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With a Chitter and a Chirp: Animal Sidekicks as Promoters of Gender Ideology in Disney’s Princess Movies

A swelling overture plays as the opening credits appear on the screen. You briefly see the words, “Adapted from Grimm’s Fairy Tales” and soon after, the screen goes black, and slowly illuminates a pristine white book, edged in gold gilt, bearing the title: “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The book magically opens, revealing a page beginning with the words “once upon a time.” And just like that, Disney has visually ensconced their movie in the fairy or folk tale tradition. *Snow White* is not the only Disney movie which gestures toward its fairy tale roots. Disney’s subsequent movies nod at their original stories, whether explicitly, like *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and others, or implicitly, like *Beauty and the Beast*. And as no fairy tale is complete without a faithful animal sidekick, the Disney princess movies provide their own iterations of these fuzzy creatures, the evolution of whom this essay will focus on.

It would be dishonest, however, to dub Disney a creator of fairy tales; their movies are adaptations of traditional tales. It would be more precise, then, to place them in the context of the retelling, as they use an original story as their basis. A common characteristic of retellings is the fact that they often reflect the societal norms of their times. They repackage the old stories in new, shiny wrapping paper that reflects the ideals of the time in which they are being created. For example, Snow White*’*s happy ending has her riding off into the horizon with her handsome prince, while the more recent *Frozen* has its female main characters save each other.

There are multiple ways Disney promotes the ideological norms of their time in their movies, but one of the more subtle ways is through their princesses’ animal sidekicks. The cute, harmless-looking animals are complicit in promoting Disney’s notions about gender and gender roles, which mirror the above shift from *Snow White* to *Frozen*, as the movies progress. The animal sidekicks begin as stand-ins for their child viewers, helping their princesses achieve their goal of marriage to a prince. Next, the sidekicks evolve to perform a more protective role, as babysitters or guardians, who may appear tough, but always cave into their princess’s wishes (which often involve a prince). Finally, as the princesses become more independent, the animal sidekick becomes more of a friend or confidante of the princess, keeping her company and providing her with moral support. This evolution of the role of the animal sidekick reflects both on the princesses they are supporting, and the franchise from which they emerged; their changes document a slow progression towards more independent and empowered princesses, as well as a shift in the gender ideology Disney promotes, writ large.

The animal sidekicks in the first three Disney princess movies can be seen as following the fairy tale trope of the helper animal. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp outlines seven spheres of action folk tale characters can be involved in. He places the “grateful animal” or the helper animal in two of these spheres: those of the donor and the helper. He explains, “[the animals] begin as donors (begging for help or mercy), then they place themselves at the disposal of the hero and become his helpers” (Propp 80-81). The concept of the helpful animal beginning as a needy supplicant, whose loyalty to the (here, female) protagonist is secured, who then repays her by helping her and often saving the day, is helpful in discussing the animal sidekicks of the Disney princesses.

Examining Disney’s animal sidekicks through the lens of the helper animal, it immediately becomes clear that they follow Propp’s progression from helpless beggar to grateful helper and savior. However, it is important to note that, although the animals often play a significant role in the final salvation of the princess, the main act of saving her is generally attributed to her prince. They are a kind of second-rate savior. Take Snow White’s woodland animal posse; when she first enters the forest with the huntsman tasked with her murder, she encounters a lost baby bird, chirping plaintively. Snow White directs the little bird back to its parents. Later, in a rather the same way that Snow White directs the baby bird home, the woodland creatures, the previous bird included, lead Snow White to a place she can safely reside.

Cinderella’s animal friends also travel through Propp’s arc of the helper animal, beginning, first, as helpless dependents, who gratefully repay Cinderella back for her kindness. In the first scene of the movie, anthropomorphized birds clothed in little bonnets, shirts, and shoes fly through Cinderella’s window to wake her up. It is later revealed that Cinderella makes these clothes for her animal friends when Gus, a mouse, is caught in a trap and Cinderella must rescue him. Once she has saved Gus, Cinderella saves no time in fitting him into an itty-bitty shirt, hat, and shoes. The mice and birds have the opportunity to pay Cinderella back when they make sure that *she* is properly clothed for the ball, by fixing up the dress that Cinderella was prevented from mending, due to her stepmother’s chores.

Back to the evolving portrayals of the Disney princess animal sidekicks; the pattern is evident, beginning from the very first Disney princess, Snow White, in 1937. After Snow White flees the huntsman that her stepmother has tasked with her murder, she awakens in the woods to find a host of little creatures peeking at her. She initially startles, which frightens the animals away, but immediately apologizes, saying that she, herself, was frightened. She says this all slowly and deliberately, in the way one might address a child when teaching them something. And, indeed, she next asks them: “what do you do when things go wrong?” (00.11.49), a question one may expect a modern television show like *Dora the Explorer* to ask its viewers directly. The question isn’t answered by the animals, nor do they have the capacity to do so; they can only nod, point, and chitter in animal-speech. This question that Snow White poses is puzzling in its purpose. If not directed at the woodland animals, then to whom is she speaking?

Ursula Le Guin provides a fascinating insight to this question in her essay, “Cheek By Jowl: Animals in Children’s Literature” (2004). In it, she divides the evolution of the animal tale into three general eras: oral literatures of the prehistoric age centering animals as protagonists, the oral and written folktales and fables of the preindustrial age in which humans and animals mingle, and finally, the postindustrial animal story which is “mostly perceived as being for children” (Le Guin 22). Le Guin theorizes that the reason animal stories have been relegated to the domain of childhood is because “we see children as inferior, mentally ‘primitive,’ not yet fully humanized” (22). According to Le Guin, children are seen by society as under-formed adults who are socially equal to animals. The early Disney movies are guilty of this approach, creating a tautology between children and animals, and, in fact, using their animal sidekicks as stand-ins for their children viewers.

If, as Le Guin proposes, children are viewed in the post-industrial age as socially equal to animals, the above scene from *Snow White* is flooded with new significance. Snow White’s question, “what do you do when things go wrong” (00.11.49), is meaningless if she is directing it toward the animals. After all, they cannot answer her! If, however, the animals are stand-ins for the children viewers, the question becomes a directive towards the children watching to think, “what *do* I do when things go wrong?” Snow White assumes a teacher-like role, instructing the children viewers through their stand-ins: the animals that surround her. Snow White’s role as teacher continues through the movie; when she begins cleaning the dwarfs’ house, she instructs, pointing at different animals, “Now, you wash the dishes. You tidy up the room. You clean the fireplace. And I’ll use the broom” (00.17.40). By involving the animals in the cleaning, Disney sends the message through Snow White that hard work and cleanliness are important values. Disney also uses the scene to correct common childhood misbehavior; a pair of squirrels shove dirt under a rug, which prompts Snow White to scold, “Uh-uh, not under the rug” (00.18.54). By using their animal sidekicks as stand-ins for children, Disney is able to effectively send social directives directly to the children watching.

Aside from the general values of cleanliness and hard work, Snow White’s woodland animal friends also promote Disney’s rigid view of gender throughout the movie. In a general sense, the animals encourage Snow White in her quest for true love. When Snow White first encounters the prince she has decided is her true love, she sends him a kiss by kissing a white dove and sending it to him. Snow White is essentially flirting with the prince here, and she is only able to do so through her animal sidekick, the white dove. The animals also try to prevent the Evil Queen from killing Snow White and keeping her from her happily-ever-after with the prince. When the Evil Queen, magically disguised as an old hag, presents Snow White with a poisoned apple, the forest birds swoop in and chirp around the Evil Queen’s head. When a clueless Snow White shoos the birds away for “frightening a poor old lady” (01.10.55), the woodland animals rush to fetch the dwarfs. Although they are ultimately too late, they try to save Snow White for her happy ending, and they rejoice when the prince appears and reawakens her.

A word must be made here about the nature of Snow White’s happy ending, and, in fact, the happy endings of the subsequent Disney princesses discussed in this essay; they all function within the framework of heterosexual romance. In her essay titled, “‘Someday My Prince Will Come’: Disney, the Heterosexual Imaginary and Animated Film” (2004), Carrie L. Cokely argues that within the structure of marriage and romance in the movies, “[t]he rules for heterosexuality are put in place” (172). The rules are ascribed based on gender, with the male character seek[ing] out the female character for marriage” (Cokely 172), who, in turn, must “wait for the man of their dreams to come take them away from their unbearable situation” (Cokely 173). Like Cokely, Karin Martin and Emily Kazyak discover in their 2009 study how heteronormativity and hetero-romantic love are reinforced in children’s G-rated films. Of the twenty films they analyze, eighty-five percent are produced by Disney. They conclude that heteronormativity is constructed in these films primarily through the depiction of hetero-romantic love as “exceptional, magical, [and] transformative” (Martin and Kazyak 323). The climax of this hetero-romantic love is the success of the marriage-plot that forms the happy ending of most Disney princess movies. In their role endorsing Disney’s views on gender, the animal sidekicks are also reinforcing the inherent heteronormativity of the films.

Returning now to Snow White’s animal posse, aside from their general support of Snow White’s gendered happy ending — riding away to marry a prince she hardly knows — they also promote gender stereotypes in the more mundane areas of cooking and cleaning. When Snow White is led to the dwarfs’ cottage, she assumes that it must be the home of “seven little children” (00.16.29) who have no mother. She then takes on a motherly role and decides to “clean the house and surprise them” (00.17.38). She performs this reasoning in front of the animals, and, in mind of the teacherly role she plays for them as child stand-ins, for their benefit. The animals then help her with the task of cleaning the dwarfs’ house, reinforcing the notion that cleaning is gendered work, and that the most natural thing for a woman (or girl, rather — Snow White is fourteen, here) to do when encountering a dirty house is to joyfully set about tidying it up. This, of course, reflects the appreciation in Depression-era America for a housewife who could “economise in terms both of money and material resources,” (Davis 118) which was viewed as “her patriotic duty to her country,” (Davis 118) especially once the Second World War began.

With 1950’s *Cinderella*, Disney continues using animal sidekicks as children, but in a more nuanced manner. Four minutes into the movie, Cinderella tells the birds who have woken her about a dream she has had the night before. She adopts the same slow, patronizing tone as Snow White when she explains that she can’t disclose the contents of her dream: “’Cause if you tell a wish,” she says, nodding sagely, “it won’t come true” (00.04.12). Here, Cinderella takes on a similar teacherly role as Snow White, educating the helpful animals that surround her[[1]](#footnote-1). *Cinderella*, however, presents a more nuanced case than *Snow White*, introducing named animal sidekicks along with the general mob of animal devotees. The two mice, Jaq and Gus, who have their own personalities and plotlines, are portrayed in a distinctly juvenile manner, with Jaq possessing a stutter and mispronouncing words, and Gus, bumbling and lovably ignorant, in need of near-constant supervision. The two mice are not portrayed equally, however. Jaq, despite his trouble speaking (or squeaking, one might say), is rather smart, thinking of ways to evade Lucifer, the stepmother’s evil cat who has it out for the mice. Jaq is also instructed by Cinderella to “See [Gus] keeps out of trouble” (00.09.16), which he does, frequently saving Gus from close-calls with Lucifer. Gus, on the other hand, is portrayed as less intelligent[[2]](#footnote-2) and is constantly getting fished out of trouble by Jaq and Cinderella; in other words, it is easier to see Gus as a child, with Jaq being his proxy-guardian, and not representative of a child, himself. This would be a mistake. Although Jaq is more inventive and resourceful than Gus, and saves him from harm multiple times, Jaq functions more like the older brother of the baby-like Gus.

In *Cinderella*, too, the animal sidekicks are used to promote traditional gender roles. Like in *Snow White*, the animals of *Cinderella* assist her in escaping the drudgery of her life by ensuring that she marries the prince and lives “happily ever after.” They do so in two main ways: first, by ensuring that Cinderella can go to the ball where she will meet her prince, and secondly, by playing a major role in the Grand Duke’s discovery of Cinderella, as the girl the prince wants to marry. When Cinderella mournfully realizes that her stepmother has given her so many chores that she won’t have time to fix her dress, her grateful mice friends decide that they “can do it!” (00.31.56). Together with the bird sidekicks, the mice sew a beautiful dress for Cinderella. Although the dress is ultimately destroyed by her stepsisters, the animals still play a crucial role in getting Cinderella to the ball. The Fairy Godmother turns some of the mice into white horses, and Bruno, the dog, into a footman, and a horse into a coachman. The animals are physically bringing her to the ball, and one step closer to her happy ending. The animals, Jaq and Gus, in particular, are also instrumental in helping the Grand Duke discover that Cinderella is the mysterious girl the prince wants to marry. When Cinderella’s stepmother locks her in her room so that the Grand Duke will not realize that Cinderella is the maiden he is searching for, Jaq and Gus heroically snatch the key from the stepmother, evade her evil cat, Lucifer, all in time for Cinderella to call out, “Your Grace, please, wait!” just as the Duke is about to leave their house. This, of course, leads him to discover that Cinderella is the intended bride of the prince, and the scene cuts immediately to Cinderella’s wedding bells ringing, efficiently communicating the animals’ role in achieving her perfect Disney ending.

Cinderella’s mice friends not only aid her in achieving domestic bliss; they explicitly express traditional gender roles. The most noteworthy example of this occurs when the mice and birds are fixing up the dress Cinderella intends to wear to the ball. Jaq enthusiastically bounds over to help, carrying a sewing needle, singing, “I can do the sewing!” (00.32.26), to which a female mouse responds, finger wagging, “Leave the sewing to the women. You go get some trimmin’” (00.32.29). Here, the mice, joyfully and songfully, solidify the traditional gender roles of the era that housework, such as sewing, is “women’s work,” while men provide the raw materials for the women to use[[3]](#footnote-3).

In Disney’s 1959 film, *Sleeping Beauty*, the princess Aurora isn’t followed around by loyal animal adherents like Snow White and Cinderella, but they do appear in one notable scene: when Aurora meets her betrothed, Prince Philip, for the first time as an adult (although they are both unaware of each other’s identities at the time). Despite their limited screentime, the animals are still treated as children, although, in a way that more closely resembles *Snow White* than *Cinderella*. When Aurora is in the woods, before she meets the prince, the birds and squirrels sing along with her and help her pick berries, in a rather childlike manner. She also confides in them in the same slow, explanatory tone that both Snow White and Cinderella employ when talking to their animal sidekicks. And, even though they prominently feature in only one scene, it is to assist Aurora in finding the man who will later save and wed her. When Aurora is downcast because she has only dreamt about love, but has never experienced it, the woodland animals find the coat, hat, and boots that a nearby Prince Philip has hung up to dry, and pretend to be a prince, to cheer Aurora up. This theft of his clothes inadvertently leads Prince Philip to Aurora, and he steps in for the pretend prince and dances with Aurora. By facilitating the first adult meeting between Aurora and her betrothed, the woodland animals aid Aurora in achieving the happy ending she had been destined to since birth: to marry her betrothed and produce heirs to the throne.

With 1989’s *The Little Mermaid*, a shift occurs in the status of the animal sidekicks. Where, previously, they had functioned as stand-ins for their child viewers, in this movie, they begin to take on the role of babysitter. The shift only *begins* to occur in *The Little Mermaid*, because the character of Flounder remains a stand-in for a child, with his high-pitched voice, dependence on Ariel, and childlike goofiness. When Ariel drags him along to explore a creepy sunken ship, Flounder protests, “I think I may be coming down with something” (00.06.25), to avoid going: a common childhood tactic. Later, he and Ariel are chased by a shark, and when, at last, they restrain the shark, Flounder, in a bout of juvenile triumph yells, “you big bully!” (00.08.47) and blows a raspberry in the shark’s face. Flounder follows Ariel like a little kid might tag along with his, cooler, older sister, functioning very clearly as a child in the movie.

The shift in the role of the animal sidekick is introduced with the character of Sebastian the crab, who is the court composer and semi-advisor to Triton, Ariel’s father. Sebastian is instructed by Ariel’s father, Triton, to keep Ariel under “constant supervision” (00.14.05), which he reluctantly does. Although Sebastian is strict and fittingly crabby, he warms up to Ariel and clearly cares about her happiness. Sebastian signifies a shift from the previous animal sidekicks by functioning in a role that is clearly not childlike. He, instead, performs a babysitting-like function, keeping Ariel in check (although he often fails to). The introduction of a babysitter-like animal sidekick comes with the decrease in maturity of the princess in this movie: Ariel. Ariel behaves in a much younger way than her princess predecessors, even though she is the same age or older. She rebels against her father by going up to the surface and taking such a keen interest in the human world. The previous princesses are more responsible, obedient, and, in some cases, rather bland, with *Sleeping Beauty’*s Aurora being a one-dimensional character who longs for love. Snow White, who, at fourteen, is the youngest Disney princess, is very put-together for her age, and her first instinct upon seeing an empty, messy house is to clean it and take care of its inhabitants. Although she is helpless and doesn’t detect the danger of the Evil Queen until it’s too late, her ignorance is due more to Disney’s depiction of gender in the 1930s — a time when women were encouraged to explore what they could “achieve in terms of their beauty...and their appearances” (Davis 116) — than her age. Perhaps Sebastian’s role as a babysitter is introduced to counteract and manage Ariel’s more youthful demeanor.

Both Flounder and Sebastian work to support the gender ideology of this movie. Much like *The Little Mermaid’*s predecessors, the ultimate goal of this movie is to get the princess, Ariel, married. Flounder is fully supportive of this goal, presenting Ariel with a statue of Prince Eric: the human prince she has become fixated on. After Ariel has been transformed into a human by the sea-witch, Ursula (who presents her own views on gender, singing, “it’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man[[4]](#footnote-4)” (00.43.44)), Flounder helps Ariel swim up to the surface. Sebastian is a little more reluctant to assist Ariel in her pursuit of Eric. There is, of course, the fact that he has been ordered by Triton to keep Ariel as far away from humans as possible, but there is also his general air of disapproval towards teenagers; as he remarks to Triton, “you give them an inch, they swim all over you” (00.13.41). But, once Ariel has been transformed into a human, and must, for lack of a better word, seduce Prince Eric into falling in love with her, Sebastian relents, and even conducts the song “Kiss the Girl” to try to convince Eric to kiss Ariel. Although Sebastian initially joins Ariel’s “side” because of the consequences of her failing — Ursula turning her into a polyp for her garden — at the end of the movie, he is fully in support of Ariel, telling King Triton, “children got to be free to lead their own lives” (01.15.53), encouraging Triton to transform her into a human, again.

There is room to read Sebastian’s role in a more radical way. Sebastian, being an advisor and servant to Triton, represents Triton, specifically, and tradition, more broadly. He represents and expresses the view that mer-people cannot marry humans, and that Ariel is making a mistake getting involved with the human world. Throughout the movie, though, Sebastian is proven wrong. He ends up warming up to Ariel’s position, and comes to agree (as does Triton) that Ariel can follow her dreams and live amongst humans. This arc that Sebastian follows, is perhaps Disney’s way of promoting a more expansive view of marriage[[5]](#footnote-5), as seen through the inter-species marriage between Ariel and Eric[[6]](#footnote-6). The fact that Sebastian’s traditional point of view is proven wrong, serves to emphasize the correctness of Ariel’s marriage to Eric at the end of the movie. Despite this possibly expanded view of marriage, it is difficult to forget that the movie’s happy ending still features a marriage between two teenagers.

Cole Reilly, in his essay “An Encouraging Evolution Among the Disney Princesses? A Critical Feminist Analysis” (2016), also picks up on both Disney’s progress and stagnation in *The Little Mermaid*, as compared to its predecessors. He places the movie in a category he terms “second-generation princesses,” the protagonists in which “show tremendous heart and spirit but sacrifice themselves unreasonably for the men in their lives” (Reilly 54). While Ariel is far from the pretty prize that Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are[[7]](#footnote-7), she is ultimately willing to “give up her voice for a chance to woo a handsome stranger” (Reilly 54). In telling her story, Disney communicates to its viewers that one *can* be independent and radical — within the confines of pursuing marriage[[8]](#footnote-8).

For the purposes of this essay, 1992’s *Aladdin*, instead of *Beauty and the Beast*, will be considered next, as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* does not have animal sidekicks; their role is replaced by the animated furniture of the Beast’s palace. *Aladdin’*s Jasmine, however, has quite a memorable sidekick: her intimidating tiger, Rajah. Rajah is less of a babysitter to Jasmine and more of a guardian, but his role similarly mirrors Sebastian’s in that he is another male animal who cares for and tries to protect his princess. Because Sebastian can talk and Rajah cannot, Rajah is less dimensional than Sebastian, but he communicates through exaggerated facial expressions. He is the tender-hearted, yet strong-limbed, protector of the princess. He scares away the suitors Jasmine doesn’t like; one, Prince Achmed, is seen storming out of the palace with a hole in his trousers, displaying his heart-patterned underpants. The next scene shows a growling Rajah, gripping a scrap of heart-patterned fabric between his teeth. Later, when Aladdin, thinly disguised as Prince Ali arrives unannounced on Jasmine’s balcony, Rajah immediately snarls and backs him against the balcony edge. Rajah, for the most part, follows Jasmine’s wishes. There is one scene where he protests against her escaping the palace, pulling at her clothes and whining, but once Jasmine explains that she can’t remain in the palace and be forced to marry, Rajah helps Jasmine climb over the palace walls. Here, like Sebastian, Rajah protests against his princess, but is won over to her side in the end.

In accordance with his fellow animal sidekicks, Rajah, for the most part, supports Jasmine in achieving her gendered happy ending. In *Aladdin*, however, Disney’s expressed ideology is more pernicious than in the previous movies. The beginning of the movie has Jasmine complaining about being forced to marry a prince before her next birthday; “the law is wrong,” (00.13.19) she tells her father, when he brings up the law dictating her marriage[[9]](#footnote-9). Later, when Aladdin, as Prince Ali, discusses marrying Jasmine with the Sultan and Jafar, Jasmine barges in accusingly and says, “how dare you...standing around and deciding my future? I am not a prize to be won” (00.53.45). Rajah, of course, supports Jasmine in this sentiment by scaring away her unsavory suitors, and it seems like Disney may steer away from the narrative that princesses must marry to achieve a happy ending. This, however, does not happen. Jasmine falls (rather quickly) in love with Aladdin, and suddenly, has no qualms about marrying before her father’s deadline. Through Jasmine’s change of heart, Disney subversively promotes marriage as the primary goal of a young woman, one that, if she is uncertain about, she will eventually grow to embrace. Yes, Jasmine critiques the institution of arranged marriage, but she goes from her “restrictive dad’s captive” to “Jafar’s slave” to “a conquest by her disguised sweetheart” (Reilly 54). With *Aladdin*, Disney begins poking at the figurative balloon of traditional gender roles but stops short of popping it.

1998’s *Mulan* provides another guardian animal sidekick: Mushu, the fast-talking, joke-spewing, miniature dragon. Mushu is a former Fa family guardian — spirits who protect the Fa family — who was demoted to gong-ringer. After Mulan runs away to the army in her father’s place, her ancestors decide that a family guardian must be sent to protect and bring her back. Mushu is sent to awaken the “Great Stone Dragon,” ends up breaking his statue, and goes in the Great Stone Dragon’s place, intent on reclaiming his role as family guardian. As Mushu tells Mulan, “I have been sent by your ancestors to guide you through your masquerade” (00.27.36). Mushu helps Mulan fit in with the male soldiers at the army camp and saves her from being discovered as a woman. In one instance, Mushu bites Ling, one of the soldiers Mulan befriends, on the rear end while he is bathing in the lake as a distraction, so Mulan, who is bathing in the same lake, can swiftly escape. Mushu also actively changes the course of the war — forging a letter from the general to move Mulan’s troop to the front lines, to give Mulan more of a chance to act heroically and bring honor to her family. At the end of the movie, when Mulan is fighting Shan Yu, Mushu plays an integral part in the invader’s defeat, obtaining and lighting the firework that they shoot at Shan Yu. Ultimately, Mushu succeeds in keeping Mulan safe, and his efforts are rewarded at the end of the movie when he is reinstated as a family guardian by the Fa family ancestors.

*Mulan* is a movie that is thinking heavily about gender. The first song, “Honor to Us All” has lyrics like “a girl can bring her family / great honor in one way / by striking a good match” (00.06.56). Subsequent songs are called, “Be a Man” and “A Girl Worth Fighting For.” In the latter song, while all the other soldiers are extolling virtues they want in a wife and Mulan sings, “How ‘bout a girl who’s got a brain / who always speaks her mind?” (00.48.58), the other soldiers shake their heads, responding, “Nah!” (00.49.06). Mulan is clearly stretching the boundaries of gender roles in this movie[[10]](#footnote-10), and her animal sidekick, Mushu, was created in accordance with that goal. Although Mushu does bring audiences another male guardian of a female princess, he is diminutive compared to Rajah from *Aladdin*, and presents less of a physical threat. Mushu’s protection and aid lies more in his advice to Mulan about how to fit in with the male soldiers, and ensuring that her secret is not discovered. He also cares for her physical needs, making her breakfast on her first day in camp and lighting a fire for her when she is stranded in the snow. Mushu’s dedication to Mulan’s physical survival is a stark reversal from Snow White’s role as the caring, doting, mother-like figure. This marks a shift in the way the princesses are portrayed. Mulan can handle problems dealing with physical strength or intimidation — what Jasmine would have relied on Rajah for — by herself. Mushu plays helps with problems of a more social nature, such as fitting in, and avoiding getting caught.

*Mulan* signals a shift in the way female princesses are portrayed by Disney. Whereas, with the earlier princesses, much of their plotlines revolved around getting married in time or finding the right suitor, Mulan’s love story is secondary to her main triumph — bringing honor to her family. When she comes home, she immediately shows her father the gifts given to her by the emperor as thanks for her service to him and to China. Only after she has presented these to her father does Li Shang appear at their doorway with Mulan’s forgotten helmet and get invited for dinner, with the understanding that he and Mulan are attracted to each other. There is notably no kiss between the two, though, and the romance is not overt; it is simply suggested. In this movie, Disney begins moving away from the narrative that the sole happy ending for a princess is marriage, although the romance remains firmly heterosexual.

After *Mulan*, the next princess movie in which the princess does not turn into an animal (as is the case with the 2009 movie, *The Princess and the Frog*[[11]](#footnote-11)) is 2010’s *Tangled*. This retelling of the Rapunzel story ushers in yet another iteration of the animal sidekick character. Pascal, Rapunzel’s chameleon, functions neither as a child stand-in, nor a protector or bodyguard. Rather, Pascal functions more as a friend. He is first seen playing hide-and-seek with Rapunzel, and later helps Rapunzel with the chores and tasks she does around the house. Although he is not the first animal sidekick to assist his princess in doing chores, it is notable that Pascal is not taught how to do the chores, nor instructed to do them; he does them *with* Rapunzel, in a kind of amicable camaraderie. Rapunzel also confides in Pascal; when deciding what to do with the escaping thief she has captured in her room, she holds a whispered discussion with the chameleon, who communicates via squeaks, humanlike facial expressions, and hand gestures, all of which Rapunzel seems to understand. Pascal provides Rapunzel with moral support, placing his chameleon hand on her foot in a comforting manner when Rapunzel is sharing something difficult, and essentially functions as a travel-sized, color-changing best friend.

Like Mulan, Rapunzel is a princess who does not rely on her animal sidekick (or her love interest, for that matter) to protect her physically. When Flynn Rider, the escaped thief, climbs into Rapunzel’s tower, she knocks him over the head with a frying pan, ties him up with her extremely long hair, and holds an interrogation. Note that, not only does Rapunzel not rely on her sidekicks to protect herself, she doesn’t wield the pan to protect Pascal either. Later, when she and Flynn are running away from palace guards, Rapunzel again uses her hair to swing and rappel out of reach, and to save Flynn from getting caught. *Tangled* also continues decentralizing the marriage of the princess as the main storyline, although Rapunzel does find love at the end. The main storyline follows Rapunzel discovering her family, and the development of Rapunzel and Flynn’s romantic relationship is a secondary subplot. Flynn, as the narrator, does inform audiences that he and Rapunzel get married, although it is clear that it was not immediate, and that Flynn was the driving force behind the marriage, not Rapunzel’s great societal or familial pressure to do so. However, as previously mentioned, *Tangled*, with its heteroromantic love story, still functions within the framework of heteronormativity that the Disney franchise has constructed.

The animal sidekicks of the Disney princesses are many things: humorous, childlike, witty, and downright adorable. And although they may appear marginal to the main narrative of the princesses, they may, in fact, point to the more interesting story — the evolution of Disney’s gender ideology. The transition of the animal sidekicks from stand-ins for child viewers, to protector or babysitter, and finally to friend and confidante, is one that accompanies a greater shift in the way Disney presents girl-and-womanhood to children. With their squeaks and chitters, these fuzzy friends communicate Disney’s evolving tale: from a company that promotes pretty passivity as the height of womanhood, to the slow shift towards more active princesses, who take life by the frying pan, and whose happy ending includes more than just marrying a handsome prince.

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1. This, and the fact that Cinderella takes a particularly motherly approach to the animals (dressing and feeding them), plays into the larger “conventional assumptions about women’s maternal nature” (Wittner 204) of the 1950s and 60s. For further discussion of maternalism in this era, and how it manifested in nuclear disarmament activism, see Lawrence Wittner’s “Gender Roles and Nuclear Disarmament Activism,1954–1965” (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a way that is consistent with “Disney’s use of humorous portrayals concerning physical or mental handicaps” (May 469). For a short discussion on Disney’s problematic portrayal of those with disabilities, see Jill May’s “Walt Disney’s Interpretation of Children’s Literature” (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Amy Davis writes in *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (2007), as the middle class grew, so did the rise of the “ideal of the male bread-winner supporting his wife and children.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although, as Ursula is the villain of the story, the movie can be seen as critiquing her view that a quiet girl gets the guy. And, if Ursula is read as a person-of-color, as she is in Hurley’s “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess” (2005), this is perhaps a place where the culture of a person-of-color is seen as less-than those of white people, as will be seen later, with *Aladdin*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Which was very possibly influenced by the civil rights advances made in the 1960s and 70s; particularly the ruling of *Loving vs Virginia*, which outlawed anti-miscegenation laws, allowing for interracial marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, in the 1970s and 80s, because "women’s employment and political opportunities were much more promising than in previous decades, legislators increasingly sought to protect women from “premature” marriage” (Mittelstadt and Moran). Ariel's rebelling through her marriage to Eric (as opposed to Jasmine rebelling against the expectation that she marry) reflects a similar cultural concern about the people and age at which girls choose to marry. For more, see “Women, Gender, and the State, ca. 1900-2010" by Jennifer Mittelstadt and Rachel Louise Moran (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Possibly as a result of second-wave feminism, with Betty Friedan’s “critique of domesticity” (Valk 357), *The Feminine Mystique,* being published in 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Which, of course, plays into the inherent heteronormativity of the film. As Martin and Kazyak write, “Characters frequently defy parents, their culture, or their very selves to embrace a hetero-romantic love that is transformative, powerful, and (literally) magical” (324). Ariel provides an exceptionally clear example, with her stark physical transformation and vehement rebelling against her father. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This framing of Arabian law as unjust or wrong unfortunately fits into the ways in which “Arabian society is represented as being an unjust or unfair society” (Hurley 227) in *Aladdin*. For a broader discussion of racial representation in the Disney princess films, and its effect on children of color, see Dorothy L. Hurley’s “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess” (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, there are readings of Mulan as lesbian or queer. See “King of the Swingers: Queering Disney” in *Deconstructing Disney* (1999) for a discussion of how, through *Mulan* (and other movies), Disney negotiates boundaries of gender, sexuality, politics, and economics. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Which plays into the troubling trope of people-of-color turning into animals. For more on race in *The Princess and the Frog*, see Ajay Gehlawat’s “The Strange Case of The Princess and the Frog: Passing and the Elision of Race” (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)