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Castillo Rebollo, Lidia; Martín Alegre, Sara, dir. Changing Gender Representations in Cinema : femininity and masculinity in Disney's Moana. 2019. 31 pag. (801 Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

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Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

**Changing Gender Representations in Cinema:
Femininity and Masculinity in Disney's *Moana***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

June 2019

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Sara Martín for her help and support during the process of creation of this dissertation. I would also like to thank my parents, my sister and my partner for their support during the four years of the degree. Finally, I would like to thank everybody that has been part of these four years: thank you for being part of one of the most important moments of my life.

Abstract

Children build their identity by means of role models and they search for these in the representations in the films and cartoons they are introduced to. Taking into account that cinema is a reflection of social reality and values, children are exposed to different ideas concerning gender in the films they watch. The Walt Disney Company is one of the most popular companies of media and entertainment for children and, consequently, their representations of gender have been object of academic interest and controversy.

One of the central aspects studied in this field are Disney princesses and their promotion of conservative, patriarchal and sexist values. *Moana* (2016), also known as *Vaiana*, has been considered by many critics to offer an alternative princess in contrast to the traditional and former ones. It has been claimed that this film breaks with sexist values usually attributed to other princess films. Therefore, the character of Moana has been studied as a feminine role model. Nevertheless, little importance has been paid to the character of Maui, the demigod that causes the main crisis in the plot and that accompanies Moana in her journey.

In this dissertation I suggest that Moana provides the audience both with a positive heroine, who is not a princess, and a demigod; also, that the relationship between the two characters influence each other in their representation of positive gender values. Therefore, I aim to reveal the elements that allow to consider Moana a progressive female character as opposed to Disney princesses and to highlight Maui's evolution that makes it possible to take him as a positive role model for the male audience. Finally, I present their relationship as a favourable influence for each other in their representation of gender values.

Keywords: *Moana/Vaiana*, Disney, gender, representations, values, Maui, stereotypes, femininity, princess, masculinity, heroine.

0. Introduction

Sometimes, our strengths lie beneath the surface.

Moana, 2016.

Societies, just as human beings, evolve. Several changes in history have made individuals' lives and rights different and some of them have been possible thanks to personal fights and collective movements against oppression. Those historical events and progression are all reflected in art in all its forms. Literature, sculpture, paintings, architecture and music are some of the tools used to illustrate reality and those changes in belief, lifestyle and culture. However, with the introduction of different forms of arts, cinema has also become representative of human and social reality.

Feminism and the fight for women's rights and equality has also changed over time, marking great differences in societies and people's lives. These innovations have their effect and representation in art and, therefore, in cinema too. Moreover, as a result, new disciplines and kinds of criticism have emerged, such as gender studies and feminist film theory. By analysing cinema from a feminist perspective, what can be seen is that women tend to be "represented as object-victims" (Kuhn, 1982: 6) and that their representation is usually characterised by "congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures" (De Lauretis, 1984: 5). The female images marketed are stereotypical and constructed around a certain set of characteristics that are oppressive and that reduce them to a cultural construction normally based on "visible criteria of beauty and attractiveness" (Kuhn, 1982: 6). All in all, their representations are founded in patriarchal ideological operations and women's objectification. Moreover, masculine representations follow a similar pattern as they also tend to be characterised by patriarchal and hypermasculine stereotypes.

As De Lauretis states, “cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values and ideology” (1984: 37) and is, hence, “a work of semiosis” (1984: 37). Individuals are social beings and, therefore, they are “constructed day by day” (Kuhn, 1982: 14). In other words, identities are affected by the surrounding society and its cultural values or, to put it in another way, its semiotics. Thus, cinema provides the audience with meaning and codes with its representations of social reality. Furthermore, children could be described as the most malleable social beings since childhood is a period of time in which individuals are in the first stages of the building of the basis of their identities. For this reason, it is a pivotal moment for the influence of gender values to mark whether they will be led by stereotypes or whether they will go hand by hand with the progressive and contemporary values.

Taking into account that cinema and its creations are “elements in a process of meaning construction” (Kuhn: 43), more attention should be paid in the way in which they represent reality. In the same way as societies change, the images of women and men are dynamic too. They should not be taken as an “unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings” (Kuhn: 77). For this reason, more emphasis should be put in “the creation of alternative representations” (Kuhn: 6) of women and men and in the spread of positive gender values.

The Walt Disney Company and Pixar, currently also part of Disney, are two of the most acclaimed companies of media and entertainment for children. The messages and the representations spread with their films have a great impact on children and audiences in general. As a consequence of their worldwide popularity, they “have been discussed and analysed in great detail by many scholars” and criticised “for their seemingly sexist and oppressive gender messages” (Lueke, 2014: 1). On the one hand, their princess films portray women as “physically weak, affectionate, nurturing, helpful, fearful [and]

submissive” (Coyne et al., 2016: 1910). On the other hand, these Disney and Pixar films also offer stereotyped representations of men suffering then “from similarly traditional and restrictive gender role portrayals as women” although “fewer studies have examined [this] behaviour” (Hine et al., 2018: 4). However, these companies are becoming more aware of how the messages they are spreading are filled with “traditional gender role stereotypes” (Coyne et al., 2016: 1910) and they have begun to provide the audience with new gender models.

In 2016, Walt Disney Animation Studios released *Moana*, also known as *Vaiana* and *Oceania*.¹ After Maui, an ambitious, egocentric and selfish demigod, steals goddess Te Fiti’s² heart due to his thirst of power and heroism, all the pacific islands are affected, and nature starts dying. Moana, a 16-year-old Polynesian girl and the daughter of the chief of one of the endangered islands, starts a new journey in the sea to save her people and her island with Maui, the very same that has caused all these misfortunes, as her companion after she convinces him. *Moana* (2016) offers alternative gender representations both for female and male audiences. Diverse critics have claimed that this film breaks with former patriarchal and sexist values seen in other Disney princess films. However, little importance has been given to Maui and to his contribution as a role model. Furthermore, Moana has been considered by researchers, such as Streiff and Dundes, to “continue a tradition of Disney princess movies” (2017: 1) and, therefore, she is seen as a princess just as Cinderella and Aurora. Moreover, she has also been claimed to be a “modern princess” (Hine et al., 2018: 3) and, therefore, she has been linked to princesses

¹ Since other business companies had already used the name *Moana*, in many countries in Europe, such as Spain, the title was changed to *Vaiana*. In Italy, it was changed to *Oceania*.

² Te Fiti is the goddess of nature and the one who brought the ocean with life. Her heart is a green pounamu stone, which is a typical Polynesian stone, that provides its bearer with power.

such as Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010) and Merida from *Brave* (2012). Yet, they have failed to see that, in fact, she is not a princess but a heroine.

The aim of this dissertation is, therefore, to prove that *Moana* (2016) provides its target young audience both with Moana as a heroine and a role model for the female audience and, at the same time, with Maui as a developing positive masculine role model. Additionally, they influence and help each other in their representation positive gender values. In order to analyse both characters, this dissertation is organized in two main different sections. In the first one, I highlight all those aspects of Moana's characterisation that allow the audience to consider her a progressive and alternative female character different from former Disney princesses and, properly speaking, a heroine. The second section deals with the evolution of the character of Maui. As I show, his stereotyped attitude in the beginning of the story evolves into different values and behaviour as the plot advances. Finally, I present the relationship between these two main characters as a favourable influence for both their development and as a representation of an emotional connection between a man and a woman based on mutual support instead of on romantic love.

1. Moana: A Heroine Against the Stereotypical Princess

The princesses that appear in the Disney films have been argued to be “serving as role model for young girls” despite their “oppressive characteristics” (Lueke, 2014: 1). Julia Golden and Jennifer Wallace Jacoby claim that Disney princesses are not “just a movie character” but figures that ultimately work as “a lovely loving friend” (2018: 300). As a result, girls will follow their steps even if they are representation of sexist traditions. Taking them as role models, evidence suggests, constitutes an “exposure to gender stereotypes” that have “a negative effect on girls’ and young women’s mental health” (Golden & Jacoby, 2018: 300). Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of “female empowerment and equality” (Lueke, 2014: 2) seems to be improving with “a number of modern princess movies across the late 2000s and 2010s” (Hine et al., 2018: 3), which have been claimed to provide the audience with “more positive role portrayals” (Hine, 2018: 6). One of these progressive and alternative films is *Moana* (2016).

Moana has, since the very beginning of the film, an obsession with a forbidden element in her community: the sea. She is attracted to an ancestral tradition that is now prohibited because it is considered dangerous after former members of her community had an accident when sailing. Nevertheless, going to the sea and sailing becomes her fixed idea and she never allows these prohibitions to obstruct her dream. Eventually, going against rules will be the solution to save her island and her world. Since the very beginning, then, she breaks with tradition. However, Moana goes a step further as she also breaks with the patriarchal and stereotyped values often represented by The Walt Disney Company films. *Moana* is not a stereotypical princess movie as this main female character spreads positive messages and values in terms of gender representation without being a princess herself.

The first question that must be answered is why she is not a princess although critics and reviewers have considered her to be one, as the chieftain's daughter. If we pay attention to one of her first dialogues with Maui, the demigod who finally accepts accompanying her in her journey, she already provides the audience with the answer. She is referred to as "Princess" by Maui to what she replies "I am not a princess. I'm the daughter of the chief". For Maui, it makes no difference as she is wearing a pretty dress and she has an animal sidekick, which are considered two main characteristics of princesses. Nevertheless, being a royal person and being the daughter of the chief are not synonyms.

In the case of a princess, for instance Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* (1959), the society portrayed is hierarchical with the royal family at the top of the social pyramid. They are never seen carrying out the same tasks as the lower classes. Moreover, wealth and material gains are an obvious part of their lives. This emphasis on wealth is illustrated by their residences, as they live in a luxurious castle with servants, and in the clothes and accessories they wear. In contrast, the society in which Moana and her family live is egalitarian. Her father is the chief of the tribe and, hence, the leader. His main responsibility is to take care of his people and the island. This position of power is inherited and, therefore, Moana is placed in it without being elected. However, everyone is treated favourably, and nobody feels inferior to him or to Moana's family. They are not wealthy as the island is shared by the community as well as the elements provided by it. All the members' lives are based on their relationship with the island and, thus, with nature itself. Although ordinary girls such as the target young audience cannot access this position of power, Moana's society is egalitarian and there seems not to be a difference in, for instance, the tasks the members have to carry out or the clothes they wear. Even the chief and his family physically work and take an active role in those tasks. As

Doggydemon (2017: online) states in his blog entry, “as a village chief, [the] problems that Moana’s community faces are her problems as well, because she does not receive any special treatment”. Being a strong leader does not mean being superior to your people but to care and to be part of the community.

Moana’s physical and psychological traits are also different from the elements that characterise the traditional princesses of former Disney films. Firstly, although she is not the first non-white female character to star in a Disney film, she is the first main character that represents the Polynesian and Pacific cultures. Moreover, something that distinguishes her from, for instance, Tiana³ is that, as I have mentioned, she is not a princess. Although Tiana, the first princess that has represented the African-American culture, is not a princess at the beginning of her story, she obtains this rank by marrying the prince. Moana, on the other hand, will not become a princess in any part of her story. Furthermore, her physical appearance provides the audience with more realistic traits with which audiences can feel represented. As Coyne mentions, traditionally, Disney princesses are portrayed as “attractive with large eyes, small nose and chin, moderately large breasts, prominent cheekbones, lustrous hair and good muscle tone and skin complexion” and as being “unrealistically thin” (2016: 1911). Moana does not replicate that model as her skin is darker, her nose is bigger, and her body does not fit into the ideal thinness usually portrayed by princesses and media in general. Her body is stronger, wider and athletic and, in that sense, it reflects her story, her hobbies and her personality. Essentially, in contrast to the harmful physical representations that traditional princesses offer, her physical portrayal represents a realistic body.

³ She is the main character of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). It is also an adaptation of a Brother Grimm’s fairy tale.

From a psychological perspective, Moana offers healthier values as she is not characterised by perfection but as a realistic character with her own weaknesses and flaws. Her generosity, her independence, her wisdom, her braveness and her physical and mental strength are essential for the plot. Her personality is also characterised by empathy, a capacity for partnership and compassion, which will be central for the climax, for Maui's development as a character and, hence, for the resolution of the story. Despite having been mistreated by Maui in their first meeting and despite being treated as inferior by him, she is able to feel empathy for him and help him with his insecurities. Additionally, she is a confident girl with fixed goals since she allows herself to challenge a demigod like Maui and to make him know who she is and what she is going to do: she is "Moana of Motului" and she "will sail across the sea and restore the heart of Te Fiti" (*Moana*, 2016). All of these characteristics make it possible for Moana to embark on her journey, break the rules and save her people and her island. However, her sensibility allows her to recognise her own weaknesses and admit when she needs help too. For instance, she does not act as if she does not need Maui, despite his egocentric attitude and his sense of superiority. Furthermore, her hobbies are not the usual ones seen in female Disney characters as they involve physical action and movement such as climbing, running and sailing. All in all, she "represent[s] an empowered female character" with a "more balanced profile" (Hine et al., 2018: 2), with behaviours attributed to both men and women at the same time as she allows young girls and the audience to realise that having weaknesses is part of being human. Thus, the combination of all her traits, qualities and flaws lets this female character show her most human side.

Benjamin Hine, Katarina Ivanovic and Dawn England carried out a study to test how young children perceive the differences between traditional Disney princesses and the new, alternative ones. They used the characters of the 1950s Aurora and Moana and

they analysed the differences in behaviour and physical appearance that children highlighted. They demonstrated that children “were aware of the differences in the gendered behaviour” of both female characters and that they tended to see Aurora as more feminine while “they noticed that Moana displayed relatively equal feminine and masculine characteristics” (Hine et al., 2018: 6). This study positively showed that Moana is “more androgynous” but that, at the same time, “becoming more masculine” does not mean sacrificing “traditionally feminine attributes”. What children are really doing is “demonstrating true context-dependent androgyny” (Hine et al., 2018: 6). In other words, Moana is a positive female representation that offers not only positive feminine values but a combination of both masculine and feminine traits and that avoids stereotyped distinctions between femininity and masculinity and, hence, women and men. Therefore, she provides an accurate and contemporary representation of individuals, of a human-like portrayal and of equality between genders.

Moana’s story and narrative arc are also completely different from the ones seen in other princess films. First of all, the stories portrayed in movies such as *Cinderella* (1950), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1958) or *The Little Mermaid* (1989) find their origins in macabre, sexist and cruel fairy tales written by male authors.⁴ Their roles in the plot are reduced to the patriarchal tradition and to being saved by a male character, who tends to be a prince whom they marry at the end of the movie. Their stories are characterised by being based on a kind of love in which women depend on men. In the case of Aurora, only by being kissed by the prince will she wake from her curse. Likewise, it is by marrying the prince that Cinderella is saved from an abusive domestic household. Ariel’s

⁴ *The Little Mermaid* (1837) original fairy tale was written by Hans Christian Andersen. Both *Cinderella* (1697 and 1812) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1697) fairy tales most popular versions were written by the Brothers Grimm and also published or orally transmitted by Charles Perrault.

story and actions, on the other hand, are based on an ultimate goal involving the prince: marrying him. Generally, they do not show any progress in their attitudes and the plots are based on a love story founded in inequality between men and women, which makes them be partially or even totally absent in action. In other words, their narrative arcs follow “a pervasive patriarchal system” (Morrison, 2014: 7) and they are viewed “as helpless, passive victims to society’s injustices” (Lueke, 2014: 2). Moreover, their position of power as princesses and queens is intrinsically linked to men as they do not reign without a prince or a king. Even more modern female characters in Disney films such as Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010) also “end up focusing on men” (Morrison, 2014: 8).

Moana, in contrast, has fixed ideas and goals which do not involve a romantic outcome since the beginning of the film. As it has been stated before, she breaks with tradition by starting, as a heroine, a journey sailing in the sea, which has been prohibited to for all her life. As a woman and as the daughter of the chief, Maui thinks her duty consists of just “kissing babies and things” and he even questions why “[her] people decided to send her”. As opposed to most Disney princesses, she shows an evolution in her story, in her actions and in her weaknesses. Thus, even though she shows confidence from the beginning, she gains more as the story develops with, for instance, her sailing skills. Furthermore, she is the heroine who saves herself when she is locked up in the cave by Maui, she saves her pet Hei Hei⁵ in several occasions and, most importantly, she is the one who saves her island and nature by using her knowledge and values to return Te Fiti’s heart. Even though she is called a “chicken” by Maui when they have to enter “the Realms of Monsters” to recover his fish hook, she proves her braveness with her actions. To

⁵ Hei Hei is a chicken, which can be considered Moana’s animal sidekick. It travels with her and Maui during the whole journey.

Maui's surprise, despite having him by her side, she does not need a hero to save her and she eventually saves the world alone. After she saves her island and returns home, she becomes the chieftain. As opposed to the patriarchal values shown in Disney princess' films, although she obtains this position of power by means of inheritance, she does not need to marry or to have a male partner in order to have that power. Furthermore, Yvonne Tasker (1998) states in her book that "female action heroes are constructed in narrative terms as macho/masculine, as mothers or as Others" (69) but, in contrast, *Moana's* heroine is a teenager with, as it has been mentioned, her own insecurities and human-like characteristics. In addition, Benjamin Hine et al. (2018) emphasise how "princesses [are] also rarely responsible for 'climatic' rescue scenes" and how the "most significant scene of the movie" usually requires "a central, often male character to save another from a dangerous situation and provide significant plot resolution" (5). Yet, Moana is a heroine, the character that saves Maui, her island and nature from dying. She rebels against the prohibition of her community and decides to go sailing, embarking on a dangerous journey. She is the protagonist in the climax of the film, the heroine that rescues the Pacific island and she does not need a male character to save her. At the same time, the fact that Moana is a teenager allows young girls to feel identified with her. Therefore, unlike most Disney princesses, she actively participates in action being the heroine of the whole story and, this time, heroism is not related to masculinity but to a female character.

Moreover, Moana is not interested in romance and she "rejects [...] traditional romantic outcomes" (Hine et al., 2018: 2). Moreover, no male character or partner of her age is introduced in the story. If we compare Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Moana, it can be seen how both of them break with traditions and rules to achieve their goal. On the one hand, Ariel decides to leave the sea, an action which is forbidden by her father, because she has fallen in love with a prince, with a man she does not really know.

On the other hand, Moana decides to go against his father's orders in order to save her people. Although Ariel takes action in the final fight against Ursula, her reasons are founded on love and on egoism, and it is Prince Eric who finally ends with the villain's life. Moana, however, fights the volcanic demon Te Ka on her own and finally manages to save her world.⁶ In this perspective, Moana's plot does not involve romantic love between a man and a woman but Moana's love for her island, for her people, for the sea and for nature and a female-male relationship based on friendship and support as it will be seen in the following section. Thus, her main interest and her goal are to save her island and the world and she, instead of being a delicate passive victim, becomes an active heroine. Thanks to her humanity, her strength and commitment, as she arrives her home, she becomes the chief of her island and a way-finder that will lead her people when sailing and traveling.

Consequently, Moana, as it has been demonstrated, is not a passive princess but an active heroine. Her behaviour, her personality and her appearance have both masculine and feminine attributes, which make her a more realistic representation of contemporary society and individuals. As Stover claims, traditional Disney princesses represent "a problematic blurring of gender ideals, which privileges some aspects of femininity and disregards others" (2013: 7). Moana as a heroine is as beautiful as previous female characters but "[her] character strengths lie mainly in [her] wit, spunk and passionate ideals" (Stover, 2013: 7). Despite being the main character and the heroine of the story the heroine, she does not represent a perfect figure but a teenage girl with her own insecurities, weaknesses and flaws. As a result, she can be seen as a more human-like

⁶ When Maui steals Te Fiti's heart, Te Ka tries to take the stone from him. He is also seeking for Te Fiti's heart in order to become more powerful.

representation for young girls and, simultaneously, this allows the female audience to feel identified with her more easily.

2. *Moana* and Masculinity: Maui's Evolution towards a Positive Model

Studies and criticism about The Walt Disney Company and its films usually focus on princesses and representations of femininity and women. However, there seems to be a tendency to overlook the representation of masculinity and the behaviour of male characters in these films. However, some researchers have analysed these characters and have found that most “male characters were more likely to use physicality to express their emotions” and “[to] be naturally strong and heroic” (Hine et al., 2018: 4). As Hine et al. further suggest, “men in these movies may suffer from similarly traditional and restrictive gender role portrayals as women” (2018. 4). At the beginning of *Moana*, Maui's characteristics seem to fit into researchers' claims as they follow the traditional clichés. However, his personality shows an evolution from these stereotyped traits towards a more positive, contemporary and human-like representation of masculinity far from patriarchal values.

The name of Maui is found in the Pacific cultures in an ancestral mythological figure. Maui is a part of the Polynesian folklore. He is a folk hero. Nevertheless, there is variation in the myths and the representations surrounding this folkloric figure depending on the nation. In *Moana*, Maui is presented, as Grandma Tala explains, “a demigod of Wind and Sea”, “a warrior, a trickster, a shape shifter who could change form with the power of his magical fish hook”.⁷ Due to his thirst for power, Maui steals Te Fiti's heart. Te Fiti's heart provides its bearer with the strongest power and Maui wants to have it in order to, as he later explains, become a real hero. The voice of this character in the English original version corresponds to Dwayne Johnson's, also known as the Rock, who has Polynesian roots in his family. The actor is also well- known for actively fighting for

⁷ There was much controversy about how different *Moana*'s Maui is from the mythological figure.

women's rights and equality. Being connected to feminism and egalitarian movements, the character portrayed by Dwayne Johnson must offer a favourable personality in order to consider him a character in favour of the actor's beliefs. Since the very beginning, Maui's portrayal is characterised by stereotypes attributed to male characters but, as the plot develops, his character evolves towards a more human-like figure and towards the representation of positive gender values.

The first version of Maui that the audience is introduced to is filled with stereotyped bad attitudes and manners. His physical portrayal is hyper-masculinised as his body is strong, wide and big, clearly reflecting his temper and personality. Maui is characterised by a sense of superiority and total egocentrism. His stealing the heart of the goddess of nature regardless of the consequences it has for the islands and for life illustrates how his actions are led by pure selfishness. When he first meets Moana, he introduces himself as "Maui, the shape shifter, demigod of Wind and Sea, hero of man". He truly believes in his position in the hierarchy of life since, as a demigod, he is superior to humans and, therefore, to Moana. As a result, he believes that Moana is his follower, even fan, and that what she wants is an autograph as "not every day you get a chance to meet your hero". Moana makes it clear to him that he is not her hero and that she is there to make him accompany her in her journey to return Te Fiti's heart and not "so [he] can sign [her] oar". Maui, astonished, cannot believe she does not like him, "which is impossible", and tries to justify himself claiming that "[he] got stuck here for a thousand years trying to get the heart as a gift for [them], mortals". Again, his sense of superiority does not allow him to see through his deeds and his real intentions, so he presupposes Moana is going to thank him, to which he responds with his song "You're Welcome", a clear illustration of his egocentrism.

His personality also follows other stereotypes related to male characters, which eventually have negative consequences both for him and for the world. Firstly, his ambition, his search and desire for power and his patriarchal values lead him to committing a crime against the goddess Te Fiti. He decides to steal a pounamu stone which contains the goddess' powers in order to become almighty and break with the god hierarchy that positions him just as a demigod. As it has been mentioned, stealing her heart inevitably makes nature start to die and affects Moana's island and the whole Pacific. Moana knows about Maui's values and interests and she knows that only by telling him that he will be a hero if he returns Te Fiti's heart will she convince him to sail with her and accompany her on this journey. For that reason, she claims that he used to be a hero but that now he is "just the guy who stole the heart of Te Fiti" and "the guy who cursed the world". Maui cannot tolerate this and, consequently, he accepts to go with her to fix his reputation as a male and as a demigod. He wants to "be everyone's hero" and listen how everybody chants his name. Moreover, his physical strength and power do not help him as he expected as using his powers to lock Moana in a cave does not prevent her from managing to take him in her journey. Most importantly, being strong and powerful does not make him the hero of the story as these qualities are not really useful to resolve the main problem of the plot: fighting Te Ka and returning Te Fiti's heart. As it will be seen later on, other values will be needed to overcome his and the islands' problems. In short, male ego, strength and ambition result in the destruction and danger of Moana's island and the world.

Maui's journey with Moana allows him to overcome all the stereotypes that surround his character and to become a good representation of masculinity, as well as allowing the audience to see what lies underneath his façade. At first sight, his hyper-masculinised physical appearance makes the audience think of him as a stereotyped

character. However, as the plot advances, spectators can see that, in fact, his vulnerabilities and weakness are represented in his skin. His tattoos are a reflection of his personal story, just as it is common in the Polynesian culture. Tattoos work as signs that express somebody's identity and personality and, additionally, they are used to mark somebody's hierarchal status and genealogy. After Moana and Maui recover his fish hook in the Realms of Monsters,⁸ Moana asks him about his decorated skin and, in particular, about one tattoo in which a baby is seen being thrown into the water. At first, Maui is reluctant to explain to her what this image represents but, he eventually narrates his real personal story. He "wasn't born a demigod" as he had "human parents". However, "they took one look and decided they did not want [him]" so "they threw [him] under the sea, like [he] was nothing". After he was found by the gods, maybe out of compassion, he was given his hook and they made him Maui, the demigod. Nevertheless, he still wanted to do good deeds for humans so he "did everything for them so they'd love [him]" but "it was never enough". Being rejected by his own parents and feeling he is not enough for humans makes him feel insecure about himself. Contrary to the typical stereotype by which men cannot be vulnerable and show their insecurities, Moana manages to see deeper into Maui and realise that what he tries to show with his attitude and appearance is just a pretence. Moreover, his tattoos seem to symbolise his hidden deep part and emotions as he sometimes talks to the "other" Maui that appears in them and his tattoo seems to show more empathy and compassion than Maui himself. For instance, his tattooed Maui does not agree with him when he treats Moana badly and when he decides to leave her behind after entering the Realms of Monsters. In this respect, his tattoos, apart

⁸ After Maui fights Te Ka for Te Fiti's heart, he loses his fish hook. In order to recover it, he has to go to a place called the Realms of Monsters which, as its name indicate, is filled with monstrous creatures.

from his weaknesses and vulnerabilities, may also reflect his real emotions, thoughts and values. This side of Maui can be seen as “a positive source of empowerment” as showing weaker men “provides acceptance for children to show vulnerability and to not always be perfect” (Lueke, 2014: 3). Simultaneously, they encourage “personal expression and discovery or development” (Lueke, 2014: 3) in contrast to the usual expectation of boys and men being strong, brave and tough.

Maui’s relationship with Moana allows him to give up his ill manners and embrace his real self and, thus, generate positive gender values. By letting Moana and the audience see his weaknesses, he accepts that not everything has to be perfect even for a demigod. As the heroine claims, “sometimes our strengths lie beneath the surface”. Moana becomes, then, a good influence for Maui as she sees more in him than just his successful deeds, his power as a demigod and his weapon. His fish hook has become a symbol for his power and his worth as a God and as a man as his powers are weakened without it. Nevertheless, as she lets him see he is still powerful as a person without his weapon, he becomes more confident and, even when his hook breaks in the final fight against Te Ka, he feels secure enough about himself.

Their relationship also has an influence and an effect in the way Maui will fight against the obstacles he encounters. He uses his strength, physical fight and aggressiveness to overcome his enemies as he first tries to do with Moana locking her in a cave and throwing her into the water, and as he tries to do with Te Ka at the beginning of the final fight. However, Moana teaches him about empathy, compassion and redemption. Only with these values will they defeat Te Ka. The lava monster is too powerful for Maui to vanquish, but Moana manages to defeat Te Ka through compassion and empathy as she realises that only by returning the heart to him will he be healed and will Te Fiti come back to life. Seldom will aggressiveness be useful to solve problems. In

this context, she shows Maui that there are alternative ways different from aggressiveness to solve problems.

Nevertheless, Maui and Moana's good influence is reciprocal as they both teach values to each other. In the case of Moana, as it has been said before, she helps Maui with the expression of his feelings. She makes him open up about his personal experiences and his insecurities at the same time that she gives him a lesson about how being vulnerable is part of being human. Moreover, thanks to her, he realises that physical strength and aggressiveness cannot be used to overcome all problems and that being communicative, empathic and compassionate will lead you to better results. This change in attitude is also seen at the end of the movie as he, instead of showing pride and egoism, shows redemption, compassion and vulnerability as he apologises to Te Fiti for having stolen her heart. As a result, instead of a punishment, Te Fiti provides him with a new fishing hook. Additionally, Maui also teaches Moana, for instance, how to sail and, consequently, he allows her to gain more self-confidence. At the beginning of the film, even though she is remarkably attracted to the sea, she starts her journey without really being able to sail her ship. When she meets him, she commands him to board her boat. She expects him to sail replacing her, but Maui teaches her instead how to sail and, most importantly, he teaches her to be confident when doing it. It is thanks to him that, at the end, when facing Te Ka she manages to feel confident enough to sail on her own to save her island and the world.

Their relationship, as I have noted, is not based on romantic love as this kind of relationship is not present in the film. As part of the evolution of male characters in Disney movies, they have gone from "lack[ing] control over their sexual impulses" (Hine et al., 2018: 4) to having "evolved and matured over time [...] in their interactions with, and growing respect for, female protagonists" (Hine et al., 2018: 5). Maui and Moana are not

lovers but companions who support and help each other. As opposed to other films that provide us with female representations, *Moana* offers an alternative kind of relationship between men and women: a type based on partnership and support in which both sides are benefited from their reciprocal influence. Her plot is not “focused on the princess finding romantic love with a ‘prince charming’” (Morrison, 2014: 8). First of all, she is not a princess, and nor is Maui a prince. Moreover, Maui begins the story being an obstacle for her that she needs to overcome. As their story develops, they do not fall in love with each other but, instead, they become partners and friends. *Moana* shows how masculine and feminine characters and, hence, men and women in general can help and even heal each other without necessarily showing any type of romantic love nor sexuality between them.

Opposite to main male characters in the Disney princess films, Maui is not a prince. Instead, he could even be seen as a villain or an obstacle that develops and changes into a friend and a supporter for Moana. Although his hypermasculine physical appearance remains intact, his stereotyped behaviour progresses and he becomes a better, more suitable representation of masculinity and, overall, of humanity. Additionally, along with Moana, they represent another natural kind of relationship between men and women where partnership is possible.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Stereotypes have had the leading role in gender representations in art and, thus, cinema since their origins. Both female and male characters have suffered from clichés that have oppressed and reduced their ability to really embody social reality. Fortunately, just as societies have evolved, so has progressed cinema and entertainment and picture companies in order to provide the audience with representation with “considerable likeness to contemporary gender expectations [...] giving audiences a figure with they could comfortably identify” (Stover, 2013: 2). The Walt Disney Company has also progressed and has invested “in female-driven narratives” (Stover, 2013: 8) in which young girls find empowered and liberated characters. Moreover, the new main male characters they present are also characterised by positive gender values.

I have chosen *Moana* (2016) since this film breaks many barriers that prevented other female and male characters from truly beneficially represent both genders. Although criticism since the beginning has praised this movie because of its new alternative princess, critics have failed to recognise Moana as a heroine and not a princess; they have also usually overlooked Maui’s capacities to represent male audiences far from stereotypes. All in all, in this dissertation, *Moana* (2016) has been proven to have beneficial representations for both its male and female audiences. As opposed to Disney princesses, Moana possesses not only favourable feminine values but also an androgyny, a healthy and realistic physical appearance and vulnerability mixed with self-confidence. Moreover, Maui, with his narrative arc and his changing personality, also represents realistic human attitudes. Although he is first introduced as a totally stereotyped character, he develops into a male character that opens up to his feelings and weaknesses and that realises compassion and empathy must replace physical strength in order to overcome life’s obstacles.

Leaving the oppressive patriarchal system and idealised and unrealistic representations behind, both of them, along with their partnership and reciprocal support, present a developing narrative arc that allows both of them to represent contemporary audiences and societies. Spectators are provided with fictional characters that embody human behaviours both with their strengths and their flaws. All in all, Moana and Maui demonstrate that it is what lies underneath our surface that really matters.

This dissertation has highlighted the progressive gender representations of *Moana*, but The Walt Disney Company still has a long path to face if they want to completely abandon the “pervasive patriarchal system” (Morrison, 2014: 7) for which they have always, and still are, criticised. Even though one of their films has successfully represented both genders and has provided with advantageous role models, their traditional films still have a great effect in audiences and some of their new films have not abandoned sexist stereotypes yet. Moreover, there is still the problem of what type of audience this kind of films attract to. For instance, *Moana* has been labelled as a princess film and, usually, this kind of films are marketed focusing on their female audience. Conclusively, it is important that researchers keep analysing Disney and children cinema in order to deconstruct films that embrace sexist semiotics and in order to prevent children and audiences from being exposed to harmful and oppressive gender representations. All in all, *Moana* serves as a starting point and as a model for these companies to continue offering films that celebrate gender equality, humanity and contemporary societies.

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