disney does not create nearly enough merchandise for their most feminist heroines, only the ones that are new at the time or the most likely to earn them money. Disney Princesses have countless merchandise opportunities and items, with multiple pages of merchandise releases under a quick search for the name "Belle" in *Dismerchandise's* merch database, but less than ten for most of the heroines who passed The Blair Feminism Test. This large gap in merchandise production translates easily into the fact that the Disney company is not willing to put their money into creating items that are related to and honor the actions and ideals of their only truly feminist Disney heroines.

### **Conclusions**

As one can see, there are many strong female characters in Disney films; Kida is a wonderful heir to the throne of Atlantis, and she has survived many tribulations to become the

queen of her people and to defend them from those who would harm them, for example.

However, due to the nature of fourth-wave feminism and intersectionality and how important these concepts are to feminism now, there are actually very few Disney heroines who are truly feminist.

From this research into feminism and Disney heroines, I can conclude that the Disney company does not value their heroines as much as their Disney Princesses due to the allocation of their money when it comes to the production of merchandise. While the Disney company claims to value the struggles of all and to strive to tell diverse stories, the fact remains that their feminism is sorely lacking when it comes to their heroines. As long as the company continues to disregard their heroines and focus on their new acquisitions and their Princesses, more and more generations of children grow up missing important lessons in feminism and the acceptance of all, not just those who are in positions of power over others. As a culture and society, we need to do better in the future to create more feminist characters for children's consumption, perhaps starting with Disney heroines. If not, future generations will have more trouble fighting for the rights of minority groups because complex issues such as these need to be introduced earlier on, and narratives in support of diversity must be reinforced.

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