

# ESSAY: NONHUMAN PRINCESSES

## The Nonhuman Disney Princesses By Corey Wrenn

Feminists have been critical of animated Disney films for promulgating outdated gender roles. Women in these films are represented as subservient, dainty, heterosexualized, and fixated on romance and the “happily ever after” with their dashing prince. The stories of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* echo rape culture (both are victims to their prince’s sexual advances while unconscious and unable to consent), while *Beauty and the Beast* romanticizes domestic violence and Stockholm Syndrome. The *Little Mermaid* encourages little girls to trade their voices for men’s affection. In most of these “princess movies,” the stories end with marriage. Heterosexual matrimony is portrayed as the culmination of life goals for women. These princesses are frequently the objects of rescue and a trophy for men to win; they are rarely the determiners of their own lives.

Many of the gender norms popular in human-centric Disney films are also perpetuated in those starring nonhuman princesses. These nonhuman princess films perpetuate Disney’s painfully heteronormative and white bias, although perhaps less obviously. They remain side characters to inspire male counterparts, to be rescued, and to be won—and again, marriage is presented as the epitome of a happy ending. Although these characters are deer, foxes, cats, lions, and frogs, they are also overwhelmingly coded as white. Whiteness structures characters’ speech, behaviors, and values. In fact, most of the voice actors are also white. For instance, *The Lion King’s* Nala is an African character, but a white woman of Irish descent voices adult Nala. Nonhuman Animals provide the possibility to transgress anthropocentric categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. That is, nonhumans do not have a “race,” for example. Therefore, Disney’s tendency to perpetuate dominant ideologies through nonhuman characters cues the audience to identify these ideologies as natural. This cultural conflation of socially constructed categories with biologically constructed categories is a powerful means of upholding inequality. Some problematic representations of nonhuman princesses:

### *Bambi* (1942)

Disney’s first nonhuman princess was Faline of *Bambi*. After meeting as fawns, she and Bambi begin a courtship that necessitates Bambi battling another buck to “win” her. He will later face a disastrous forest fire and rescue her from hunters and their dogs. Following this, he becomes the “Great Prince of the Forest” and starts a family with her.

### *The Aristocats* (1970)

After their wealthy mistress bequeaths her vast wealth to them, Duchess and her kittens are ousted from their Parisian mansion by the jealous butler. Stranded in the country and handicapped by her “white” femininity and hyper-daintiness, Duchess and her children are rescued by Tomcat, Thomas O’Malley. A romantic relationship forms between Duchess (who is lonely after the loss of her former male partner) and her hero, Tomcat.



### *Robin Hood* (1973)

Disney’s animated version of *Robin Hood* features a fox princess who is trapped in the court of the miserable and murderous King John. Robin Hood faces certain danger to participate in an archery contest to win Marian’s affections (and “earn” the kiss). As King John’s sights narrow in on Robin Hood, Maid Marian’s situation becomes increasingly precarious. Robin Hood eventually liberates the kingdom and marries his damsel in distress.

Illustrations: Disney’s *Aristocats*; human interpretation by Alaina Bastien

### *The Lion King* (1994)

*The Lion King* features a relatively strong nonhuman princess, Nala, who struggles to keep the pride afloat in Simba's absence. A bit of a "manic pixie" character, she encourages Simba to find himself and become the "man" he is destined to be. Consequently, Nala is relegated to sidekick status. We never learn much about her interests, desires, challenges, or background. Predictably, she becomes a love interest and soon realizes her feminine role in producing an heir to the kingdom.

### *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)

More recently, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* sees Tiana, a young Creole princess transformed into a frog and partnered up with her obnoxious amphibian prince. This film has been criticized as squandering the only Disney princess film at the time to feature an African American girl by presenting her as a frog for most of her screen time. She is also essentially preyed upon by Prince Naveen, who exploits her empathy for his gain. He uses her forced time with him to relentlessly "woo" her until they are eventually married. Unique for Disney films, we are at least left with the understanding that Tiana has a life after marriage, as she founds her own restaurant.

Gender norms may go unchallenged in Disney films, even when the characters are not conventional white, blonde, human characters; but perhaps these films can offer another, progress perspective on the status of Nonhuman Animals. Anthropomorphized as they are, these films pay respectful attention to the unique challenges that nonhuman others face in a human world. Audiences are encouraged to empathize with homeless cats, scorn hunting, take forest fires seriously, and see frogs as complex individuals.

Nonhuman Animals hold a special place in many children's stories, and this is especially helpful for challenging speciesist ideologies that normalize human supremacy and systematic violence against other animals (Cole & Stewart, 2014). A problem arises, however, when other animals are used as vessels for oppressive norms that marginalize women, people of color, homosexual persons, and other vulnerable groups. When the vixen Maid Marian, for instance, becomes a female object of conquest for the male protagonist Robin Hood in a motley Nottingham community composed of snakes, bears, chickens, lions, and others who are all coded as white, Nonhuman Animals are hardly encouraging their audience to critically assess problematic social structures. In fact, in these cases the perpetuation of oppressive ideologies may even be more insidious—wrapped-up with fantasy.

[bell hooks \(2009\)](#) reminds us that media is a kind of fantasy. It reflects the world we idealize and constructs political narratives. Disney films specialize in fantasy-making and so are well positioned to wield the magic of the movies to inspire social change. It could be useful if more nonhuman Disney characters exhibited egalitarian values. And representing princesses as independent would not be sufficient, as this individualism discourages the collective consciousness needed to restructure an unequal society. Strong female characters that control their own lives, build alliances with others, and are not fixated on men and romance to the exclusion of all else would be a great improvement. Avoiding the anthropomorphization of Nonhuman Animals as white and straight would be similarly useful, because animating animals as a reflection of dominant groups not only obscures diversity, but also treats difference as abnormal given the ideological role they play in naturalizing social inequality.



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