

# Disney Princess Formula Undergoing Much-needed Transformation

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I, like most people my age, was raised on a diet of baby formula and Disney movies, and, as a learned veteran of tiaras and glass slippers, I would like to consider myself something of an expert as far as princesses are concerned.

Growing up, a veritable portion of my wardrobe consisted of tiny princess ball gowns, and it is entirely possible that I have cemented the lyrics of "Beauty and the Beast" into my memory — even now, I could quote verbatim any number of show tunes sung by lamps and clocks.

But time turned, and I grew out of princess ball gowns and into a new frame of mind. Singing along like a puppet in a tiara had never proved particularly hard, and I began to wonder if I really knew the lyrics I sang, if I understood at all the movies that had sculpted me.

Belle wants an adventure, she treks through the woods, she meets a guy, she loves the guy; it's a story as old as time, cue the credits.

Ariel wants to be a human, she loses her voice, she meets a guy, she loves the guy, blank screen.

Cinderella is a little less ambitious than Belle or Ariel — she mostly just dreams of being free from the auspices of a domineering stepmother and two preening stepsisters. She puts on the shoes, she meets a guy, she loves the guy, she loses a shoe, she finds the shoe, she meets the guy again, happily ever after ...

The princesses I had once upon a time idolized were beginning to look startlingly alike. It was the Disney Princess Formula:  $P = D + G$ ; a Princess is the sum of some deep-ridden Desire — adventure, tail-less-ness, freedom — and a Guy who satisfies this desire.

Sometimes Disney's writers — in a contrived attempt at Girl Power — wrote the Brave Princess, or the Smart Princess, or the Warrior Princess. But  $P = D + G$  was the quintessence of the princess movie, and whatever came between the D and the G was detail, trivial.

By 2010, it would seem that Disney itself had realized this, too, or had at least begun to. We followed as "Tangled's" Rapunzel dreams of leaving her tower, as she meets Guy, as

Guy fulfills Desire ... but wait! She manages to defeat Mother Gothel without Flynn Rider's help, even saving Flynn himself in the process.

In 2012, "Brave's" radical Merida made headlines, shooting "for her own hand" and defying a long, objectifying line of suitors. The film, in fact, does not even make an effort to explore potential relationships with the strange bachelors suddenly thrust into Merida's life. Instead, a mother-daughter relationship is examined, tested, then strengthened. There is no Guy to speak of.

Elsa and Anna of the 2013-released "Frozen," congruent with Disney's recent nods to feminism, were exceptional femmes to follow. Anna's plot chronicles that there is more to love than first-sight clichés, and Elsa — Guy-less — literally learns that power (even a snowy, icy power) cannot make her cold. The intersection between the two spotlights a budding sisterly affection and friendship, and the credits roll with a female audience feeling largely empowered.

Disney's most recent release was also weirdly empowering, in a much less obvious way. "Moana" stands apart for a few reasons, the first — and probably the most tangible — being our protagonist's appearance. No fancy dress (finally!), and a coconut-cutting, rock-hauling chief-to-be, Moana has *muscle*. Watch closely — steering her boat, climbing a cliff ... Yup, the girl has some definite cords in her arms, beautifully challenging Disney's usual female depiction as soft-looking and slim-limbed.

This well-muscled protagonist's personal journey is unique in that romance — possibly for the first time in Disney Princess history — is not even remotely mentioned. Which isn't to say that love isn't a factor in the film. Love is apparent between Moana and her family, between Moana and her people ... and, of course, between Moana and the sea.

Sure, there are *guys*. But there are, for once, no Guys, or even mention of potential Guys. Moana's route to self-discovery is one tread without overpowering male dominance, normalizing the notion that a girl's story — her identity — is complete without any added romance.

There is still headway to be made — is a princess in *pants* too much to ask for? — but as a girl who learned early in life to always wait for Guy, I have high hopes for a new generation of princesses writing their own stories, choosing to be something bigger and stronger and infinitely more complex than a uniform equation.