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# From Perfect Daughter to Feminist: How Culture Disguises Disney's Recycled Formula in Mulan and Moana

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The University of Southern Mississippi

From Perfect Daughter to Feminist:  
How Culture Disguises Disney's Recycled Formula in *Mulan* and *Moana*

by

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## Abstract

Film is a relatively young art form and industry compared to others, such as music and dance. Its origins go back no more than 150 years, yet criticism surrounds film over the lack of originality. The Walt Disney Company, or Disney, is one of the most well-known companies in the industry, and it too is accused of recycling some of the same narrative elements and images in its films. This recycling of themes, characters, animation, plot points, and more are known as formulas that Disney uses to ensure financial success. In recent years, the film industry, but more specifically Hollywood, and Disney have been reprimanded for the lack of diversity in films in regards to the positive representation of people of color and true feminist characters. In an attempt to satisfy audiences, Disney began producing films from cultures outside of Europe that star feminist-approved female leads. This thesis uses contextual and narrative structure analysis to determine how Disney brought a new perspective to audiences but still followed the concept of the Disney formula in the films *Mulan* and *Moana*.

Keywords: Disney, formula, feminist, culture, *Moana*, *Mulan*

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents. They came to this country from Mexico and Puerto Rico to give me better opportunities, and here I am twenty-two years later with a completed thesis. Throughout all of my endeavors, they have supported me unconditionally. There were days where I wanted to quit everything, but they told me to push forward. Their sacrifice and my hard work have never been just about my academic achievements but rather my personal development into an intelligent, ambitious individual. Everyday they remind me that I have a voice, and that I should share that with the world until my final days. I love you mami y papi!

## Acknowledgements

At this time, I would like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Dr. Gentile. When I first started this process, writing a thesis seemed like the most daunting endeavor in my academic career. At times, I would go into Dr. Gentile's office doubting my work. He always knew the right things to say not only to compliment my work and motivate me, but to also guide me towards strengthening my work. Whenever I felt there was something missing but could not figure out what it was, the answer would be in his feedback. I would also like to thank him for giving me the freedom to work at my own pace. The process itself brought along an endless amount of stress my way, but he never added to that pressure and helped alleviate some of it. He made the process easier and more enjoyable for me, and I will forever be grateful.

In addition to Dr. Gentile, I would like to acknowledge the constant support from my best friends, Maria and Whitney. They stuck around and heard my never-ending ramblings about my thesis that would reignite my passion for this subject when I would be consumed with the stress of it all. Having them listen to an informal version of my analysis would get me to say whatever was on my mind, and that would spark new ideas. They were also great listeners and motivators. When I was sulking, they would let me get all that negative energy out first, and then they would bring out the tough love and tell me to stop procrastinating and get to work. They would remind me of our favorite student athlete motto (despite not being athletes at all): "The grind never stops! We stay dream chasing!" When I would update them on what I planned to do next, they would answer with our inside joke/phrase of encouragement: "Go for it!" They kept me laughing when I needed it the most, and this thesis and I wouldn't be where we are without them.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In my thesis, I want to answer the question of how Disney can use the same general plot and various identical story elements to shape the protagonists of *Mulan* and *Moana* into feminists, yet still produce two seemingly original stories on the surface. Both films center around a sixteen-year-old girl who embarks on a forbidden quest to save her people at the expense of her father's wishes. The relationship with the overprotective father, more or less passive mother, "wacky" grandmother, and male travel companion influences what kind of person the protagonist is before and after the journey.

Along with these crucial characters, the dangerous adventure itself is a recurring element. The physical journey is necessary for the protagonist to evolve and discover the identity she struggled with from the beginning. At first, the women are not equipped with the skills required for their respective quests, but through determination, they learn these skills and became self-assured women. By the end of the films, these girls who desired to be the "perfect daughter" have abandoned this idea and transformed into fully-fledged feminists. Whether it is the interaction with characters or plot devices such as the journey, these factors either push the protagonists towards becoming confident women or serve as obstacles that hinder their mental journey to this end goal.

In essence, the skeleton of the stories is very similar because of these same patterns and general plot lines, but Disney manages to give the audience the sense of two different experiences through the representation of two cultures. Once Disney brings in culture, the details of the stories start to transform the films into distinct stories. For instance, *Mulan* is based on the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan, while *Moana* draws inspiration from various Polynesian cultures and mythologies. Suddenly, *Mulan* and *Moana* are no longer the same story because *Mulan* is

about a girl who enlists in the Chinese Army to save her father and all of China, and *Moana* is about a teenager who sails the ocean to restore the heart of Te Fiti, which will save her village's resources. In terms of characters, the supernatural travel companion takes on a form that fits into the respective culture that is represented. For example, Mushu is an ancestral dragon, while Maui is a Polynesian demigod. Additionally, the different cultures mean that the audience is not exposed to the same visuals in terms of art, costumes, sets, and music as well. Because the audience is seeing two completely different cultures, it is easier to justify that the films are not the same or at least do not possess similar formulas. Furthermore, the films seem "fresh" because they differ from the Eurocentric default of most American films.

My research objectives would include identifying what elements were used in both films as a means of character development and observing how films can seem original while using the same patterns. Furthermore, the second objective would tie into the value of my research. In the film industry, a person is essentially working in the idea business, but no idea is ever purely original because humans are influenced by the world around us. Everything that humans have consumed over the years plays a role in the stories that are imagined and translated into film. Because of this theory, some people believe that the same story is told over and over again with no feeling of freshness; however, a person can tell the same story, but make it feel like a new idea through diversity. One of the issues with film and other media forms is Euro centrism. A way to remedy that feeling of monotony is by sharing stories through the lens of other cultures or groups of people. My research would explore how diversity can make this goal possible and take a look at the evolution of positive, accurate representation of people of color in Disney films since *Mulan* and *Moana* share an eighteen-year difference.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since my research involves comparing *Mulan* and *Moana*, establishing the relationship of these two films is important for my thesis' credibility. These films were not randomly chosen for a comparison and contrast paper. In fact, they were carefully selected because of the relationship that exists between these films; they come from the same film studio and are constructed with some identical elements. Additionally, my research centers on how these films are similar within the overall storytelling realm and the Disney specific storytelling realm.

Before delving into literature that mentions these films specifically, it is crucial to introduce a theory that accounts for why and how these two films share similar plot elements. In his book, *Seven Basic Plots: Why Do We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker claims that all human stories are built on seven "basic plots." Booker believes that all stories do not always strictly follow these plots because if they did humans would get bored and easily recognize the concept of the seven basic plots. Despite the fact that there are stories that only use part of a plot or overlap with other plots, Booker stands by the belief that there are still a small group of plots that humans generally use. Once people acknowledge these plots, the psychology behind why stories are told with these plots can be studied. For my research purposes, the psychology of why humans tell stories in a certain way will not be explored, but rather Booker's idea of the quest plot will be mentioned to provide a link between *Mulan* and *Moana*.

According to Booker, the quest plot revolves around a hero and his or her companions going on a quest because of a call that will lead to a "life-renewing goal."<sup>1</sup> On the journey, the hero and the companions are met with trials and tribulations, but eventually they reach the final destination before accomplishing their goal. Once there, the hero will face a last epic test, come

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Booker, *Seven Basic Plots: Why Do We Tell Stories?* (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd / Books.), 82.

out victorious, and possess a “new” life.<sup>2</sup> Most of the elements Booker describes of the quest plot are evident in both *Mulan* and *Moana*. The quest plot is essentially the skeleton of these films’ plots.

After recognizing the role of these films in the general storytelling world, the films must be analyzed within the context of Disney. While Booker’s concept of storytelling is based on the subconscious way humans tell stories, Disney also tells its stories on a more conscious level. Several books have been published on Disney as an entertainment industry, including *Rethinking Disney* and *The Mouse That Roared*. Whether it has been in passing or in great detail, many scholars believe that Disney carefully constructs the way it tells stories because of economical reasons. According to people such as Henry A. Giroux, Mike Budd, and Max H. Kirsch, Disney adopts a formula for their animated films in order to maintain their capitalist success and promote Disney’s reach beyond entertainment. Giroux cites Norman M. Klein as one of his sources and confesses that Disney creates a world where “entertainment, advocacy, pleasure, and consumerism” intersect,<sup>3</sup> whereas Budd and Kirsch really drive the idea that Disney focuses on the success of animated films not for the sake of children’s entertainment or education but rather the corporation’s financial gain. In fact, they agree with Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney’s idea that these films are “self-contained confections” that are used as a gateway to push consumerism and capitalism through toys and merchandise related to the films.<sup>4</sup>

Because Disney has found a particular way to express stories and maximize profits, the company tends to hold onto what has worked for it. Animation style serves as a visual

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence* (Lanham (Maryland): Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch, *Rethinking Disney: private control, public dimensions* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005),80.

representation of the lengths Disney will go to preserve its business. For example, a former animator confessed that working with Disney required following a set “Disney-style.”<sup>5</sup> Animators’ creativity is limited because they must follow Disney’s guidelines, and a reason for these rules is associated with the assumption that the Disney film *Hercules* failed because it used a non-Disney animation style. Furthermore, Disney is not afraid of recycling older animations. In the past, Disney has used rotoscoping, a technique where new footage is created simply by tracing over old footage. Multiple videos exist showing the technique in effect. While Disney has gotten away from recycling footage, Disney still tends to rely on a particular art style.

Even though animation is one of the aspects Disney likes to regulate, the most important area to study for this research project is the continuous focus on themes that affect the film plots. Budd and Kirsch identify four themes that are demonstrated in every Disney film. These themes include the “naturalization of hierarchy, defense of elite coercion and power, promotion of hyper-individualism, and the denigration of democratic solidarity.”<sup>6</sup> Once again, Disney pushes for the spread of these ideals because they are the concepts that drive the capitalist system that makes Disney rich. These themes come together to form a story that assures audiences that it’s acceptable for an elite individual to embark on a journey that serves his or her needs. The audience can conclude that if it is normal for the protagonist to step away from their regular lives, then the audience is allowed to do the same by watching an escapist film such as the ones Disney always seems to produce. In regards to the use of these themes, *Mulan* and *Moana* are no exception. On the other hand, Giroux mentions how Disney films share the overall themes of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,83.

“survival, separation, death, and loss” in a way that children can handle within these fantasy worlds Disney creates.<sup>7</sup>

While these scholars agree that Disney recycles the same themes in all of their films, there is debate over whether Disney changes what themes it promotes over time. For example, Budd and Kirsch argue that there have been no changes in regards to “theme, character, or representation” since Walt Disney’s death.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Giroux claims that Disney does not strap itself down to “unchanging formal conventions.”<sup>9</sup> When analyzing, *Mulan* and *Moana*, I believe that both theories are correct to certain degrees. For instance, Disney still addresses the themes that were mentioned earlier in both films; however, it cannot be said that no changes have occurred. Disney makes changes according to trends, so if audiences wish to see something different, Disney moves toward that direction because the company follows the money. For example, audiences demanded to see more feminist characters and more positive, accurate representations of people of color and their cultures, which is why Disney created *Mulan* and *Moana* in the first place. While Disney has not seen drastic changes per se, it cannot be denied that changes have not occurred.

Introducing a theory that illustrates stories’ tendencies to revolve around the same plots and showing how Disney reuses elements in animated films is necessary to set up how *Mulan* and *Moana* share a relationship from their conceptions. When analyzing these films further, however, the similarities continue. Unfortunately, there is not much literature that has been published on these ideas because of the recent release of the film *Moana*, but that is where most of my research relies on personal observations. Although literature cannot be found on the

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<sup>7</sup> Giroux, *The Mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Budd and Kirsch, *Rethinking Disney: private control, public dimensions*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Giroux, *The Mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*, 5.

similarities of both films, literature exists that discusses the films individually, which will aid in the thesis project. For instance, one of the topics that I will identify is how Disney uses some of the same plot elements and characters to develop the protagonists into feminists; therefore, I must explore the feminist approach to these films. Once I have dealt with that part of my thesis question, then I must begin to answer how, despite being extremely similar stories, both films are distinct because of the way Disney infuses culture into the narratives. With that section, I must use the cultural approach. Depending on what film is being discussed, essays in academic journals, sections in published books, and articles in newspapers serve to explore feminism and cultural studies in these films.

Since *Mulan* has been around for over ten years, there is more literature published on the subject than there is on *Moana*. In Giroux's book, the author dedicates a section in chapter three about the controversy of gender identity in Disney films. He proceeds to claim that *Mulan* does a better job than the previous films at painting Mulan as a feminist protagonist, but ultimately resorts to old gender roles because Mulan ends up with a romantic partner. In contrast, the articles by Richard Corliss, Teresa Ortega, Stuart Klawans, Jean Seligmann, B.J. Sigismund, Corie Brown, and Laura Shapiro praise Mulan as a warrior and exalt how Disney made her the most feminist character to date. These reviews were written around the time *Mulan* had just come out in theaters reveal that for that time period, Mulan was considered a very feminist character; however, recent articles argue that Moana is currently the most progressive Disney character in terms of feminism. Similarly, Eliza Berman addresses the feminist nature of Moana's character, but she does so through the directors' words. Ron Clements and John Musker state that Moana is not like other Disney princesses and that she is a "badass."

Interviewing the directors provides great insight into their vision and how personal interpretation of the film can fit with their intentions.

Berman is not the only author to quote the directors in regards to the film. Marc Snetiker managed to unveil that the reason why the directors built their story around a young woman is because several Polynesian myths promote female empowerment. Thus, they tie Moana's feminist nature to her Polynesian culture rather than implying that Disney made her a feminist simply because that is what viewers want to see. Speaking of culture, most of the articles found on *Moana* typically address cultural sensitivity rather than focusing on feminism. With these articles, authors tend to either concentrate on cultural representation or feminism. Vadim Rizov makes the comment that Clements and Musker have done a better job of representing culture positively after the controversy of the racism found in their previous film, *Aladdin*. The mention of this fact then gives insight as to why the directors would pay so much attention to cultural details; Disney must ensure that it meets the public's request for diversity and produce a film free from stereotypes, which garnered controversy. Suddenly, the years of research trips for this film that Lapacazo Sandoval and Barbara Robertson talk about makes sense. The directors embarked on these research trips to once again avoid negative images, and most critics applaud their effort that even included forming an organization that would double check cultural details.

While a lot of the authors applaud Disney's efforts to represent cultures outside of Europe, there are other writers, such as Lawrence Downes who point out some of the stereotypes seen in *Moana*, which include Maui's body size. Taking into account literature that points out positive as well as negative views on feminism and cultural representation in these films is important because Disney has never produced a film that is unproblematic. A common trend appears to be that positive reviews tend to come from brief film reviews that came out when the

films did, while more critical reviews stem from lengthier articles that were written years after the film's release. Also, scholars and people from the cultures that are portrayed usually point out the flaws, and their arguments should be considered as well because they are looking beyond the magical world of a Disney film and analyze how Disney could have been more culturally sensitive.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

Because the thesis topic revolves around the parallels between the Disney films *Mulan* and *Moana*, researching Disney as an industry is important. Reading literature on how the company works and how it creates its films will give insight into why and how these two films are similar. Learning about the formulas Disney employs will provide me with a general idea of how the films are alike when looking at characters, plot devices, and themes. Discovering what aspects Disney recycles in a majority of its films would give me a starting point for my analysis of *Mulan* and *Moana*.

Since this thesis is about *Mulan* and *Moana*, I will have to watch both films, my primary sources, numerous times. Viewing the films individually and in their entirety is the first step in the analysis process because I must be familiar with what happens overall in both films. Then the formal analysis of the films' story and plot will occur in the form of segmentation. As I watch one film, I will provide a chronological outline of the film's events. I will most likely use segmentation per scene, which involves watching a scene in the film, pausing the film, outlining the scene, and resuming the film after that section has been dissected. Segmentation of both films will be time-consuming since this method is a detailed one, but it will offer visual support of the identical plot elements in both films.

Additionally, segmentation reveals the structure of the films, which in turn helps point out the meaning of the film. My thesis topic is not only about identifying the same elements both films share, but rather how both films use these elements to construct the story of a rebellious sixteen-year-old daughter who becomes Disney's next feminist role model. Segmentation aids in uncovering how Disney asserts feminist ideologies—a growing trend in most recent Disney movies- through the films' form.

Furthermore, when analyzing what elements shape the protagonists into self-assured women, I will use a feminist approach to examine the role of certain characters and plot devices in influencing the protagonist's character development. Because the goal of Disney is to satisfy audiences' demand for strong female leads, the feminist approach must be applied in my evaluation.

Another approach that will be used is reception studies. Because a bulk of the thesis is based on personal observations, reading other people's reviews of the films might be helpful in seeing if my observations are valid or if other ideas exist besides my own. For the most part, the reviews that would aid in my thesis are those that discuss the protagonists as feminist characters; however, articles touching on the representation of culture in the films will be useful as well.

After I have identified how the films are one and the same, I will examine how Disney separates the two in the viewers' minds through the lens of different cultures. First, I must read and watch interviews where the directors talk about their cultural inspiration and research for the films. Once I have discovered this information, I must research their research to account for how culture separates one film from the other.

### Chapter Breakdown

The thesis will have nine chapters. The first three chapters will be the same chapters as the prospectus: Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology. Chapter four will be titled Disney the Industry and will establish why both films are similar even before conception. Chapter five will be about the similarities between the protagonists. Chapters six, seven, and eight will discuss the identical elements that are used to mold the protagonists. Chapter six will be about the protagonists' relationship with men, such as the overprotective father and male travel companions. In contrast, chapter seven will be about the relationship with women like the

passive mother and wacky grandmother. Chapter eight will be about the journey, and chapter nine will be about how Disney uses culture to make the films seem like different stories. The final tenth chapter will be the conclusion.

## Chapter Four: Disney the Industry

According to Giroux, The Walt Disney Company has extended its purpose and reach outside of entertainment, and this idea is evident today. In the beginning, the company focused on its animated films, but nowadays, that is only a portion of what the company has created. Toys, books, movies, CDs, clothing, and endless products that feature Disney characters can be found in most physical and online stores. Furthermore, Disney keeps its characters alive with theme parks and resorts found throughout the world. Disney also owns hundreds of radio stations and several TV networks.<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that the company has grown into an industry, and it is an industry that owes its accomplishments to the image it has built over the decades.

Because Disney is a media conglomerate worth billions, maintaining its reputation is key to financial success. Disney is known as a family friendly company, and through the years, it has determined what families deem appropriate for viewers of all ages. The company collects this information and then recycles what it knows works. Every aspect of an animated Disney film is studied in order to ensure that it fits the Disney mold. Formulas exist in the form of characters, themes, art, music, plot devices, and so on.

Despite being products of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Mulan* and *Moana* are no exception to this recycling of formulas. For example, the protagonists, Mulan and Moana, are not the only rebellious daughters from the Disney universe. Other teenagers who clash with one of their guardians are Cinderella (*Cinderella* 1950), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas* 1995), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid* 1989), Jasmine (*Aladdin* 1992), Rapunzel (*Tangled* 2010), and Merida (*Brave* 2012). All of these young women disobey only one guardian, but out of those characters, only Pocahontas, Jasmine, Ariel, Mulan, and Moana disobey their overprotective fathers-Chief

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<sup>10</sup> Giroux, *The Mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*, 2.

Powhatan, King Triton, the Sultan, Fa Zhou, and Tui. This conflict between guardian and daughter is one of Disney's common plot devices in its animated films. Additionally, a second plot device that is constantly used is the dangerous adventure. In *Peter Pan* (1953), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Hercules* (1997) the protagonist must escape the dangers of Neverland, Wonderland, and the Underworld in order to return home. Similarly, Mulan and Moana go on an adventure, face several obstacles, and return home.

Another character that is found in *Mulan* and *Moana* is the wise grandmother. This character made its first appearance in *Pocahontas* as Grandmother Willow. This character acts a more positive, present influence on the protagonist than the protagonist's actual mother. For instance, Pocahontas' mother is dead, so she turns to Grandmother Willow for advice in regards to her overbearing father. Moana also seeks out Tala for that same reason even though her mother is alive. There is not a moment where Mulan goes and talks to Grandmother Fa, but Grandmother Fa is a character who veers away from the status quo slightly more than Mulan's passive mother does. Moana's mother is also more reserved and susceptible to following authority figures. Having a grandmother who does not strictly adhere to gender roles gives the protagonist an example of a female who does not always bow down to men and their expectations. While *Mulan* and *Moana* do share this character, her purpose is more significant and different in *Moana*.

Even though Disney has set certain parameters for its films, the company is not unchanging. Disney understands that in order to satisfy the customers, the company must be flexible ideologically because society's views are ever changing. By the end of the nineties, women were demanding feminist role models. Disney princesses like Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Ariel who had to be saved by men were no longer acceptable protagonists; therefore,

Disney created *Mulan*-a film about a woman who secretly enlists in the Chinese army and saves China. While some critics praised Mulan as a feminist, others argued that while she was independent she still did not escape the usual Disney formula where the girl finds a man. Additionally, Mulan had to take on the role of a man in order to accomplish anything, so Disney kept striving to present the masses with its most progressive, feminist protagonist with each movie that was released.<sup>11</sup> *Moana* is Disney's latest movie starring a female protagonist, and Moana has shown the progression Disney has made: Moana's relationship with Maui is platonic, Moana is the one who restores the heart of Te Fiti, Moana is the next in line to be chief, and Moana's physical appearance is more "realistic."

*Mulan* and *Moana* are also films about people of color. For years and to this day, underrepresented communities have asked for diversity in films.<sup>12</sup> Audiences want to get away from Eurocentrism and see other cultures represented positively, which explains why Disney looked toward Chinese and Polynesian culture for their films *Mulan* and *Moana*. Between both films, *Moana* is the film that most illustrates Disney's willingness to learn from past mistakes. In 1992, Ron Clements and John Musker teamed up to direct and write *Aladdin*. Unfortunately, critics claimed that the film was riddled with stereotypes and racism. According to Yousef Salem, the bad guys have beards, big noses, and heavy accents, while Aladdin seems more American than Arab.<sup>13</sup> Another major complaint was that the song "Arabian Nights" painted

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>12</sup> Ricardo Lopez, "Despite Dollars in Diversity, Hollywood Still Averse to Making Inclusive Films," *Variety*, November 06, 2017, , accessed December 06, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/film/news/diversity-box-office-winners-hollywood-1202603438/>.

<sup>13</sup> Giroux, *The Mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*, 104.

Arabs as barbarians who cut off ears. At first, Disney ignored the criticism surrounding the song, but as the backlash grew, they changed the lyrics.<sup>14</sup>

Years later, Clements and Musker teamed up again to create and direct *Moana*. This time they dedicated more time to studying the cultures. In fact, the Disney Animation chief John Lasseter would not allow them to move forward with their idea until they did extensive fieldwork.<sup>15</sup> They went on multiple research trips and even created the Oceanic Trust—a group of scholars and artists from Samoa, Tahiti, Mo’orea, and Fiji who helped assure the film was not culturally insensitive.<sup>16</sup> Despite careful consideration when it came to the film, Disney was not entirely problem free when it came to the launch of a Maui costume. Pacific Islanders, supported by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, were upset and claimed that the costume was brown face, and Disney responded by taking the costume off shelves.<sup>17 18</sup>

While *Mulan* and *Moana* share common elements with other Disney films, my thesis is about how the creators of *Mulan* created one formula and years later applied it to *Moana*. Both films are about a sixteen-year-old girl who is having an identity crisis that causes tension between her and her father. The protagonist must go on a forbidden journey that is aimed at saving the protagonist’s loved ones, but on an individual level, the journey will present her with obstacles that will help her resolve the question of who she is. Because of the nature of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>15</sup> Joanna Robinson, "How Pacific Islanders Helped Disney's Moana Find Its Way," HWD, November 16, 2016, , accessed September 15, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/moana-oceanic-trust-disney-controversy-pacific-islanders-polynesia>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Disney accused of 'brown face' over Maui movie costume," ABC News, September 20, 2016, , accessed November 06, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-21/disney-maui-accused-of-brown-face-over-movie-costume/7863702>.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, "How Pacific Islanders Helped Disney's Moana Find Its Way," HWD, November 16, 2016.

journey, the domineering father disapproves because it goes against the expectations he has for his daughter. The protagonist's passive mother does not challenge the father's behavior towards his daughter. Instead, she serves as an example of who the protagonist should become, whereas the wise, "wacky" grandmother acts as an example of a woman who slightly deviates from what is expected of her. Another character or group of characters that help shape the protagonist throughout the journey is the male travel companion(s). While *Mulan* includes human companions in the form of soldiers, it also features a supernatural creature, Mushu. For *Moana*, the protagonist's demigod travel companion, Maui, takes over the role of both the soldiers and Mushu. Beyond the film's universe, the purpose of the characters and the journey itself is to produce Disney's most feminist character to date.

## Chapter Five: The Protagonist

One of the major elements that *Mulan* and *Moana* share is the protagonist. In recent years, Disney has aimed to shift from the damsel in distress formula to a female character with agency. Pressure from audiences to portray female characters as feminists is why movies such as *Mulan* and *Moana* were created. In order to fulfill this demand, Disney presents *Mulan* and *Moana* as young women who show potential to embody this feminist ideal but are not quite there.

While the films' narratives do not mention the characters' ages, *Mulan* and *Moana* are sixteen-year-old women of color. In the DVD audio commentary, the directors—Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook—confirm that *Mulan* is sixteen, while Auli'i Cravalho—the voice actress for *Moana*—revealed *Moana*'s age in an interview with ABC News.<sup>19 20</sup> Having a sixteen-year-old protagonist establishes the idea that this character is a teenager, and in turn, her rebellious behavior and identity crisis are justifiable. At the same time, her age cements the belief that she is on the cusp of becoming an adult and, therefore, should embrace a path that she must navigate without her parents.

Additionally, both protagonists are active characters—as seen in their decision to take on a dangerous journey for the safety of their loved ones. Instead of allowing her injured father to fight and most likely die for the Chinese army, *Mulan* takes his place under the guise of Fa

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<sup>19</sup>Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, "Commentaries," *Mulan*, DVD, directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft (Buena Vista, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1998).

<sup>20</sup>Angela Williams, "14 Things to Know About Disney's 'Moana' Before You See It," ABC News, November 14, 2016, , accessed January 15, 2018, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/14-things-disneys-moana-film/story?id=43276845>.

Zhou's son. On the other hand, Moana navigates the ocean in hopes of restoring the heart of Te Fiti, which will bring back life to Motunui.

Furthermore, the journey highlights how courageous the protagonist is because she embarks on a journey despite not having the necessary skills to survive. Mulan has no previous military training, and Moana does not know about wayfinding. The journey also shows how determined the protagonist is. She pushes herself to learn the skills she needs to live and accomplish her mission. During Mulan's training sequence, no one can retrieve an arrow from the first challenge, and Mulan is by far the worst soldier. Shang indicates that she should leave, but instead she works throughout night until she completes the first challenge. From there on, she excels in all combat sections. Since Shang suggested Mulan's departure, Mulan could have deserted the army and still saved her father's life, but she did not. She stayed and worked hard to become a soldier. In *Moana*, there is more focus and time spent on Moana's struggle. From the beginning, it is clear that Moana does not know how to sail. She almost drowns the first time she tries, and the second time is when she undertakes this voyage to find Maui. She manages to find Maui with the help of her grandmother's spirit and ocean, but once she meets Maui, he assumes all wayfinding duties. At that point, she could have allowed him to take over the task, but she asks Maui to teach her. He brushes her off, and she states, "My job is to deliver Maui across the great ocean. I should be sailing." Maui reluctantly teaches her how to wayfind, but Moana has trouble at first. After seeing how Moana is able to handle other difficult situations, Maui willingly instructs her, and this time Moana learns how to wayfind.

Mulan and Moana are also protagonists who use logic to solve their problems. Their logic revolves around similar concepts, such as the use of disguise and zip lines to escape. For example, Mulan disguises her peers as women, so they can get past the guards. Similarly, Moana

covers a barnacle in bioluminescent algae in order to escape Tamatoa. When Moana is escaping from Kakamora, she throws an arrow to her canoe's post and ziplines back to safety, and Mulan uses the rope that holds some lanterns as a zipline as well. Logic is typically labeled as a masculine trait, whereas intuition is considered a feminine trait. The protagonist destroys this idea, by relying on logic rather than intuition. In order to be a successful soldier, Mulan needs to develop strategies that take out the most number of enemies, which she does when she shoots the last canon at the mountain's peak. Her captain is mad that she "missed" the target, Shan Yu, but Mulan's action caused an avalanche that wiped out thousands of men instead of just one. Similarly, Moana needs to use reason because a chief is constantly solving problems. For instance, Moana figured that the fronds were not the problem with the leaky roof but rather that the wind shifted the post; therefore, she knew that she had to readjust the post. Without logic, the protagonist would not have been able to succeed on her journey. In fact, her male travel companions admire her logic so much, that she finally gains their respect.

In addition to shared traits, Mulan and Moana's relationships with other characters are the same. The protagonist lives with her mother, father, and paternal grandmother, and she is an only child. She has a healthy relationship with her mother and grandmother, but her relationship with her father is prone to conflict. Because the father has certain expectations that she has trouble meeting, the daughter clashes with her father. After leaving her family, the protagonist acquires male travel companions—human, supernatural, and animal. Mulan has multiple travel companions: the army men (human), Mushu (a supernatural ancestral dragon), and Cri-Kee and Khan (animals). On the other hand, Maui takes on all of those roles in *Moana*. He was born human but was turned into a demigod by the gods. One of his abilities includes shape shifting into different animals, and Heihei also acts as Moana's animal companion. In this relationship,

the protagonist works diligently to prove herself and gain respect from men. Another relationship that is important to the protagonist is that between her and her ancestors. Mulan prays to her ancestors for the ability to bring honor to her family, and they awaken to assign a guardian to protect her once she leaves home. In the beginning of the film, Moana is unaware of her ancestors' history as voyagers, but once she discovers this fact, she eagerly shares what she knows with the villagers and regains the inspiration to try sailing once more.

As mentioned before, the protagonist clashes with her father, and the core of this conflict is that the daughter does not meet society's expectations of her. In *Mulan*, these expectations of a perfect bride are articulated in "Honor To Us All," and in *Moana*, these expectations of a great village chief are expressed in "Where You Are." What validates this idea that these expectations come from society and not just the protagonist's family is the fact that the song features various singers. At one point, the protagonist demonstrates that she accepts her role by briefly singing in the song. Mulan concludes that she must become the ideal bride in order to keep her family's honor intact, so she calls upon her ancestors to aid her:

Ancestors, hear my plea  
Help me not to make a fool of me  
And to not uproot my family tree  
Keep my father standing tall

On the other hand, Moana commits to rule as Motunui's future chief while on the island and not beyond the reef, which she struggled to accept throughout the song:

I'll lead the way  
I'll have my people to guide me

We'll build our future together

Where we are

While the protagonist appears to accept her role, she is really plagued with an identity crisis that is at the root of why she embarks on this journey. Mulan sings about her inner struggle in “Reflection,” and Moana sings about hers in “How Far I’ll Go.” Both songs share similar phrases that touch on the theme of an identity crisis as the result of the inability to please everyone. “Reflection” uses the phrase “who I am inside,” while “How Far I’ll Go” uses “the voice inside.” The songs also include expectations of the protagonist and how she cannot meet everyone’s especially her father’s expectations. Mulan laments:

Look at me

I will never pass for a perfect bride

Or a perfect daughter

Can it be I'm not meant to play this part

Mulan accepts that she cannot be the perfect bride that society expects her to be, so in turn, she cannot be the perfect daughter since that is all her father wants from her. Moana longs to be the ideal daughter as well:

I've been staring at the edge of the water

'Long as I can remember, never really knowing why

I wish I could be the perfect daughter

But I come back to the water, no matter how hard I try

Moana recognizes that she struggles to understand why the ocean captivates her. Her inability to stay away keeps her from being the perfect daughter because the one rule her father has is to never go beyond the reef. Also, since Moana’s attention is always diverted to the ocean, she

cannot be entirely present for her village's needs. Even though the laid out paths for the protagonists are different, both characters sing that they do not know who they are but whatever that is will disappoint her family and community.

Even though Mulan and Moana come from different cultures, they possess several of the same traits, relationships, and struggles because they must fit the Disney mold. The heroines need to start at the same place in order to end at the same place. In the beginning of the film, the protagonist is a loving daughter with an identity crisis. Because of her relationships and a perilous journey, the protagonist emerges as a self actualized woman and Disney's latest feminist heroine.

## **Chapter Six: Relationships with Men**

For a majority of the film, the protagonist is in the company of men. Their presence is one of the factors that helps mold the protagonist into an independent woman at the end of the journey. In the beginning of the film, the overprotective father burdens his daughter with personal expectations that make her question her identity. Once the protagonist leaves home, her male travel companions replace the father's dominant male presence with their own, but the men's expectations and behavior toward her are more sexist in nature. Either way, all of the male female relationships force the protagonist to uncover and defend who she is.

### The Demanding Father

While living at home, the only relationship that the protagonist has with a man is with her father. From the earliest interaction between the two, the father is presented as a concerned but loving father. Although the father loves his daughter, some of his first words center on remembering her place. Because she is seemingly his only child, there is more at stake for her to carry on his legacy. For example, Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, prays to his ancestors to help Mulan impress the Matchmaker. When Mulan joins Fa Zhou, he stresses, "We are counting on you," and Mulan finishes his sentence for him, "to uphold the family honor. Don't worry, father. I won't let you down." From the start, the audience is aware of Mulan's willingness to fulfill her responsibility. Also, Mulan has most likely heard that she must preserve the family honor on multiple occasions if she was able to guess that those would be her father's next words. Tui, Moana's father, demonstrates his paternal concern by running and grabbing a baby Moana who is playing near the shore. Later on, it is revealed that Tui fears seeing Moana near the sea because he lost a friend to it. When Tui guides Moana back towards the village, he explains to

her, “You are the next great chief of our people.” Like Fa Zhou, Tui reminds his daughter of her duty to her family, and he continues to do so throughout Moana’s childhood and adolescence, which we see represented during the song “Where You Are.” In fact, Tui leads the song that is about village life and how Moana is responsible for maintaining that lifestyle in the future: “Don’t walk away. Moana stay on the ground now. Our people will need a chief, and there you are.”

After the protagonist fails to stay on course with her father’s plan, he shares a tender moment with her. In *Mulan*, Mulan returns from her meeting with the Matchmaker, which was a total disaster. Mulan is so ashamed about disappointing her father that she refuses to look at him when he sits beside her. He comforts her with a metaphor that compares her shortcomings to the blossom that blooms late. Fa Zhou claims that the blossom will be “the most beautiful of all,” and Mulan finally faces her father and smiles. The tender moment between Moana and Tui occurs when Tui brings Moana to the sacred place where Chiefs have added a stone on the mountain once they assumed their position. He mentions how he has wanted to bring her there from the minute she was born and concludes, “You are the future of our people, Moana. It’s time to be who they need you to be.” After his effective words, Moana is willing to forget the ocean and become chief.

Shortly after this exchange unites father and daughter, a problem is presented. The protagonist expresses her input, and her father becomes upset and publicly scolds her. For example, Mulan’s father is called upon by the emperor to serve in the Imperial Army, but Mulan objects that her father has already fought and begs that he is not forced to fight. Once Chi-Fu, the emperor’s council, advises that Fa Zhou teach his daughter to be quiet in a “man’s presence,” Fa Zhou looks away from his daughter and in front of the entire community states, “Mulan, you

dishonor me.” In *Moana*, the fishermen reveal that there are no fish left in the reef, and Moana poses the solution of going beyond the reef to find more food. Tui becomes enraged because he announces that doing so would be dangerous. He reproaches Moana in front of the fishermen and other villagers, “Every time I think you’re past this,” and storms off inland. Despite the fact that she was rebuked once, the protagonist cannot forget about the problem and offers her opinion for a second time, inciting her father to have an even more intense outburst. Her father’s reaction combined with a moment of grief is what ultimately pushes the protagonist to undertake a journey her father would have forbidden. While Mulan’s family eats dinner after discovering that Fa Zhou must fight in the army, Mulan refuses to keep quiet and insists that he should not have to go. Mulan cannot understand why he would die for honor, and this time Fa Zhou does not subdue his anger and yells, “I know my place. It is time you learn yours.” Mulan runs out crying and witnesses her parents’ heartbreaking goodbye. As a result, Mulan disguises herself as a man, takes her father’s place, and leaves for the military camp. On the other hand, Moana interrupts a council meeting to exclaim that if they restore the heart of Te Fiti then Motunui can be saved. Her father marches out with the intention of burning the boats that would make the journey possible. When Moana shows him the heart, he throws it and asserts that it’s just a rock. Immediately after that exchange, Moana experiences her moment of sadness with her grandmother’s failing health that ends with death. With the encouragement of her grandmother, Moana takes one of the hidden canoes and sails beyond the reef.

Although the protagonist disobeyed her father, the father acts delighted and relieved over her return. Mulan arrives as a highly esteemed warrior, offering her father gifts from the emperor that will bring him honor. Fa Zhou casts the gifts aside, hugs her, and confesses, “The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter.” Tui also embraces his daughter as she says, “I may

have gone a little past the reef.” He responds with, “It suits you.” With an embrace and compliment, the father finally approves of his daughter’s new path that she chose and lived without his input. At the end, the protagonist fulfills her father’s wishes in a way, but she does so on her own terms. Mulan brings honor to her father by becoming a warrior, and Moana embodies a great chief who saved her people by voyaging beyond the reef.

In these stories, the father-daughter relationship is crucial in shaping the protagonist into a self-sufficient woman. On one hand, this relationship fuels a desire for the protagonist to please others, which holds her back from realizing her potential. In the beginning, the protagonist is willing to put her identity aside in order to bring to life her father’s vision of who she should be. At the same time, her failure to meet his expectations prompts her to question why she might be unable to do so, and she realizes that she has not given herself the opportunity to explore her identity. The protagonist starts to voice her opinions that inevitably clash with her father’s ideas, and that tension is a factor that convinces the protagonist that she deserves to figure out who she is. While the protagonist leaves and gains temporary freedom from her father’s expectations, she does not abandon how she has always handled relationships with men. When she meets her male travel companions, she is determined to win their approval because they have skills she must learn from them. Just as with her father, conflict arises that forces the protagonist to defend her developing identity; however, the tension does not arise from her father’s expectations over how the protagonist should live her life but rather from sexist expectations these men have about women. On one hand, the father addresses the question of the protagonist’s ambition, and on the other, the travel companions bring up the question of women’s capabilities.

### Supernatural Travel Companion

One type of travel companion the protagonist has is supernatural. For *Mulan*, Mushu fills that role, and Maui does the same in *Moana*. Mushu is an ancestral dragon, while Maui is a demigod. Both characters share a similar backstory that convinces them to undertake the journey with the protagonist. The characters were once trusted by higher supernatural beings (ancestor spirits for Mushu and gods for Maui), but these men made a mistake that has left them forsaken. For example, Mushu's mistake was dubbed "a disaster" that ended with the decapitation of one of Mulan's ancestors, and Maui stole the heart of Te Fiti, which brought about a life-draining darkness. Despite being deserted, these characters are overconfident and constantly project an image of greatness. When the protagonist meets the supernatural being for the first time, the companion's body casts a prodigious shadow on a rock that strikes fear in the protagonist. She is overwhelmed with the physical appearance of this character before she even lays eyes on him, and she hides and cowers. When Mushu introduces himself, he paints a picture of a formidable guardian, "I am the guardian of lost souls. I am the powerful, the pleasurable, the indestructible Mushu." In reality, Mushu is a miniature dragon whose sole supernatural ability is to breathe fire in limited amounts. In contrast, Maui's shadow is not a betrayal. He is massive, but without the fish hook that was gifted to him by the gods, he cannot shape shift on his own; however, Maui also speaks of himself as if he is still a grand figure rather than a forgotten demigod who has been stranded on an island for thousands of years. When Moana tries to assert that Maui must come with her, he interrupts her because she did not get his title right, "It's actually Maui, shape shifter, demigod of the wind and sea, hero of men. I interrupted. From the top. Hero of men. Go." He continues to treat Moana as a fan, refuses to acknowledge her demand as serious, and highlights all of his feats that humans should be grateful for in the song "You're Welcome."

Well, come to think of it  
Kid, honestly I can go on and on  
I can explain every natural phenomenon  
The tide, the grass, the ground, oh  
That was Maui just messing around

Moana quickly concludes that Maui is arrogant, and Mulan notices that Mushu overestimates his abilities. Nonetheless, the women cannot completely dismiss those men because they possess an ability that aids the heroine on her journey. Maui has superhuman strength and eventually regains his shape shifting abilities, and Mushu helps Mulan light fireworks at crucial moments with his fire.

#### Human Travel Companions

In addition to the supernatural companion, the protagonist relies on the skills of her human company. While the supernatural beings lend their ability to the success of the journey, the human possesses a set of skills that he can teach the protagonist. Maui is a demigod, so he partially fits the category of human. Either way, he has a human skill set that is necessary for the trip—wayfinding. Li Shang, on the other hand, is trained in military combat. Because the protagonist goes on this journey without mastering the one skill she needs to survive, she must win the approval of her human companion.

In *Mulan*, the tension between Shang and Mulan occurs when Ping, Mulan's alias, causes a mess and several fights among the other soldiers; therefore, Mulan is already in Shang's bad graces before training. Once training commences, Shang's thoughts on Mulan worsen because while all the other men are also amateurs in combat fighting Mulan is by far the worst. Maui's disdain for Moana stems from her insistence that he must restore the heart of Te Fiti, but it is

strengthened by the fact that Moana does not know how to wayfind. Maui attempts to escape Moana by trapping her in a cave and continuously throwing her off the boat. Although Shang does not try to sabotage Mulan, the rest of the men do so during the training session because they all got off on the wrong foot. Nevertheless, the protagonist resolves to win their approval through hard work. At first, Mulan changes her peers' minds by working overnight to retrieve the arrow from the first challenge. Once she gives training her all, the men are motivated to train harder and better themselves as well. The second time Mulan gains the soldiers' but most notably Shang's respect is when she saves Shang's life and wipes out the Huns. Similarly, Moana earns Maui's appreciation when she saves his life from Tamatoa's wrath, and once more when she finally learns how to wayfind. In reality, the protagonist could have gone along for the ride and let the men do all the work, but she discovers that there is something inside of her that desires to learn and have some control in this situation.

While those relationships pushed the protagonist to learn more about herself through the determination to learn a skill, there is also an element of those relationships that undermines the protagonist based on her gender. Even though the protagonist seems to catch flack for lacking a skill, these men believe that the reason she lacks this skill or several others is because she is a woman. One of the most common ways the men express this idea is through sexist comments.

#### The Sexist Companion

At the core of Mulan's society, the idea prevails that women bear children and men fight. Women are portrayed as quiet, obedient, beautiful, and fragile, and therefore, not fit for war. For example, Yao implies that women are helpless with his statement, "And there's nothing you girls can do about it." Another man who consistently puts down women is Chi-Fu. He acts defensive when he teased that he squeals like a girl, and that comment itself is constructed as an insult.

Chi-Fu brushes off the fact that Mulan saved Shang and killed most of the Huns simply because it is revealed that she is a woman: “I knew there was something wrong with you. A woman! Treacherous snake.” Chi-Fu declares that women have no real value after Shang defends Mulan’s title as a hero. Furthermore, the soldiers sing a song about the girl who is worth going to battle for. In one verse, they talk about her physical appearance, her admiration of his body and strength, her cooking skills, and her resolution that he is perfect:

I want her paler than the moon with eyes that shine like stars  
My girl will marvel at my strength, adore my battle scars  
I couldn't care less what she'll wear or what she looks like  
It all depends on what she cooks like: Beef, pork, chicken

Even Mushu joins in by whistling at the women who work in the rice paddy fields. Mulan counters these expectations by suggesting a girl who has a brain and speaks her mind, and they all respond with “nah.” Mushu constantly reminds Mulan that she is a woman and implies that she cannot do anything because of that fact. According to him, he’s the one who is teaching her how to act like a man and thus keeping her alive; however, everything that Mushu teaches her usually backfires and creates tension between her and the other men. After Mulan trains diligently and improves her combat skills by herself, Mushu dismisses her achievements and deems Mulan’s desire to bathe as “stupid girlie habits” that will expose her secret. Ironically, Mushu does not perceive that his attempts to aid Mulan singled her out rather than helped her blend in—the whole point of teaching her how to be a man. Mulan’s response to everything is to simply ignore the comment and prove these men wrong by being the warrior who saves all of China.

While a handful of men question Mulan's capabilities based on her gender, Maui is the main culprit in *Moana*, and he expresses his comments either after Moana has done something admirable or after she has a moment of doubt. Because Maui is threatened by Moana's growing confidence, he insults her at her highest and lowest points in an attempt to weaken her drive. If Moana abandons her task to deliver him, he will no longer be held accountable for the return of the heart. Nonetheless, Moana rarely lets Maui get to her, and she fights back by manipulating Maui into doing her bidding, replying with her own cutting retort, or carrying out a dangerous task. After Moana recovers the heart from Kakamora, Maui sarcastically congratulates her for not dying and calls her "girlie." In that situation, they were outnumbered, and Maui chose to flee. Meanwhile, Moana showed courage and ingenuity by not only escaping but taking back the stone. Seeing Moana emboldened by her victory prompts Maui to ask if Moana has ever defeated a lava monster in an attempt to scare her. She replies, "No. Have you?" Her comment clearly cuts Maui, since the audience knows he has not. Maui responds that in order to restore the heart Moana needs him, and he refuses to risk his life for that assignment. Moana convinces him to restore the heart by pointing out that he would be a hero and imitating a chanting crowd. Despite the fact that exploiting his hero complex was a genius move, Maui dismisses her as a "little girl," while declaring himself a hero in the same sentence. Later on, Moana enthusiastically asks Maui to teach her to sail. He takes her misuse of the word sailing rather than wayfinding as a sign of Moana's incompetence and labels her a "princess." Moana argues that she is not a princess but rather a daughter of the chief. Maui realizes that he has struck a nerve and explains why she is and will always be a just a princess: "If you wear a dress and you have an animal sidekick, you're a princess. You are not a wayfinder. You will never be a wayfinder." When the ocean

sedates Maui with a dart, Moana concludes that he can still talk and therefore teach her to wayfind.

In the next scenes, Moana's confidence grows shaky due to a nightmare and the inevitable venture into Lalotai—the Realm of Monsters. Maui laughs at her calling her “buttercup” and “chicken.” Despite her fear, Moana begins to climb toward the entrance of Lalotai and even passes Maui. Irritated by her determination, Maui downplays her role as the chief's daughter by saying that he thought she just kisses babies and never leaves the island. Therefore, he cannot fathom why the village or the ocean would send her on such a treacherous trip: “You're what? Eight? Can't sail. Obvious choice.” Once at the top of the mountain, Moana reassures herself that there is a reason why the ocean chose her. Maui overhears her and states, “If you start singing, I'm gonna throw up.” Again, he's referencing this idea of the princess who sings about her emotions. Wanting to prove him wrong, Moana comes up with a plan that does not backfire unlike Maui's. She ends up saving him, recovering his fish hook, and keeping the heart safe in their hands. Although Maui struggles to thank her and calls her a “little, girl, child, thing,” Moana does not become offended. Instead, she assures Maui that their mission is not cursed after he points out that he could not beat Tamatoa. Maui wallows in his defeat, but Moana creates a tender moment where she offers the idea that Maui may have been chosen because he was worthy. Her words encourage Maui to train himself and Moana for the final challenge.

### The Betrayed Companion

After the bond forms between the protagonist and her male companions, tension arises again when the protagonist commits a major “mistake.” Mulan's secret is revealed, but Shang pardons her life, claiming that he has settled his debt to her since she saved his life. He abandons her and makes the rest of the men do so as well. This disappointment like the one she constantly

faced with her father triggers an idea in the protagonist's mind that she is less than. While Mulan plunges into a reflection of her failure, Mushu does the same. Even though Mushu also recognizes his failure, he does not shy away from pointing out Mulan's as well. Mulan, however, never talks about his shortcomings or blames him. Mushu's comments further validate Mulan's idea that who she wanted to be was not worthy, which convinces Mulan to go home. On the other hand, Moana's mistake was that she attempted to get past Te Kâ, which resulted in massive damage to Maui's hook. Before abandoning her, Maui also voices his anger at Moana's choices while calling himself "nothing." Once Moana hears Maui's harsh words and he leaves, she begins to question her identity as the Chosen One and concedes to go home.

#### The Forgiving Companion

Eventually, the protagonist decides to resume her journey with or without the help of her travel companion, and she sets off toward her final challenge. Shortly after, her travel companion forgives her and willingly listens to her plan. Shang and Maui put aside their hero tendencies and act as diversions rather than the heroes. Maui entrusts Moana with the task of restoring the heart, "I got your back Chosen One. Go save the world," and Shang obeys Mulan's plans instead of taking over as her captain. Right before overcoming her final challenge, the protagonist saves this travel companion's life once again. For instance, before Te Kâ strikes Maui with a fatal blow, Moana holds up the heart to get her attention. When Shan Yu is about to strike Shang with a sword, Mulan diverts his attention to her by throwing a shoe at him.

When the travel companion parts way with the heroine, he gives her a compliment that deals with her newfound identity. When Moana invites Maui to return with her because her people need a "master wayfinder," Maui responds, "They already have one." Shang's goodbye to

Mulan is much more awkward, but he settles on, “You fight good.” Being told that by an army captain validates Mulan’s identity as a warrior.

Despite the fact that these men burdened the protagonist with their expectations, their behavior encouraged the protagonist to develop her identity. Furthermore, their insults and obstacles pushed her to discover what that identity was and defend it fearlessly. Without the conflict-riddled dynamic between father and daughter or travel companion and daughter, the protagonist would not have had to rise up to the occasion and fight for who she is.

## Chapter Seven: Relationships with Women

Even though the films focus substantially on the relationship between the protagonist and men, the women play an important part in shaping the protagonist. On one hand, the protagonist's mother acts as a reminder of who the protagonist is expected to be. On the other hand, the grandmother shows the protagonist that women who do not exactly fit the mold can still exist and be accepted in their society.

### The Mother

Just like the protagonist's father, the mother loves her daughter, but she is plagued with concerns over her daughter's inability to fulfill her duty. When the audience is introduced to Mulan's mother, Fa Li, she sighs, "I should have prayed to the ancestors for luck," because of Mulan's tardiness—one of the many signs that Mulan is not the "perfect bride." In fact, a majority of mother-daughter exchanges center around the mother's insistence that her daughter embrace her role. Unlike the father, however, the mother possesses a more lenient approach to her daughter's failure, and she often expresses her disapproval in the form of disappointment rather than anger.

Shortly after the mother's first appearance, she participates in a song that lists her daughter's societal obligations. In *Mulan*, Fa Li and other older women educate Mulan with the song "Honor to Us All." Throughout the scene, Fa Li prepares Mulan for her meeting with the

Matchmaker. This preparation includes a bath, hair, clothes, and makeup—essential elements that will guarantee Mulan a husband. When Mulan is given a bath, one of the ladies sings:

We'll have you washed and dried  
Primped and polished  
Till you glow with pride  
Trust me recipe for instant bride  
You'll bring honor to us all

During that part of the preparation, Mulan complains that the bath water is freezing, and Fa Li points out Mulan's first failure as a bride, "It would have been warm if you were here on time." Not too long after that exchange, Fa Li questions Mulan over the ink on her arm. Mulan responds that she wrote notes in case she forgets any information. Fa Li closes her eyes and sighs—one of her common reactions to Mulan's actions.

The next step in Mulan's cosmetic transformation is styling her hair in a bun. Almost all the women wear their hair this way, whereas Mulan prefers to wear hers down. According to the women, this hairstyle has the power to send men off to war and bring honor to everyone:

Wait and see  
When we're through  
Boys will gladly go to war for you  
With good fortune  
And a great hairdo  
You'll bring honor to us all

A loose strand of Mulan's hair naturally falls on her forehead, but it is swiftly pushed away from her face. Later on, Mulan purposefully returns that strand to its original place—an act that

signals her hidden desire to be true to herself. Additionally, the lyrics are ironic because Mulan must keep her hair in a bun to appear more masculine when she goes off to war. When Mulan manages to kill a considerable amount of the Hun army under the guise of Ping, she does in fact bring honor to China. However, once Mulan is revealed to be a woman, she abandons her masculine and feminine bun and saves China with her hair down. Throughout the film, hair symbolizes Mulan's rejection of gender roles and her acceptance of who she is.

Once Mulan's hair has been groomed, the women clothe Mulan while singing:

Men want girls with good taste

Calm, obedient

Who work fast-paced

With good breeding

And a tiny waist

You'll bring honor to us all

According to this verse, fashion is a significant part of the process because men prefer women who dress up and take an interest in their physical appearance. Mulan is seen wearing multiple layers of clothing that other women have to help her into, but she is also expected to dress herself quickly. While Mulan is overwhelmed at the pace and all the layers, Fa Li happily ties a piece of fabric around Mulan's waist as the women mention how men also take an interest in a woman's physical body. Mulan gasps for air as the fabric tightens around her body, while her mother and two other women stand back and admire their work.

Another interesting part about this scene is that Fa Li sings throughout the song, but in this verse, she has two standout times where she sings alone. The first time she does so is when she sings the word "obedient," which is telling of her behavior with Mulan. From the beginning,

Fa Li is constantly reminding Mulan that she must be obedient and follow all of these rules that will make her an exemplary bride. The second aspect that men want is “good breeding”—another value that her family instills in Mulan. The final part of the makeover is makeup. Fa Li sits back as another woman paints Mulan’s face, making her look “like a lotus blossom—soft and pale.” Once the woman is done, Fa Li takes out a hair comb and places it in Mulan’s hair. She contently announces, “There. You’re ready.” When Mulan steps in line to meet the Matchmaker, Fa Li wipes tears away, proud of Mulan’s transformation. She realizes that Mulan does not have her parasol, and she rushes to hand it to her. She returns to her worried state as Mulan runs to keep up with the girls, but she adopts her sense of hope once Mulan imitates and blends in with the other potential brides.

In *Moana*, Sina and the other villagers teach Moana about village life and her responsibility as chief with the song “Where You Are.” Moana learns about dancing, basket weaving, building fires, the uses of coconuts, and ceremonial outfits. Moana begins her lessons as a toddler, and the audience observes how these same lessons are repeated to Moana from that time until she is sixteen years old. At first, Moana quickly loses interest in what she is being told, and her mind wanders to the sea. Her reaction is understandable because she is a toddler, but her behavior continues as she gets older. Sina and Tui are constantly bringing her attention back to the task at hand. When Moana is younger, Sina is caught off guard by Moana’s fascination with the ocean, but she is amused as well. For example, Sina smiles when Moana draws a picture of a boat. She writes off the behavior as typical, but nonetheless, she steers Moana towards leadership.

Another parallel to Fa Li is the joy Sina displays when she reveals the ceremonial headdress, or Tuiga, to Moana. Sina and Fa Li happily teach their daughters about traditional

clothing that is worn by the type of women they must become. Fashion is mainly associated as a feminine pursuit, and in both cases, it seems to be an important factor in the protagonist's transformation. For instance, when Moana is first shown her headdress, her mother and father proudly stand back and gesture at it while singing:

Don't walk away  
Moana, stay on the ground now  
Our people will need a chief  
And there you are

The headdress is a symbol of Moana's future as chief, and the final lyric is an indication that Moana this leadership commitment comes with the sacrifice of forgetting about the ocean. Moana attempts to carry out the tasks her parents give her, but she always injects some of her personality into them. Examples include Moana's creation of boats when she is drawing and weaving baskets. Additionally, Moana is constantly abandoning whatever skill she is supposed to be practicing in hopes of reaching the ocean. Another rebellious moment is when Moana meets her grandmother by the rocks and dances with her.

While Moana has her moments of rebellion, she ultimately gives into expectations like Mulan does. After talking with her father, Moana no longer joins her grandmother's dance and instead participates in the village group dance. Consumed with joy, Sina smiles and reaches for her husband's hand. Also, when Moana first wore the headdress, her mother placed it on her head, but the second time Moana does it herself.

In addition to teaching the protagonist about her duties, the mother also physically pushes her daughter toward situations she should embrace and away from those she should avoid. Fa Li ushers Mulan toward the building where she gets bathed. She adopts a no nonsense demeanor

when Mulan tries to explain why she is late, “None of your excuses. Now, let’s get you cleaned up.” Fa Li continues to gesture toward the next building Mulan needs to enter in order to complete her transformation. Towards the end, Fa Li is content to see that Mulan understands where she needs to go on her own. While Mulan ends up where she needs to be, she also gets drawn into situations she has no business being involved with. When Mulan walks by two men playing a game, *Xiàngqí*, the women sing:

A girl can bring her family  
Great honor in one way  
By striking a good match  
And this could be the day

When they use the phrase “good match,” the women refer to finding a good husband, but Mulan shows how she is much more interested in the men’s match. The game they are playing is a strategy game that involves an army. Mulan makes a move for the man who appears to be losing, and she gives him an advantage. The game foreshadows her role in the army, but her mother does not approve of Mulan’s involvement with such a game. Fa Li pulls Mulan away from the men.

When Tui takes toddler Moana off his shoulders, Moana takes the opportunity to dash towards the ocean. Sina senses that Moana is not near her and pulls her away from the ocean. Instead, she places Moana in the middle of the dancing villagers, so Moana can learn how to dance. Another time, Moana makes it all the way to the bushes near the shore, but Sina and Tui drag Moana back toward the island where she wears the Tuiga for the first time.

Both musical sequences exemplify how much of the mother’s life is consumed with teaching her daughter how to fit society’s mold. Despite the fact that the protagonist deviates

from the path on multiple occasions, the mother is determined to bring her back on course every single time. Her mother's actions cement the idea that the protagonist needs to conform, and eventually, the protagonist is worn down until she accepts to live out her life in the way her mother wants.

Despite being adamant about how her daughter should behave, the mother is submissive in her marriage. She represents the woman the father wants his daughter to become. While the protagonist is having difficulty coming to terms with her identity, her mother never encourages her to figure out who she is. Instead, the mother reinforces her husband's ideas, which typically mirror society's, in the way she treats her daughter. Also, the father not only wants his daughter to fulfill society's expectations, he wants his daughter to obey all of his commands as well; therefore, the mother validates that idea by rarely being assertive with her husband.

When Fa Zhou is called upon to serve in the army, he hands his cane over to his wife. Fa Li holds the cane close to her body, closes her eyes, and bows her head as she realizes that her husband will most likely die in the war due to his past injuries. Instead of objecting or pleading that her husband be exempted from conscription, she accepts his fate and remains quiet, which is what is expected of her. Mulan, on the other hand, immediately voices her concern. Her response is to beg the soldier to excuse her father of his duty, which results in reprimands from the emperor's council and her father. Despite being publicly scolded, Mulan does not give up on voicing her opinion again. Before she touches the subject, Mulan looks around the table as she serves everyone tea. Everyone is quiet and avoiding the elephant in the room. Unable to bite her tongue any longer, Mulan slams down her cup of tea and exclaims that her father should not have to fight. Fa Li softly says Mulan's name in an attempt to stop her from saying anything else, but Mulan continues to talk about how there are other men who can fight in her father's place. When

Fa Zhou firmly states that Mulan must learn her place, Fa Li remains silent once again. Her facial expressions and body language reveal that she feels upset over the circumstances and that she wants to comfort Mulan; however, she knows that her duty as a wife is to support her husband, so she looks from Mulan to her husband. Eventually, she resigns to just look down and not go after Mulan.

On the other hand, Sina is never present when Tui reprimands Moana, but she still sides with his argument. After Moana clashes with him over her suggestion that they go beyond the reef, Sina has an earnest conversation with Moana about why Tui is hard on Moana. Moana concludes that her father does not understand her, but Sina counters that it is the opposite; Tui was just like Moana, but his ocean adventure ended with his friend's death. After that day, he vowed to protect Moana and her people by prohibiting boats to go beyond the reef. As a way to convince Moana to stop thinking about exploring the ocean, Sina tells Moana, "Sometimes, who we wish we were, what we wish we could do is just not meant to be." Sina's response to Tui's outburst is to have a conversation to change Moana's thoughts on the matter, but Moana does the exact thing Tui prohibited even after the talk she had with her mother. Sina is present the second time Moana offers sailing the ocean as a solution. Sina nervously looks over at Tui but says nothing. When Tui rushes out of the council meeting with Moana right behind him, Sina does not run out after him. She resolves to let him handle the situation, but Moana is adamant that they must restore the heart.

Although the mother is passive with most matters her husband handles, she does not always display unquestioning obedience to him. Furthermore, this brief moment of defiance is witnessed by the protagonist, which fuels her decision to leave. As Mulan cries outside, she sees an interaction between her parents. Fa Zhou attempts to comfort his wife, but Fa Li steps away

before he embraces her. Her action may seem trivial, but in reality, it is the first moment a wife is ever seen opposing her husband. Although Fa Li does not communicate her feelings verbally, her decision to pull away from Fa Zhou is the loudest form of physical communication that she has given him up to that point. Once they discover that Mulan has left, Fa Li exclaims, “You must go after her. She could be killed.” Fa Li is not asking Fa Zhou to bring back Mulan. She is demanding that he do so with the use of the word “must.” Finally, Fa Li has reached a point where she verbally confronts Fa Zhou. Fa Li solidifies her determination to retrieve Mulan by getting up and moving forward. Her action is not one that suggests she is going to help Fa Zhou get up but rather a motion to bring back Mulan herself.

In Sina’s case, Sina never directly confronts Tui, but her action does defy his often-repeated rule. When Moana is packing for her long journey to restore the heart, Sina walks into the room and catches Moana in the act. Instead of stopping her or calling Tui over to stop her, Sina accepts that Moana must undertake this journey in order to save Motunui. With tears in her eyes, Sina helps Moana pack the food she will need to survive. She hugs Moana and watches as her daughter heads off on a dangerous trip. Even though Moana does not see her mother reject her father’s idea while he is present, Sina’s act is enough to push Moana to realize that Sina is no longer on board with Tui.

For a majority of the films, the mothers behave in a way that acts as a barrier to the protagonist’s development into self-assured women. On one hand, the mothers explicitly instruct their daughters how to act on a regular basis. On the other hand, the subservient relationship with their husbands subconsciously reminds the protagonists what kind of women they should become. The mother is one of the most important female role models the protagonist has, so it proves more difficult for the protagonist to readily accept that she can be different if her mother’s

life says otherwise. Observing the moment when her mother challenges her husband validates the protagonist's growing thought that she can still love her father yet think differently than him.

### The Grandmother

In contrast to the protagonist's mother, the grandmother is the only female character, besides the protagonist, who is noticeably different from all of the women. She is a wise woman who honors cultural traditions, but she brings a humor to those beliefs that results in the community labeling her as "crazy" or "wacky." In addition to her personality, the grandmother also has moments where she encourages the protagonist to defy her father, which brings the protagonist closer to distancing herself from expectations that stifle her development.

From Grandmother Fa's first words, her personality as a funny character is established. Her response to Fa Li's laments that she should have prayed to the ancestors for good luck is, "How lucky can they be? They're dead." She proceeds to state that the only luck they need will come from a cricket. To prove her point, she crosses the busy street with her hand over her eyes. She, of course, comes out of the incident unscathed, but all the carts that crashed to avoid hitting her did not. Because nothing happened to her, she is convinced that Cri-Kee is indeed lucky. While Grandmother Fa seems to reject the tradition of praying to ancestors, which Mulan's father, mother, and Mulan continuously do, Grandmother Fa accepts the Chinese belief that crickets bring luck. Even though Grandmother Fa dismisses the power of ancestor prayer, she later asks them to watch over Mulan when Mulan leaves for the army. Ironically, it is only after her prayer that Mulan's ancestors are awakened.

Other examples of Grandmother Fa's knowledge of traditional beliefs are evident in "Honor To Us All." Grandmother Fa's verse explains how an apple will grant Mulan serenity, a

pendant will give her balance, and jade will bring her beauty. Also, Grandmother Fa reiterates the cricket's luck and jokes how with Cri-Kee "even [Mulan] can't blow it." Another example of Grandmother Fa's comic relief is when she disagrees with the Matchmaker's initial impression of Mulan, "Who spit in her bean curd?"

At the end of the film, Mulan's parents are happy to have her back home and are less concerned with her being the perfect bride. In regards to Mulan's war achievements, Grandmother Fa dismisses them and circles back to the question of Mulan finding a husband. She confesses, "Great. She brings home a sword. If you ask me, she should've brought a man." Right on cue, Shang walks up to Grandmother Fa and Fa Li, asking for Mulan. After seeing Shang, Grandmother Fa exclaims, "Whoo! Sign me up for the next war." Once Mulan invites him for dinner, Grandmother Fa asks, "Would you like to stay forever?" Clearly, she is enthusiastic about an attractive, young general showing up for her granddaughter who was considered unfit to marry any man. In this scene, Grandmother Fa demonstrates that she is not as reserved about voicing her thoughts as Fa Li is since Fa Li also shows her shock over Shang's arrival through her facial expressions. Referencing the description of the perfect woman that Mulan recites in the beginning, Grandmother Fa is not quiet, demure, graceful, delicate, refined, or poised.

While no one ever calls Grandmother Fa crazy, Gramma Tala acknowledges that that is people's perception of her with her two verses in "Where You Are."

I like to dance with the water

The undertow and the waves

The water is mischievous (ha!)

I like how it misbehaves

The village may think I'm crazy  
Or say that I drift too far  
But once you know what you like, well  
There you are

Gramma Tala reveals how this dance along with other aspects of her personality set her apart from the rest of the village. Gramma Tala's dance is also indicative of her playful personality and the connection she feels with the ocean since it mimics the ocean's movements and temperament. When Gramma Tala tells Moana that she will be reincarnated as a manta ray, she jokes that she chose the wrong tattoo if she does not. Moana asks her why she is acting "so weird" to which Gramma Tala cheekily responds, "I am the village crazy lady. That's my job." She is aware of what people call her, but she owns it and does not let it affect her carefree display of personality.

Like Grandmother Fa, Gramma Tala possesses knowledge of traditional beliefs. For example, she starts the film's narrative with an ancient, oral story about how Maui stole the heart of Te Fiti. She gets carried away with the drama, and her voice booms over the children about "inescapable death." Tui comes in to soothe the children's fears, but Moana is the only child who is enthralled by the legend—foreshadowing that she will be the one to deliver Maui. Gramma Tala possesses a no filter way of talking like Grandmother Fa. Another time that Gramma Tala is nonchalant about a serious event is when Moana washes up on the shore after almost drowning. Gramma Tala glances at the aftermath of the failed boat ride and suggests, "Whatever just happened, blame it on the pig." She reaches for her Moana's foot with her cane. As she inspects Moana's injuries, Moana inquires if she will tell Tui. Gramma Tala boldly replies, "I'm his mom. I don't have to tell him anything." Both of her responses deal with keeping the truth from

Tui, and the reason for that is because Gramma Tala knows that Moana is meant to travel the seas. It is her destiny, but most importantly, it is who Moana is deep down. That fact is what drives Gramma Tala to actively encourage Moana to go to the ocean despite her father's protests.

During the "Where You Are" montage, Moana's parents relentlessly usher Moana away from the ocean. Once Moana escapes and joins her, Gramma Tala goes against what everyone else has been telling her about being content on the island. Gramma Tala imparts this wisdom on Moana:

You are your father's daughter  
Stubbornness and pride  
Mind what he says but remember  
You may hear a voice inside  
And if the voice starts to whisper  
To follow the farthest star  
Moana, that voice inside is  
Who you are

With this verse, Gramma Tala acknowledges the similarities between Moana and her father, which explains why they clash over and over again. Gramma Tala does not explicitly tell Moana to disobey her father; instead, she paints Moana's inner voice as a valid reason not to listen to everything he demands of Moana. In other words, Gramma Tala advises Moana that she should not sacrifice her identity to keep her loyalty to him intact. Furthermore, Gramma Tala is the first person to recognize that Moana cannot completely fit in because her identity goes against certain expectations, which also explains why Gramma Tala sings the two verses before this one. Gramma Tala needs Moana to understand that she is also different because she takes after the

ocean, but Gramma Tala explains that once you accept your desires despite what other people believe about you then you will find yourself. After that exchange, Gramma Tala attempts to sneak Moana out to the ocean, but Tui catches them. Gramma Tala continues to unite Moana with her journey by bringing her to the cave that holds the secret of her voyaging ancestors. She entices Moana to enter the cave by claiming that the cave reveals the question she has always asked herself, “Who are you meant to be?” After Moana sees the vision of her voyaging ancestors, Gramma Tala reveals that the ocean chose Moana.

Even as Gramma Tala lays on her deathbed, she commands Moana to deliver Maui. That is the final moment that convinces Moana that she must go on this journey to find who she is. Because of the culture that *Moana* represents, Gramma Tala is a more supportive character when it comes to her granddaughter’s desires. Grandmother Fa, however, does have a small moment where she encourages Mulan to go against what she is told. As soon as the soldiers arrive with the imperial proclamation, Fa Li implores Mulan to stay inside. After Fa Zhou and Fa Li walk out of sight, Grandmother Fa coughs to get Mulan’s attention and quickly gestures toward a place where Mulan can see what is happening.

Despite the fact that most of the interactions the protagonist has are with men, the relationships with her passive mother and wacky grandmother are crucial factors in her development. These women’s personalities either tipped the scale toward one end or the other and laid the foundation for the protagonist’s general identity—loving, obedient daughter and socially different young woman. Her clashes or similarities with each part were key to discovering her true identity. Without her mother’s tireless push for conformity, the protagonist might not have discovered that she was unable to fulfill those expectations because her true

identity did not allow it. Without her grandmother's contrary nature, she might have never pursued finding her own contrary nature.

## **Chapter Eight: The Quest**

Of all the factors that Disney uses as to shape the protagonist into their next feminist role model, the most influential one is the quest. Without the quest, there would be no story to be told. This dangerous journey is responsible for a multitude of reasons that allow the protagonist to resolve her identity crisis. When met with her community's overbearing expectations, the journey gives the protagonist the option to distance herself from her duties in the name of saving her loved ones; she can go forth into an environment where her community will not constantly try to fit her into a box. On the other hand, the journey aligns her with men who will push her to discover who she is in order to defend herself. Additionally, the journey puts her in a position where she must learn skills that are key to her identity and presents her with obstacles that stimulate her logic and agency. The protagonist must now go out and get things done on her own, which benefits the development of her identity.

Although the protagonists have different journeys, their quests have an almost identical structure and function. The opening scenes work to answer the question: Why does the journey exist? Additionally, these scenes reveal what quest must be undertaken. In *Mulan*, the main conflict that calls for a journey is the Huns' invasion of China, whereas in *Moana*, the problem is a darkness that is destroying the earth. Both conflicts deal with traveling elements that leave death and destruction in their wake. The solution to the Huns is an army, whereas the key to the darkness is restoring the heart of Te Fiti.

Even though anyone could essentially carry out those tasks, there is an individual who solidifies the idea that one person is destined to fix it. Upon hearing about the Huns' invasion,

the Emperor of China orders the strengthening of his army through the delivery of conscription notices, calls to reserve troops, and recruitment of new soldiers. His general counters that his troops alone will be enough to stop them, but the Emperor states, “I won’t take any chances, General. A single grain of rice can tip the scale. One man may be the difference between victory and defeat.” The next shot is of Mulan playing with one grain of rice—symbolizing that she is in fact that hero. Although she is a woman, she will have to dress up as a man to embark on her journey. On the other hand, Gramma Tala is the one who reveals that there is one individual who can save them from “inescapable death.” As she shares her prophesy, “But one day, the heart will be found by someone who will journey beyond our reef, find Maui, deliver him across the great ocean to restore Te Fiti's heart and save us all,” the camera closes in on Moana’s face—indicating that she is that person.

Once it has been established who the heroine is, the films delve into what circumstances drive the protagonists to take on the journey and what is “the call.” Both protagonists are drowning in societal and familial expectations regarding who they need to be. In Mulan’s case, she must be the perfect bride (detailed in “Honor To Us All”), whereas Moana must be the next great chief (“Where You Are”). Even though the protagonist attempts to fulfill her duties, she fails. Mulan messes up her meeting with the Matchmaker, and Moana constantly abandons her education of her duties in an attempt to get on the water. Trying to reassure his daughter that she can succeed, the protagonist’s father shares a tender moment with her that is eventually forgotten when the protagonist has her first clash with him: Mulan pleads with the council to excuse her father from war, and Moana suggests leaving the reef to find more fish. Despite the first clash, the protagonist once again brings up the same solution to the main problem that has trickled its way to directly affect the protagonist’s loved ones. The father snaps and tells the protagonist that

she must learn her place. His outburst, combined with a moment of grief, and a small act of defiance on her mother's part pushes the protagonist to disobey her father and leave.

According to Christopher Booker, the hero goes on a journey because there is "a call" that forces the character to act. This call centers on the fact that something of epic proportions has gone wrong.<sup>21</sup> For Mulan, that call is to join the army that will fight against the Huns in order to spare her father's life, and for Moana, the call is to sail the seas and restore Te Fiti's heart, which will save her island. Those are the reasons the protagonists credit as why they undertook this quest, but on a deeper, hidden level, they accepted the journey because it would satisfy a desire to unveil their true identity. In fact, Moana repeatedly mentions the ocean's "call" that she discovers is actually her own.

Once the protagonist leaves home, her journey begins, and a thunderstorm symbolizes the turbulent times that await her. From the beginning, the protagonist lacks a crucial skill for her trip. To take her father's place, Mulan must act like a man without raising suspicion. In order to find Maui, Moana must know how to sail the seas. Frustrated with her incompetence, the protagonist meets a supernatural being that does possess knowledge of this skill; however, she clashes with him and the other male travel companions. The protagonist is presented with her first challenge. At first, she has difficulty achieving her goal, but she does so through determination. Once the protagonist completes her first challenge, she is faced with a second obstacle where she saves the life of the man who dismisses her the most. Her use of logic impresses the men, and she gains their respect. Somewhere before or after that challenge, depending on the film, the protagonist acquires that initial missing skill by training with her

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<sup>21</sup> Booker, *Seven Basic Plots: Why Do We Tell Stories?* (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd / Books.), 70.

partners. At this point, the dynamic between the protagonist and her partners appears to be more positive, but shortly after, the “arrival and frustration” moment occurs.

According to Booker, the “arrival and frustration” moment is when the hero and travel companions reach the final destination, but there is uncertainty about accomplishing the final challenge.<sup>22</sup> In these films, that moment is marked as the abandonment scene. From this scene until the end, the films’ structures are formulaic. Before the abandonment scene, certain scenes would switch places in the overall plot organization or there would be scenes in one film that were not present in the other film. Perhaps the exact structure and function of the following scenes must exist because this is when the protagonist has her epiphany: She must rely on herself. Either way, the abandonment scene happens when the travel companions feel betrayed by the heroine’s mistake and leave her before completing the final challenge. The protagonist has a brief moment where she considers giving up, but she realizes that that is not who she is. Despite not having her travel companions’ help, the protagonist prepares for the final battle. As the stakes rise, the men return to help the protagonist, and the protagonist emerges victorious. At that point, the protagonist has come to terms with who she is. Furthermore, an authority figure recognizes her role in saving her people, which also validates her identity. She returns home where she is respected and celebrated by family/community.

If the protagonist had no quest, there would be no plot device to drive the story forward. The protagonist would have no place that grants her freedom from longtime expectations that clouded her mind. Additionally, she would not have been posed with obstacles that helped her discover her identity.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 83.

## Chapter Nine: Culture

While *Mulan* and *Moana* feature similar protagonists, supporting characters, and plot devices under the roof of a major formula, Disney distances the audience from the perception that these films are one and the same. The creators manage to pull off this goal by telling these stories through the lens of different cultures. First of all, the films are about people of color, so that is considered a major shift from the default Eurocentric worlds that American films tend to represent. Furthermore, *Mulan*'s Chinese culture and *Moana*'s fusion of Polynesian cultures encompass details that seem to be opposites at times.

In terms of the story, culture plays a major role in the films' narrative differences. One of the factors that accounts for those changes is the source material for the films. *Mulan* is based on the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. Because Hua Mulan is the heroine of a folktale, several versions of her story exist, so it is never passed down completely the same. In all of the versions, however, Mulan is a young woman who takes her father's place in the Chinese army under the guise of a man. Disney keeps that plot point in its story and builds the rest from there.

Unlike Mulan, Moana was not a protagonist in a past story, but she is created from elements of Polynesian mythologies and history. Pacific Islanders' title as the greatest navigators in the world is usually connected to a mysterious event where they stopped voyaging for about 2,000 years. Wanting to provide an answer to that question, *Moana*'s creators turned to Maui, a prominent demigod or human character, depending on what Polynesian culture is represented, as the explanation. Disney opted to have Maui embody his demigod existence, which led him to steal the heart of Te Fiti. Doing so unleashed a darkness that destroyed life and brought monsters

that made it unsafe for the Pacific Islanders to navigate the seas. Thus, the voyaging stopped for all of those years, but some event has to be the cause of the return of the navigators. Originally, Maui was the protagonist, but the directors decided to center the story on a young girl who is next in line to become chief—a position that exists in Polynesian cultures but is not necessarily a role bestowed to women. Disney included the acceptance of Moana as a female chief for the purpose of producing a feminist friendly film. Just like her ancestors, Moana is drawn to the ocean, however, and she becomes the heroine who will reignite the voyaging nature of Pacific Islanders.

Before delving into the protagonist's journeys, the worlds that the women come from must be explored in order to explain why the protagonist embarks on a dangerous adventure. Mulan comes from a patriarchal society, while Moana's society is considered egalitarian. The distribution of power also determines what kind of life the protagonist leads. For example, Mulan is an everyday citizen in a country that deems men superior to women; therefore, she is subjected to strict gender roles that silence her identity. Mulan is expected to do housework, find a husband, bear children, and maintain her physical beauty.

In contrast, Moana lives in a world that treats men and women equally, even allowing her to inherit a position of power. Moana is expected to participate in village life, which includes dancing, basket weaving, net making, and fire building. These tasks, however, are done by men and women and are viewed as community-building activities. Also, Moana gets the opportunity to become a leader, and her responsibilities will bring her a satisfaction that is not afforded to Mulan; Moana will be challenged to use her skills, knowledge, and logic to solve problems.

Another disparity between the two worlds is the prominence of doubt and disappointment versus belief and encouragement. Mulan's community is more close-minded because everyone

has their assigned roles according to gender and deviation from that is viewed as a dishonor. There is no mindset that if something does not work out then there is another option. People need to fit in, or they are a failure. Mulan and her family continually express doubt that Mulan can impress the Matchmaker. Their lack of faith in her is highlighted in their ancestral prayers. Even Mulan calls upon the power of her ancestors to prevent her from embarrassing her family. Additionally, Mulan's grandmother relies on the powers of a lucky cricket to help Mulan be successful. No one believes that Mulan is capable of meeting expectations. Because women's roles are limited to obedient daughter, wife, and mother, Mulan's failure to satisfy those roles brings on her family's disappointment. On the other hand, Moana's family believes that Moana will be a successful chief, due to the positive outlook that her village seems to possess. Moana's triumphs are met with encouragement that she is doing a great job, and her shortcomings are also met with encouragement to try again. Overall, Mulan's world seems more restrictive and judgmental, whereas Moana's seems more accepting and supportive.

On that note, Moana's grandmother is more supportive of Moana's desires than Mulan's grandmother is. In fact, Gramma Tala is the one who reveals to Moana that their ancestors used to be voyagers. For Moana, this piece of information explains her intense connection to the ocean and sways her to sail the seas in search of Maui. Once again, Gramma Tala has more freedom to support Moana's dreams because she does not live in a society that asks her to remain silent over such matters, whereas Grandmother Fa does feel that rule hang over her at times. Also, Gramma Tala dies and comes back as a manta ray, which is inspired by Polynesian animal totems, but Grandmother Fa is alive and well. Even beyond her human life, Gramma Tala guides Moana. In her moment of despair, Moana is visited by her grandmother's spirit who confesses that she should have never put that much pressure on Moana to restore the heart. Instead of

expressing disappointment, Gramma Tala comforts and reassures Moana that if she wants to go home than her spirit will return with her. Not too long after, however, Gramma Tala sings about the girl Moana has become and reminds her about the voice within, prompting Moana's epiphany about her identity and determination to carry out her destiny.

When it comes to characterization, Moana is more outspoken and quick to defend herself than Mulan is. This difference can be attributed to the society that the protagonist was raised in and the nature of her journey. For example, Mulan cannot afford to fiercely defend women's capabilities when doing so would raise suspicion. Furthermore, Mulan has been conditioned to keep silent for most of her life. She still speaks up at crucial moments, but she does not do it as freely and often as Moana. On Moana's end, she has been raised to believe that women can be authority figures; therefore, she must know how to assert herself if she plans to become chief. Her journey also pairs her with a pompous demigod who mercilessly tries to discourage her, so she must learn to defend herself.

Despite being more subdued with her thoughts, Mulan's situation forces her to participate in violence and kill China's enemies. In contrast, killing someone never crosses Moana's mind. Weapons, such as swords, daggers and canons are common tools that Mulan needs for her journey. Meanwhile, Moana relies on magical artifacts, such as the heart of Te Fiti and Maui's fishhook.

Other elements that aid the protagonist in her journey are her travel companions. Mulan's companions consist of human soldiers, animals, and an ancestral dragon, whereas a chicken, a demigod, the ocean, and the spirit of her grandmother accompany Moana. Every single one of Mulan's companions, except Mushu, is an ordinary creature. In contrast, almost all of Moana's companions are supernatural in nature. Furthermore, the villains that Moana faces are mythical

monsters. Kakamora are tiny creatures whose legends originate from the Solomon Islands, and Disney takes those myths and dresses Kakamora in coconut armor. Other supernatural beings include Tamatoa and Te Fiti/Te Kā—a Disney version of a Polynesian goddess. Mulan's enemies are simply the Huns, actual invaders of China at one point in history.

For the most part, Mulan's story seems to be more realistic because it deals with people and situations that existed in China's past, whereas *Moana* contains several mythical elements. Audiences perceive *Mulan* as a darker narrative that could have been a reality in this world, while *Moana* comes off as an epic adventure that exists only in someone's imagination and onscreen.

In addition to differences in narrative elements, visuals and audio play a role in convincing the audience that *Mulan* and *Moana* do not share a similar blueprint. The images and music work together to create different worlds; therefore, audiences readily separate the two films in their minds because the narratives do not look and sound the same.

Because *Mulan* centers around the war with the Huns, a majority of the film takes place on land, unlike *Moana* that takes place on or by the ocean. Settings unique to *Mulan* include snow-covered mountains, the Great Wall of China, rice paddy fields, a bamboo jungle, and the Imperial City. On the other hand, *Moana* features Lalotai—the realm of monsters—a waterfall cave filled with canoes, and Motunui—an island with coconut groves, blowholes, and lush flora. Both films also contain sacred spaces, but they are nothing alike. In Mulan's world, the sacred place is the shrine to her ancestor's. It is a covered area that contains the tombstones of Mulan's ancestors and the stone guardians. Mulan and her family go there to pray to their ancestors and ask for their help. For Moana's people, their sacred place is out in the open on top of a mountain. In the middle of the mountain, there is a pile of stones. Former chiefs place a stone on the pile

when they are ready to lead. The stones closest to the bottom have moss growing on them. This place is inspired by maraes—Polynesian temples that have stone foundations.

In the opening credits of *Mulan*, the art style used was traditional black ink calligraphy on parchment paper, whereas the prologue in *Moana* tells the legend of Maui on painted tapa cloth. Tapa cloth is used consistently in the artwork of Motunui's legends and history. While tapa is used to illustrate the life of Moana's ancestors on the canoe sails, Mulan's ancestors are represented by stone tombstones that have Chinese writing on them. Mulan and Moana's clothing styles are also different. For the most part, Mulan's clothes have multiple layers that cover her arms and legs completely whether that be her everyday clothes, her matchmaker outfit, or her military uniform. In contrast, Moana wears a skirt and a crop top that exposes more of her skin. The clothes are also made from different materials, and Mulan dons a variety of outfits and colors, which Moana does not.

In regards to music, Opetaiia Foa'i, a Samoan artist, incorporates elements of island style music in *Moana*'s soundtrack. For example, the opening song features chanting in the Tokelauan language. In "We Know The Way," Opetaiia also uses Tokelauan, and he includes choral harmonies and slit log drums, which is the instrument Moana bangs before the song starts.<sup>23</sup> For "Honor To Us All" and "A Girl Worth Fighting For," the pentatonic scales, typical in Chinese music, were used. Also, the Chinese di and gu-zheng were some of the instruments used.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, what culture does for these Disney films is provide audiences with two unique experiences that hides the recycling of a formula. Culture infuses itself into every aspect of the

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<sup>23</sup> Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman, "Disney's "Moana" - Musical Musings," Hawaiian Music for Listening Pleasure, November 29, 2016, , accessed February 25, 2018, <https://amykstillman.wordpress.com/2016/11/29/disney%CA%BBs-moana-musical-musings/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Chinese Culture in Mulan," July 20, 2004, , accessed February 25, 2018, <http://www.oocities.org/hollywood/5082/culture.html>.

film in a way that it gives details to the general structure of the formula. These details produce narrative, visual, and aural contrasts that take that formula and create two different stories.

## **Chapter Ten: Conclusion**

With my research, I wanted to illustrate how Disney is a company that builds its empire on past successes. In *Moana*'s case, the formula that touched on the theme that *Moana* wanted to explore was *Mulan*'s formula. Both films are about a sixteen-year-old woman of color who is consumed by an identity crisis. The tension with her overprotective father and passive mother is a result of the inability to satisfy their expectations that stem from society's expectations. That daily clash combined with the inspiration from her grandmother's "crazy" personality pushes the protagonist to finally discover who she is. When a quest that will save her loved ones and grant her freedom to explore who she is arrives, the protagonist accepts it without a second thought. On her journey, she does not find a peaceful place to reflect. Instead, she is paired with male travel companions who present obstacles that demand she figure out who she is in order to defend herself. Those tumultuous relationships and the perilous quest are the key to self-discovery. In the end, the protagonist learns that she is an independent woman who can be and do anything she wants to do as long as she sets her mind to it. When she returns home, she is confident in who she is and is unwilling to compromise her identity for the identity her family and community wanted to assign to her. Fortunately, her absence from her loved ones' lives and her accomplishments convince her community that the best version of the heroine is the one she molded herself. While that was the end goal in the film's universe, Disney's goal in this universe is to present the public with the most feminist character to date in pursuit of commercial success.

Despite having a formula that sets up the framework for the film, Disney is not guilty of producing the same story. Instead, the company utilizes a formula and creates two distinct stories

through the representation of distinct cultures in each of the films. All cultures share some aspects, and that accounts for the similarities in characters; however, cultures include elements that are unique to their community. At the end of the day, that is the reason why *Mulan* and *Moana* are two different stories that provide their own experiences for the audience. Culture fleshes out the details of this general formula, and it creates and represents worlds that have contrasting narrative, visual, and aural elements. Because of culture's encompassing nature, Disney is able to hide and continue to use its recycled formulas.

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