Film and Television Adaptations of the Snow White Tale: Towards an Emancipation of the Female Characters?

Soraya HADDAD

Mémoire présenté en vue de la validation de la première année de Master Métiers de l'Enseignement en Anglais
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Soraya HADDAD

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Sous la direction de

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Introduction

Once upon a time in the middle of winter, when the flakes of snow were falling like feathers from the sky, a queen sat at a window sewing, and the frame of the window was made of black ebony. And whilst she was sewing and looking out of the window at the snow, she pricked her finger with the needle, and three drops of blood fell upon the snow. And the red looked pretty upon the white snow, and she thought to herself, "Would that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame."

The Grimm Brothers, Little Snow-White, 1812

This is how one of the most famous fairy tales of all times starts. The Brothers Grimm tell the story of a princess, called Snow White, who has to face the meanness of her jealous and vain step mother, the Evil Queen, after the death of her mother and her father. This cruel woman, whose greatest wish is to be the fairest of all, goes as far as trying to kill the young orphan. This tale warns us against the dangers of vanity and the importance that we can give to superficial elements of our lives, like beauty. But it also shows that the boundary between innocence and naivety is very thin, because it is a lack of awareness that causes Snow White’s troubles.

The tale has gone through many generations. The story has been attributed to the Grimm Brothers, but it existed before them. They were just the ones who gave a written and, supposedly, final version to Snow White’s story. However, the fact that the fairy tale was supposed to remain unchanged to deliver its moral to everyone did not prevent someone from trying to give his own version of the story. This person is Walt Disney, and in 1937 he gave to the tale a new meaning. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was Disney’s first featured-length animated film, and its impact on the world was so great that the American version of the fairy tale has now completely replaced that of the Grimms. It has become a reference for audiences all around the world, but also for the filmmakers who decided to make their own adaptations of the story. Some elements and events of the original tale have been eluded and replaced by what Walt Disney wanted to show us.
Interestingly enough, the elements which have been kept — or created — in the Disney adaptation offer a certain vision of woman and her role in our society. When the animated film may seem adapted to the standards of the 30’s, the question of woman’s status is problematic in the most recent adaptations of the story. In 2011 and 2012, in cinemas and on our television screens we could see what was introduced as new and modern versions of Snow White: Snow White and the Huntsman, Once Upon A Time and Mirror, Mirror. Those films and series all present elements borrowed from Disney’s film, and they also follow the classic fairy tale pattern, even if they add some adventures to it. However, the modernity that was supposed to be offered by those new versions of the Snow White tale is not really obvious. Especially because the role of women is still very limited.

That is why, in this dissertation, we will take an interest in what these adaptations of the fairy tale really brought to the representation of women in cinema and television and whether we have an emancipation of the female characters or not. We will be working on 4 versions of Snow White’s story: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Snow White and the Huntsman (2012), Once Upon A Time (2011) and Mirror, Mirror (2012). First, we will show that the character of Snow White is presented as an independent woman in all the new works about her, even though, in the collective memory, she stays the woman who cleans a whole house while whistling. Secondly, we will deal with the other important character of the story, the Evil Queen, who is depicted as the personification of pride and vanity. This will lead us to our last part, in which the message conveyed by the film industry in those adaptations will be analysed.
Part I

Snow White and the New Independent Woman
A) Disney and storytelling

The story of Snow White belongs to the folk memory of our Western society. But the version that most of us have in mind is oddly enough not the real Snow White tale. The most popular one has lasted through many generations of children and adults since it has been revealed to the world, and it is the one created by the Disney studios. Since the launching of the film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, Walt Disney and his teams have imposed themselves as the new storytellers of our time. Snow White is not even an exception, the same phenomenon happens each time someone is asked to tell what they know about a tale that has been adapted by Disney: they tell the story of what they saw in a Disney animated film. And when we search for the original tale on the Internet, we find many websites which only give the Disney version, probably without knowing the real story. It can even be said that a few people would be able to name the actual authors of those fairy tales. Even if the Brothers Grimm, Perrault or Andersen did not invent those stories themselves, because they belonged to the oral transmission of folklore, they are still considered as the ones who made those stories communicable. These writers produced what they thought would be the final versions of those tales; the tales were not supposed to change again. As the dictum says: “Words fly away, writings remain.”. Walt Disney definitely proved the proverb wrong.

As Amy Davis wrote in her book *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, if the Disney company decided to change the classical tales, it is because they needed to adapt to their time, their audience, and probably also to their own agenda:

In other words, Disney carry on the tradition of telling these stories in ways which are relevant to their audiences: the stories went from being constructed for oral presentation, to being altered to make them suitable for print, then transformed to make them suitable for filming. Concurrently, to changing them as to fit the constraints of each new medium, each new teller has also re-formed and re-shaped elements of the stories to fit both the medium they were using and the audience they were targeting.\(^1\)

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Elements added to or erased from the fairy tales are in fact destined to please the audience. But it is also done in way that ensure the people (or the company) who modified the stories of the support and admiration of this audience. In the case of Disney, the changes made to the tales won Mickey Mouse’s home the title of only respectable storyteller, because nowadays, in order to let the young generation know about the classic fairy tales , a child is more often offered a DVD than a book by Perrault’s or Grimm.

It would be nonsense to imagine that the Walt Disney Studio is not aware of the fact that Disney has taken over the role of storyteller in our modern society, and the proof is that, at the beginning of its most famous films (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella or The Sword in the Stone), we can see the opening of an ancient-looking fairy tales book, meaning that a story that has been through many generations will now be narrated to us. This is explained by Pierre Pigot in his book L’assassinat de Mickey Mouse:

[…] Disney devient le grand conteur universel, le grand pourvoyeur d’images enchanteresses, diffuseur de morales et de situations stéréotypées à ambition mondiale. […] Chaque fois, l’image du livre sert en réalité à tuer ce texte originel : car le but final est bien entendu, pour les images animées, d’établir leur prééminence visuelle dans l’imaginaire du spectateur et d’éliminer toute velléité d’une version alternative à vouloir seulement exister².

The opening of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

² Pierre Pigot, L’assassinat de Mickey Mouse, p. 88.
Not only has the Disney Studio been named the official source of magic and happy endings, but it has also erased all the other versions of the tales used for its films. This means that nowadays, instead of gathering around the storytellers who were declaiming their stories in the streets during the Middle Ages, we gather around the television or in cinemas to watch the tales that are being shown to us.

What is really interesting about the Walt Disney version of Snow White is that the very elements that have been added by the American studio are the ones which we almost always remember: the dead father, the poisoned apple, the first true love kiss, and the ageing cruel mother. Indeed, those ingredients were either not in the original story, or were not essential elements. In the Grimm Brothers’ tale, Snow White’s father remarries with a cruel woman who hates her husband’s daughter. But he does not die. He is just erased from the story by the two brothers, because he is a secondary character, whose only action is to bring a bad mother into Snow White’s life. But in the Disney animated film, the father dies and it is only after his death that his new wife, the Evil Queen, decides to get rid of her step daughter because she is more beautiful than her. Leaving the father alive as a powerless or indifferent, witness may have been perceived by the American studio as too politically incorrect. Disney’s main target was, and is still, the family. Therefore, it must have been better for them to kill the father so as not to have to explain why this character would not step in the way of the Evil Queen to protect his daughter. We will see later that another solution has been found by Tarsem Singh, the director of the 2012 film *Mirror, Mirror*.

The second element, the apple, is probably the most famous one and would often be the first to be named by a majority of people when asked to say one thing about Snow White. The poisoned apple is the means used by the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to kill Snow White. But, in the original story, the step mother tried to murder her husband’s daughter three times. First, she disguised herself as an old peddler woman who sold bodice laces, and she used one to choke Snow White, who was then saved by the dwarfs. The second time, she disguised herself again as an old woman and was selling combs this time. One of them was poisoned, and she tried to kill Snow White with it, but the dwarfs once again saved her. And the third time, after dressing up as a peasant woman, she gave the infamous poisoned apple to Snow White. This time, the dwarfs could not do anything to avoid their princess’s death. As we can see, the apple was not the only thing used by the Evil Queen to attempt on
Snow White’s life, but it is nevertheless the one that we all know, and the reason for this is simple: the poisoned apple was featured in the 1937 Walt Disney film. Once again, this is a proof of the American company’s power.

A link can obviously also be made with the religious symbolism: indeed, Snow White’s apple reminds us of Eve’s forbidden fruit. And the similarity is even strengthened by the fact that both women were tempted by an evil creature, respectively the witch and the snake. The outcome is also comparable in both stories: a woman is punished because she disobeyed the rule given to her. Snow White died, and Eve was forced to leave the garden of Eden, punishing Adam at the same time. Therefore, I would say that the choice of the apple as the object of Snow White’s fall is not innocent: throughout the whole Disney story, Snow White is a passive character who does what she is told to do (she cleans the Queen’s castle, she flees when the huntsman tells her, she cleans the dwarfs’ house because that is what is expected from her), but the only moment when she does act is when she chooses to eat the apple. And this action is thus punished. The message is: if Snow White had listened to the dwarfs’ warnings, she would not have been harmed.

The apple as the triggering element of a story must be really enjoyed by Disney because it has been used recently in their 2013 free adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s Wonderful
Wizard of Oz: Oz the Great and Powerful, directed by Sam Raimi. Here, the witch Theodora eats the magical apple given by her sister in order to find a way to heal her broken heart. But the fruit changes her into the Wicked Witch of the West. The apple is once again an ill omen.

The next element that I would like to highlight is the ageing of the princess’s step mother. In the original story, the Evil Queen only disguises herself twice in order to mislead her daughter-in-law, and the third time she only puts on a disguise that makes her look like a countrywoman. Her mirror tells her that she is not the fairest of all, because Snow White is beautiful, and not just because she is younger than the Queen. The link between youth and beauty has been added by the American studio in their animated film. It cannot even be said that the Evil Queen has to be older than Snow White: the King could have married a woman of his daughter’s age. After all, the story is supposed to take place in an ancient time where the conventions were not those that we know today. The Queen is only Snow White’s step mother, and therefore she does not have to be older. In Disney’s film, the Evil Queen drinks a potion that makes her old and ugly to the point that she is also scary. This is not only a disguise, it is complete metamorphosis, from which we are not sure she can come back. Disney tells the audience that being old is wrong, because it leads to being ugly.
This Evil Queen’s aging has also been used in the 2012 films *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror, Mirror*, but it creates an even more oppressive atmosphere for women. In both films, the Evil Queen desperately tries to stay young, either by sucking up youth out of young and beautiful women or by using magic to create an illusion. In *Mirror, Mirror*, the queen also forces herself into a corset, with the help of her housemaids, to prove that she has not put on any weight.

The directors seem to have the same inspiration for the scenes where the Queen sees wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and mouth. She is more scared of them than of anything else. It is this fear of becoming old and so, ugly, that motivates the bad step mother in her quest for Snow White’s death. The message conveyed by this apparently little change, conducted by Disney, is actually different from the one offered by the Grimm’s tale. If, in the original story, the Evil Queen’s vanity and cruel nature are to blame for all the wrongs that she does to the princess, in Disney’s version and in the two films, we are told that the Queen is in fact any woman, because any woman will become old one day, and therefore will have to fight against younger women in order to exist in some way. It is definitely more problematic to attribute the Queen’s behaviour to her fear of becoming old than to a psychological problem that she may have. Her story then becomes every woman’s story.
Finally, the last element added by Disney is the kiss which saves Snow White. In the original tale, the young woman wakes up from her sleep because, when the prince takes her coffin to his castle, one of his servants lets it fall and it hits a tree. Thanks to the impact, the bite of apple that was stuck in Snow White’s throat comes out. Basically, she was saved by chance. But in the Disney film, she is able to wake up only thanks to the prince’s kiss, which is for Snow White her first true love kiss. Therefore, the message changes again here. If Snow White needs this kiss to be saved, that means that the hero is the prince. We will analyse this in the third sub-part.

Already, we can see that Disney seems to cherish a certain vision of our society. The father has to be dead in our story, because a father is always a good man who, if it had been possible, would have protected his daughter. But, on the other hand, women are depicted as creatures that are easily led astray, as a gender whose actions can only be explained by their female nature.
B) A princess with a masculine side

In this part, I would like to focus on the three contemporary adaptations of the tale I am studying: the ABC Studios series *Once Upon A Time*³, and the films *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror, Mirror*. In these works, the young princess seems to have two personalities: first, she reminds us of her Disney model by being a very quiet, beautiful and obedient woman, but then, she changes into a kind of warrior who decides to fight to defend herself. When she becomes this second character, in both films and in the series, Snow White’s appearance also changes. She swaps her princess outfit for clothes more fitted for war: a pair of trousers, boots, weapons and sometimes even an armor.

![Then & Now: Once Upon A Time](Image)

The change is even more striking in the film *Mirror, Mirror* because the princess wears clothes with what we usually call “girly” colours (pastel colours, pearly white, and gold). Those are usually the colours used by brands targeting young women, such as brands of make-up or clothing. But when she becomes a fighter, she only wears blue and black, the colours usually attributed to men. And at the end of the film, the princess version of Snow White is back: she wears a pastel blue dress, as if she wanted to tame her warrior role.

In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the young woman is dressed in blue, yellow and red. Those same colours are found in the prince’s outfit. It is as if Snow White is already part of a couple, even while she is not married to the prince. She wears the colours of her soon-to-be husband as a way to signal that she is waiting for him to marry her, because she already belongs to him.

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³ *Once Upon A Time*, premiered on Sunday, October 23, 2011. ABC Studios are owned by the Disney Company.
Snow White is allowed to fight only when she puts on a more boyish outfit, which completely hides the fact that she is a woman. Indeed, those clothes can also be seen on the male characters, but not on any other female one. And it is for a good reason: the other women are not fighters. The only one who actually fights against Snow White is the Evil Queen in Snow White and the Huntsman. But she loses, because she does not have the required appearance to win a fight.

Therefore, I would say that to become a heroine, Snow White has to turn herself into a hero first. These three works show us that the young princess has to put on clothes usually
worn by men in order to be seen as a powerful character, worthy of winning a war. Of course, nowadays, most women wear trousers, boots and other clothes which used to be reserved to men. And the fact that Snow White is given a pair of trousers to ride a horse and fight could be only for practical reasons. But when this choice is preferred three times, it becomes conspicuous. Especially when the films and the series decided to set the action in an ancient time, which means women’s outfits could not be similar to men’s, contrary to nowadays. The dress (and the rest of the outfit that goes with is: a nice hairdo, jewels, pretty shoes) is a symbol of femininity in those works. This femininity seems in opposition with the role that Snow White takes on later, so this part of her is hidden. She almost becomes “one of the men”, because the dwarfs even start to consider her as one of them. Only the appearance of the prince reminds us of Snow White’s gender. Snow White is represented as a male figure, who fights and kills because, from a conservative point of view, if a woman must commit an act of violence, she has to act like a man. And in our case, she even has to dress like one.

This idea of a woman forced to dress like a man in order to be a violent and powerful character has been a recurrent image since the story of Joan of Arc. Indeed, after hearing God’s orders, which were to free France from the English invaders and to put the Dauphin on the throne, Joan decided to enroll into the French army. As the future King had named her Major of his army, Joan disguised herself as a man so the soldiers would obey her. The message that can be derived from this is that when a woman takes on a role generally attributed to men, she has to wear their clothes to be taken seriously. Joan of Arc’s case is even more interesting here because the period in which it belongs (the Middle Ages) is the era in which Snow White’s tale is usually set. This subject was also tackled by Jean-Claude Kaufmann who, in his book La femme et le prince charmant, writes:

Il est troublant de constater qu’en ces temps anciens, les trajectoires féminines d’autonomie les plus spectaculaires fussent composer avec les attributs masculins. En ce monde dominé par les hommes, il fallait que Jeanne (comme Great Buffalo Woman et plus tard George Sand) soit un peu homme pour être une femme au-dessus du commun. D’où cette figure étrange, cette identité totalement atypique de vierge en armure.

Forcing a woman to adopt another identity—the one of a man—alters the person that she was before.

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When Snow White’s outfit changes, there is also a change in her character. At the beginning of the films and throughout the series, when she is dressed as a princess, Snow White appears as a weak creature, forced to ask for someone else’s help to protect her. Her only actions are to obey when she is told to flee, and to look for a way to be protected by someone (the huntsman or the dwarfs). In *Mirror, Mirror*, she can even be seen almost begging the little men to let her stay with them. I guess that she is, at those moments, supposed to represent the fair sex. But, after the make-over, she reveals another part of her. She becomes strong, fearless and she gets the ability to lead men to war.

In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, two scenes really show her transformation. First, after being kissed and waking up, Snow White motivates her soldiers to fight the Evil Queen. She is small, but in the middle of a crowd, she dominates it by her mental strength. Secondly, there is the scene when Snow White and her army arrive at the Queen’s castle on the beach. She is at the front of the cavalry, and in a medium close-up shows, the spectator can see that her face is distorted by anger and determination. Also, and this is something that women are not usually shown to do, that she is strong enough to lead the army through the enemy’s attacks.

Snow White in an armour in *Snow White and the Huntsman*

Maybe the directors and scriptwriters wanted to transform their Snow White into a sort of Xena-like warrior, to take advantage of the feminist period that we seem to go through,

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5 character from the series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Warrior in a quest to seek redemption for her past sins as a ruthless warlord by using her formidable fighting skills to help people (Wikipedia).
with the important media coverage given to groups like the Femen\textsuperscript{6} or to series like \textit{Girls}\textsuperscript{7}. Nevertheless, if that was really the reason why they made their films that way, then it has to be called as a hypocritical move. A woman’s strength does not depend on the way she is dressed. It is hard to see any evolution between Joan of Arc’s story and the works about Snow White that we have today. Indeed, if for the film industry a woman in a dress is still the embodiment of fragility and sensitivity, then they still have efforts to make so that the heroines they create can be considered as models for future generations of women.

\textsuperscript{6} feminist Ukrainian protest group based in Kiev, founded in 2008 (Wikipedia).
\textsuperscript{7} HBO TV series, created by Lena Dunham, which premiered on April 15, 2012.
C) The hero’s comeback

Even if Snow White is presented to us as a woman capable of fighting and defending herself, the three contemporary works studied here still follow the structure of the Grimm’s tale. The outcome of the story can be a happy ending only thanks to a man. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Once Upon a Time*, a prince comes to rescue the young princess and kisses her. As she was under the influence of the Evil Queen’s spell, it is explained that only a first true love kiss can break it. Of course, there is no need to point out that, even for the most recent films, this kiss has to happen between a man and a woman. The originality of *Snow White and the Huntsman* is to give the hunter the role of the saviour: the prince (because there is one in that film too) becomes a secondary character, but in the end, the princess is still saved by a man. And the most important scene of the films, the one that we are all encouraged to expect, becomes the kissing scene.
The spectator is thus convinced that Snow White can only exist thanks to the prince: after all, that is exactly what she is saying in the Disney song “Someday my prince will come”—that song is hummed by Snow in Once Upon A Time as a wink at the animated film—. There is a real evolution in Snow White’s goal throughout the story: at first, she wants to escape from the Evil Queen’s hold and her aim is to find protection, but then, when she feels more or less safe, the young princess starts longing for love. It is as if the story could not end with Snow White finally running away from her bad step mother. The “happy ending” for a heroine is only complete when she becomes a wife (and the fact that she will be a mother one day is explicit, at least in French: “and they lived happily ever after” is translated as “ils vécurent heureux et eurent beaucoup d’enfants”).

A little more freedom was taken by Snow White and the Huntsman’s director. As already mentioned, he decided to reduce the prince’s role by giving the kiss scene to the huntsman, and also by making the queen’s defeat—which happens after the kiss—the real outcome of the film. But, the absence of wedding in this film can obviously be attributed to marketing reasons: this gives the filmmaker the opportunity to exploit the Snow White brand once again by making a sequel to the film (which is in fact already planned).

Anne-Marie Bidaud deals with this theme of love in films in Hollywood et le rêve américain:

D’après les films hollywoodiens, l’amour est une nécessité absolue. Qui en est privé s’étirole et perd sa substance. C’est le moyen privilégié pour atteindre l’équilibre et la plénitude, dont la quête permet de « vivre intensément la seule aventure privée du monde bureaucratique – ce qui effectivement dans le langage bourgeois se nomme « aventure ». Le grand amour reste constamment associé à l’itinéraire matériel conduisant à la réussite, ou au parcours moral qui mène au rachat. […] Cette constante valorisation de l’amour s’apparente à une proposition idéologique dans la mesure où elle met en avant des modèles de comportement bons pour l’ordre social et solidaires de la consommation. Marché du bonheur et marché de la séduction sont indissociables puisqu’on y achète ses armes (vêtements, cosmétiques, parfums...)⁸.

We learn that the film industry has made legitimate the idea that love is the ultimate quest and achievement of life. I use the word “legitimate” because this notion existed before the cinema, as we can see in the Grimm Brothers’ tale or in other narratives. But the fact that

one of the greatest inventions of the modern era—cinema—has embraced this idea gives a whole new breath of life to it. The film industry has highly contributed to the spreading of the idea that a woman who conforms to the norms has to be looking for a husband and has to be willing to become a mother one day. This subject is tackled by Mona Chollet in her book *Beauté Fatale*:

> Catherine Monnot signale également la primauté, dans les magazines et les feuilletons destinés aux préadoolescents, de la maternité et de la vie de famille, présentées comme incontournables dans l’épanouissement d’une femme. Mille phrases d’interview mises en exergue (« Je suis faite pour avoir des bébés. J’ai l’instinct maternel, je le sens »), mille scénarios convenus en témoignent.

It is true that the films and the series studied are family-friendly, but their main target is the young girl who still enjoys fairy tales. And they do have a great influence on her life. Being a wife and a mother, this is the happy ending that is mostly offered to women. And as Anne-Marie Bidaud highlights it, there is a whole industry behind this notion of womanhood: the beauty and fashion worlds have jumped onto the opportunity to sell their products by making women believe that they need them to reach their goal, which is to seduce men in order to become wives and be happy.

This link between beauty and happiness is very often present in films. We all have examples in mind of films with an ugly heroine who falls in love with a man and, so as to have a chance to appeal to him, decides to have a makeover. And it is only when she becomes beautiful (in compliance with Hollywood’s standards) that she is worthy of the man. This is the case in *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), where Mr Higgins realizes that he has feelings for his young protégée, Eliza Doolittle, only when she becomes almost a real lady. She speaks like one, she is dressed like one. Her appearance, language included, has changed and as she reaches the level of the women that could have the honour of being seen with Mr Higgins, she becomes interesting to him. More recently, we have the examples of *The Princess Diaries*\(^9\) or the series *Ugly Betty*\(^{11}\), in which both heroines are described as ugly at the beginning, but they accept the fact that they have to change their appearances. As a reward, they are given a higher social position (one becomes a princess, the other a famous

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9 Mona Chollet, *Beauté Fatale*, p. 39
11 American “dramedy” television series developed by Silvio Horta, which premiered on ABC on September 28, 2006, and ended on April 14, 2010 (Wikipedia)
fashion editor), and a man. The message conveyed by that kind of film or series is that a woman who refuses to conform to the criteria imposed on her gender cannot achieve much.

Among the Snow White films studied, one tried to differentiate itself from the others. In *Mirror, Mirror*, Tarsem Singh decided to keep the kissing scene, but to slightly change it. In his film, the kiss is still a saving one, but the one being saved by it is not Snow White, but the prince. In fact, the Evil Queen uses a love potion on the prince, in order to make him fall in love with her, so she can expand her power on his kingdom and also she can feel younger by having a young man as her husband. But she does not get the right potion, and she actually turns the prince into a sort of dog: he keeps the appearance of a human being, but he acts like a dog. Once again, the only way to break the spell is a loving kiss. And it becomes Snow White’s role to save the prince from the Queen. Also, the young princess is already in love with the prince, and the only way to get him back is to save him. The roles are inverted here, as the one usually in danger becomes the saviour. It has to be said that the director’s choice was very daring, as Snow White’s story is one of the most beloved tale and especially since Disney gave his own version.

*Mirror, Mirror* received mixed reviews: its visual aspect has been acclaimed as the film is very colourful and beautifully made. But the story itself has not been appealing enough. The kissing scene was not the only artistic freedom that Singh took: his version of the tale is quite different from the story that everyone knows. And it is not even closer to the original Grimms tale either. For example, in the film, the Queen sends two giant wooden puppets to kill Snow White and the dwarfs, she transforms the King into a scary beast who lives in the forest, and she gives the apple to the princess only at the end of the film, after being defeated by Snow White (and the young woman does not eat it because she recognizes the Queen, who has turned into an old woman after losing her power). Thus, according to Rotten Tomatoes\textsuperscript{12} and Box Office Mojo\textsuperscript{13}, the film was not a box office success. It only made $64,935,167 in the USA, whereas other films targeting the same audience earned more: *Snow White and the Huntsman* grossed $155,332,381. As a point of reference, *Alice in Wonderland*—another film dealing with a classic fairy tale—earned $334,191,110 in the USA. This can raise the question of the artistic freedom that can be taken with classic stories.

\textsuperscript{12} \url{http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/mirror_mirror_2012/}
\textsuperscript{13} \url{http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=untitledsnowwhite.htm}
such as the fairy tales: people seem to prefer the film adaptation to follow the tale that they know—which often means the Disney version—as Snow White is not the only story that Disney has transformed and made famous.
Part II

The Queen or the Personification of Women’s Faults
A) The characteristics of the female villain

Snow White may be the heroine of the tale, but its fame is not only attributed to her: the other character that really made an impression is the bad one, the Evil Queen. Generations of children, and adults, have in mind the Disney queen, because once again it is their version of this character that has gone through the ages. It can be said that she is one of Disney’s most memorable villains. After her transformation into an old and scary witch, The Evil Queen becomes especially memorable. In the Disney film, after the Queen has drunk her potion, the music becomes fast and oppressive, it announces something dreadful. The image becomes quite blurry and the Queen’s castle seems to be going round and round and creates an impression of dizziness. Then, there are a few close-ups on her body: her hair turns white; her hands become bony and frightening. And right after this, when the metamorphosis is complete, the old witch shows her face and scares her loyal raven…but also all the children watching the film. At the end of the scene, when the witch has found a spell to kill Snow White in her book of magic, she looks straight at the audience with an evil smile on her face, and there is forward tracking shot that closes in on her ugly face. This is enough for the character to be imprinted in our brains.
But even if the most vivid memory we have of this character is the one of the Evil Queen as an old and scary witch, she still is depicted as a beautiful woman for the most part of the Disney film. And this is also done in the recent film versions of the Snow White tale. Indeed, the other important element about this villain is her need to own beauty and youth. Her mirror, that she questions everyday to know whether she still is the most beautiful woman on earth, is just as famous as the cruel queen. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Mirror, Mirror* and *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the scene that sets off Snow White’s adventures is the one where the mirror informs the Evil Queen that her step daughter, who is now a young woman, is more beautiful than her. This is the reason why the queen decides to find someone to kill Snow White. This shows the first concern for female villains: the quest for beauty and the importance of appearances. The Evil Queen embodies vanity and she uses beauty as a valid pretext to murder someone. It is interesting to notice that her decision to kill the young princess, because she is prettier than her, is never challenged. On the contrary, a male villain’s main interest is never as superficial as his female counterpart’s: men fight for power, revenge or money. It is as if a woman, considered as a vain person, could naturally become violent because of something as superficial as appearances.
Of course, the spectator is not asked to support the queen’s actions, because it is with the heroine that the audience is supposed to identify. But still, the fact that Snow White’s only fault is her physical appearance is problematic. When we keep in mind that these films are family-friendly, and therefore also target a rather young audience, the message delivered is naturally questionable. The films tell the youth that they can be judged for what they look like, and not only for what they do.

The quest for beauty is also a problem in the message conveyed by the tale. As mentioned before, the audience targeted is young and mostly made of girls. This means that, even though these girls watching the films certainly identify with Snow White rather than with the Evil Queen, what they will learn from this story is that only beauty matters and that a person becomes important when she, or he, is physically attractive. This idea is even emphasized in *Snow White and the Huntsman*: the film introduces us to a kingdom where the Evil Queen sends her army to the villages to catch young and beautiful young women, from whom she sucks up the youth she needs to stay young. The victims, now old, are then left to die in her castle’s cells.

![Youth is sucked out of a young woman in *Snow White and the Huntsman*](image)

In order not to go through this horrible experience, some women of the kingdom decide to disfigure themselves, so the queen will not be interested in catching them. Snow White encounters those women and their little daughters, who have big scars on their faces
and live in exile. The only choice given in this film is to be beautiful and persecuted, or to live a miserable life and be ugly.

The only work that differs from this idea of killing someone for their beauty is *Once Upon A Time*. Here, the queen’s reason to hate her step daughter is revenge: Snow (Snow White’s name in the series), as a child, was responsible for the death of Regina’s (the queen’s name in the series) lover. Regina was forced by her mother to marry a king, Snow’s father. But she already loved someone else, Daniel. After Regina confided in Snow, the little girl accidentally told Regina’s secret to her mother, who decided to solve the problem by killing her daughter’s lover. From then on, Snow White became Regina’s enemy and the reason of all her wrongdoings. This shows another Evil Queen to the audience, because her vain side is diminished and she becomes a more complex character. With revenge as a goal, the queen in *Once Upon A Time* blurs the boundary between a female and a male villain. Revenge cannot be said to be a good motive in life, but for a character who represents evil, it does seem a normal quest. At least, more normal than beauty.

![Snow White as a child and Regina](image)

Generally, in fairy tales, a female villain is often someone with a very narcissistic or materialist target that motivates her to be bad. It is not only found in the Snow White story. The same sort of character is depicted in *The Wizard of Oz*, because the Wicked Witch of the West wants to hurt Dorothy to avenge her sister’s death, but also because she wants the red
shoes. In *Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper*[^14], the step mother prevents Cinderella from going to the ball in order to be sure that her own daughters will have more chances to impress and marry the prince, without being threatened by Cinderella’s beauty. Another famous female villain is used by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm in their *Sleeping Beauty* stories, it is the wicked fairy godmother. In both versions, she does not have a name, but Disney gave her one, which has become widely famous now, Maleficent. But in all the versions of this tale, the fairy’s motive for casting the eternal sleep spell on Aurora is her humiliation for not being invited to the princess’s christening. She wants to get revenge for being ignored, which is a rather obvious proof of an ego problem.

To summarize, the Evil Queen embodies in fact the usual flaws attributed to female villains, because she is a woman. Her cruelty is not explained by anything special that happened to her (except in *Once Upon a Time*) but only by the vanity that women are often accused of possessing.

[^14]: Charles Perrault, *Cendrillon, ou La Petite Pantoufle de Verre (Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper)*
B) A fight within a gender

As already mentioned, the story of Snow White is based on the confrontation between Snow White and the Evil Queen. Even if the final battle is postponed by the princess’s escape, it remains the element that triggers the end of the story. Indeed, in a fairy tale, Good has to be the sole winner at the end, and therefore the tale could not have ended with Snow White living in exile with the dwarfs, because it would have left the villain half victorious. The problem is that both characters are women, as if no man could have been Snow White’s enemy. In the original tale, and in all the film adaptations that we are studying, one character starts by being a threat to the princess, but then becomes her auxiliary because he refuses to obey the Evil Queen and to kill Snow White. However, the young woman is not saved by her smartness or her strength; she lives because the hunter chooses to spare her life. This is a recurrent element in all the versions of the story that we encountered. Men—the hunter, the seven dwarfs, the prince, and also the King (Snow White’s father)—are presented as helpful people who do everything they can to save Snow White because she is beautiful and innocent.

The men helping the young princess in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Of course, the Evil Queen is not shown as a weak character, as she is the one with the magic powers and so, she gives the orders. But as we have seen before, she is still presented as a woman, with all the defects usually attributed to the fair gender. Therefore, she is not invincible. Her vanity is what will cause her loss at the end of the story, and the reader (for the written tale) or the audience (for the film versions) know it from the start. Indeed, she is guilty
of one of the seven deadly sins, Pride. As explained before, the Queen is obviously a narcissistic character, and she embodies that fault usually reproached to women. The object that materializes her problem with her image is the magical mirror: the queen needs to ask it (or him, because the mirror is usually depicted as a male figure) everyday if she is the fairest of all. The Evil Queen has undoubtedly troubles with her own reflection when the mirror tells her that Snow White is more beautiful than her. As Laura Mulvey explains in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject.¹⁵

The queen seems to have misinterpreted the image that she sees in her mirror. The fascination that she has for her reflection prevents her from seeing by herself that Snow White has grown into a beautiful woman, as her mirror had to tell her the news. This idea of misinterpretation by the queen is used in the film Mirror, Mirror as, for once, what the Evil Queen actually sees in her mirror is her own reflection (in the other adaptations of the tale, the queen sees someone else in her mirror). But it is an improved version of herself: wiser, smarter and more powerful.

Yet, the fact that she goes as far as wanting to kill her step daughter in order to be the most beautiful woman is not only narcissism, but also hubris (as the sin of Pride was known in Greek mythology). This is why the Evil Queen can be considered as a descendant of the Greek mythological characters, like Tantalus, Prometheus, Narcissus or Icarus, who thought they could challenge the gods.

The same idea can be found in other texts, like Faust by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or The Monk by Matthew Gregory Lewis. Pride is always punished in Literature, whether the person guilty of it is a man or a woman. The responsible is usually punished by a horrible death, and we can see it especially in the Disney adaptation of the Snow White tale, where the old witch falls from a mountain. It could have been interesting to give that fault to man in the

Snow White tale, as it was done with Narcissus. But apparently, in all the versions of the story, men are depicted as warriors with generous hearts.

The Queen and her mirror (Snow White and the Huntsman)

The only real exception to this is found in Snow White and the Huntsman. In the film, the Evil Queen has a twin brother, Finn, who is just as cruel as she is, but he has no magical power. This man first tries to take advantage of Snow White when she is a prisoner in the castle, but she escapes. From then on, his mission is to take her back to the queen, so she can steal all the youth from the princess’s body. The queen’s brother does not hesitate to invade and destroy the exiled women’s village where Snow White was hidden. Yet, Finn is only a secondary character. And the fact that he is the queen’s twin brother allows for a way to hurt the Evil Queen by hurting him. This is shown in a scene where Ravenna (the queen’s name in Snow White and the Huntsman) is seen screaming and trashing about on the floor because of
the pain she feels after sensing that her brother was being killed. Finn is not a real enemy, but only represents the queen’s weak side. Killing him is a way of weakening the female villain. Once again, a woman’s fate is tightly linked to a man’s fate.
C) The submission to magic

The Evil Queen’s power comes from one element only: magic. Without it, she has no appeal, because she becomes a common woman. In both Once Upon A Time (season 2) and Mirror, Mirror we are shown how weak and uninteresting the queen can be when she is deprived of her magical powers. In the TV series, once the curse is over, Storybrooke’s inhabitants remember that they are in fact fairy tales characters and that Regina tore them away from their enchanted land. Thus, they go to see her and force her to send them back where they come from. And when they realise that the former Evil Queen has no longer any power, they consider killing her. The audience then discovers a vulnerable queen who can be afraid and who needs to be helped.

Regina in jail and without power in Once Upon A Time

She becomes just like the other characters, or even weaker because she is a woman. Indeed, we are left wondering whether Regina would have been so afraid in that situation if she had been a man. After all, the character that saves her and stops the mob from killing the queen is Charming, Snow White’s prince, who has no magical power. The prince’s royal
authority could explain his power over the other people, but Regina is not called the Evil Queen for nothing: she was indeed the sovereign of a realm because she married Snow White’s father. Therefore, her royal authority should also be respected.

In *Mirror, Mirror*, the queen’s power is represented visually: it is contained in two necklaces, one that the queen wears and one that her beast has around its neck. Once Snow White understands that she needs to cut apart the jewel that is on the forest creature, the Evil Queen’s power disappears and the queen starts aging.

This can also be seen in *Oz the Great and Powerful*: at the end, Evanora (one of the wicked witches)’s necklace is broken by Gilda, so she loses her power and becomes a scary old woman. The idea that a witch who cares about her physical appearance has all her powers contained into a piece of jewellery, because she is a woman, seems to be recurrent in the film industry.

In *Mirror, Mirror*, the magical mirror even tells the Evil Queen: “Are you ready to discover the price for using magic?” This means that the queen is not the one in charge: magic is the real master. I would even say that the queen becomes a sort of magic addict who has no
limit in terms of “price to pay” in order to obtain her magical dose. And addicts are rarely described as being capable of controlling anything. The use of the addiction metaphor is also seen in *Mirror, Mirror*, when the queen enters a sort of magical world behind her mirror. There, she meets her magical counterpart and asks her for more magic: a strong love potion. And even if her alter ego warns the Evil Queen about the consequences of such a use of magic, she does not listen to her.

The idea that magic is not free is also a fundamental element of the series *Once Upon A Time*. The other magically powerful character, Rumpelstiltskin, sometimes offers the other characters his services. But he insists on something: “Magic always comes with a price!”\(^{16}\) This sentence can summarize the Evil Queen’s relationship with magic. She needs it to stay young (or to get revenge in *Once Upon A Time*) and powerful, but it forces her to do unforgivable things, such as destroying people by making them forget about who they are and about what used to be their lives (*Once Upon A Time*), changing the king into a terrifying beast (*Mirror, Mirror*), or killing young girls (in *Snow White and the Huntsman*).

The character of the Evil Queen in the latter film is particularly interesting, because she seems to be the only queen, in the four adaptations, who really suffers. Indeed, this queen’s biggest fear is to be powerless and weak. The audience learns, thanks to a flashback, that when she was a child, her mother used a magic spell to protect her daughter’s life and to prevent her from being only a common woman. After that, the child was abducted by some soldiers. But thanks to the mother’s spell, her daughter will be able to have a better life. After that, the Evil Queen used her attractive features to delude men in order to become more powerful than them. In other words, the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Huntsman* is a fearful character here: she wants to protect herself, and she knows that beauty IS power. But in order to keep that beauty from being damaged by time, she needs magic. The relation between our female villain and magic is always one of dependence.

The Evil Queen is always presented as a powerful and threatening character, who can really endanger Snow White. From the written tale to the film adaptations, we are encouraged

\(^{16}\) Rumpelstiltskin says that sentence in almost every episode where he appears.
to be scared of that woman. But in the end, she is nevertheless depicted as a woman, with all the stereotypical faults associated to the fair gender. From the very beginning of the story, the audience (or the reader) knows that the Evil Queen cannot win, because she goes against all the rules that human beings are strongly encouraged to follow. She does not respect human life and she is guilty of being narcissistic and arrogant. Moreover, when we analyse her character and her motives, we realise that she is not that powerful: she is dependent on magic, and without it she is just a despicable woman.
Part III

The Film Industry and Its Fake Feminist Message
A) And Disney created woman

With films like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Walt Disney imposed a certain image of women to the society of that time. His princesses are indeed what we can call “perfect housewives”: they know how to knit, to cook and to do the household chores for example. And they do not even mind doing it for strangers, as Snow White does for the dwarfs. These women are also very passive. In the three films mentioned above, the Disney princesses wait for their princes to save them from their cruel fate. Cinderella goes to the ball thanks to her godmother, but then she waits for the prince to find her again. Aurora (the sleeping beauty) pricks herself with a needle and then sleeps until her prince saves her with a kiss. Almost the same happens to Snow White as, after being forced by the hunter to escape from the queen’s castle, she eats a poisoned apple and falls into a sort of coma from which, obviously, a charming prince saves her. These heroines reflect the idea that society had of women: the ideal woman was a perfect WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), only interested in marrying a good man and in being a good housewife.

Even physically, those first Disney princesses are strange role models. Since the 1920’s, women allow themselves to wear more practical clothes, or to adopt the flappers’ look and way of life. But these young princesses seem to ask for a return to a more classical image of women. Indeed, their dresses do not look like anything a woman of the 1930’s or 1950’s would wear. We can even go as far as saying that the audience can have the impression that a woman’s body is something that disturbs Disney draughtsmen. So, they agree to show that their characters are of the female kind, but in moderation, as only the politically correct feminine attributes are well shown: the hair, the red lips, the almond-shaped eyes … This is totally in contradiction with women’s will to emancipate themselves: the flappers decided to accept their femininity, Disney decided to prevent women and young girls from following in their steps. Of course the stories of those films do not take place in our time or in a country that we know; they are supposed to be happening a long time ago. But so are the stories of the more recent Disney animated films, like The Little Mermaid\(^\text{17}\), Beauty and the Beast\(^\text{18}\) or

\(^{17}\) The Little Mermaid, Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Studios, 1990

\(^{18}\) Beauty and the Beast, Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, Walt Disney Studios, 1991
In those 1990’s films, women actually have a woman’s body. The clothes are more shape-fitted and less conservative: Ariel (the little mermaid) even wears a bikini top during a good part of the film and Jasmine’s belly can also be seen in *Aladdin*. This shows a will to follow the present trends in women’s fashion and way of life. This was not what Disney wanted in his early princess films.

The gap between what women really wanted at the time and the representation of the fair gender given by the Disney films can partly be explained by a strange fact: women were not allowed to become drawers for the Walt Disney Studios. All the drawings, from the settings to the characters and their clothes, were made by men. The women who applied for a job in the studios’ creative department were only given one thing to do: colouring. They could only give colours to the men’s drawings, but only with strict instructions. No creative freedom was allowed. Women were not even allowed to become students in the Disney training school, where all their draughtsmen were taught how to create animated films. This can definitely be interpreted as a lack of trust and interest in women’s competences. Limiting women’s activities in the studios to colouring means, in other words, that they can only do what children are asked to do: to put colours in pre-drawn shapes and to follow the instructions in order to make them look nice. The roles given to the Disney princesses of that time seem clearer thanks to this piece of information: passive women were what Walt Disney wanted.

*Aladdin*\(^\text{19}\). In those 1990’s films, women actually have a woman’s body. The clothes are more shape-fitted and less conservative: Ariel (the little mermaid) even wears a bikini top during a good part of the film and Jasmine’s belly can also be seen in *Aladdin*. This shows a will to follow the present trends in women’s fashion and way of life. This was not what Disney wanted in his early princess films.

\(^{19}\) *Aladdin*, Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Studios, 1992
A letter, addressed to a woman called Mary V. Ford, was found recently, and proves that women were not welcome in the studios. Daphnée Denis, a journalist for Slate.fr, wrote an article about the discovery of this letter by Ms Ford’s grandson. This is the letter:

Daphnée Denis, *Pour Disney les filles n’étaient bonnes que pour le coloriage*, publié le 01/05/2013 à 17h26, mis à jour le 02/05/2013 à 3h14 sur Slate.fr
The most striking part of this relationship between Disney and women is that it is in total contradiction with what was happening at the time in women’s lives. Of course, as it was mentioned, the flappers played an important role in the movement towards more independent women, but the real changes happened after WWI and also WWII. As the fathers, brothers and husbands were fighting, women in the United States and in Europe had to participate in the war effort in order to prevent their countries from being completely ruined. Even during the wars, people had to go to work in factories and in the fields, and as most men were not there to do so, women took over. They helped making cars and weapons, while those works were usually given to men. And those countries’ economies did not suffer from women’s presence in the factories. Women proved during both wars that they could do jobs that were usually taken by men. This is why Walt Disney’s reaction to applications from women appears surprising: why could a woman not be allowed to create and draw characters for an animated film when they were asked to build weapons a few years before and after?

Another element proves that women were trying to make things change at that time: the women’s suffrage movement. In the United States, the movement started at the end of the 19th century and was about women fighting for their right to have a political voice, in other word, the right to vote. In England and in the USA, the members of the women’s right to vote movement were known as The Suffragettes. Finally, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was created in order to prevent women from being refused the right to vote. It was ratified on August 18, 1920, or seventeen years before the launch of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The right to vote has been, throughout history, a great battle for each community who fought for it. It is always the proof that one person is considered as equal to others, which means most of the time to white men. Therefore, after women were given the right to vote in the United States, Walt Disney and his teams should have started seeing women as smart enough to work on the actual creative process of the film, instead of limiting them to the colouring aspect.
Walt Disney’s point of view on women and their right to vote can be found in another film: *Mary Poppins*[^21]. This film takes place in London, England, and Mrs Banks (the children’s mother) is part of the Suffragettes. The women’s movement is unquestionably ridiculed in the film. Mrs Banks is a character who uses the suffragettes as a distraction, a hobby. Her husband works in a bank, she does not need to work. So, in order not to get bored at home, she goes to suffragettes’ meetings. Walt Disney depicts the women suffrage movement as something to distract wealthy women looking for a sort of adventure.

[^21]: *Mary Poppins*, Robert Stevenson, produced by Walt Disney, 1964

Mrs Banks and her house maids (*Mary Poppins*)
B) A Charming Princess

In all the recent adaptations of the Snow White tale, the actresses chosen for the leading parts (Snow White and the Evil Queen) are all known for their beauty. And casting them in these films is absolutely normal because, after all, the tale is a story about beauty. But we are then left wondering why such a story is still so popular nowadays?

Scott Meslow tackles the subject in his article “Snow White’s Strange Cinematic History” published on the Atlantic website after the release of Tarsem Singh’s version of the tale, Mirror, Mirror.

If an enterprising Hollywood executive asked a magic mirror which fairy tale made the fairest box office-gross of all, the answer would undoubtedly be "Snow White." Even for the fairy-tale film genre, the character's history is unusually rich and varied: IMDB currently lists 91 films and TV shows featuring a character named "Snow White," which is dozens more than other comparable fairy-tale heroines, including Belle of Beauty and the Beast and Sleeping Beauty of Sleeping Beauty. Hollywood has banked on Snow White's success for decades, and this year, two rival studios are independently banking on it again.

Snow White’s story has been used again and again throughout Hollywood’s history because audiences all over the world love the tale. Indeed, Meslow also mentions that the film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs had many theatrical releases: in 1937, 1944, 1952, 1958, 1967, 1975, 1983, 1987, and 1993, making the film the 10th highest-grossing film of all times. According to Erin Abbamondi, people are attracted to Snow White’s tale because of “its main themes of adolescent sexuality, witchcraft, ritualistic cannibalism, and a murderous rivalry". Audiences are interested in these subjects, a fact that also explains the success of horror films (and the dark 1997 adaptation, Snow White: A Tale of Terror, directed by Michael Cohn, which deals with rape, miscarriage and suicide). The story of Snow White answers people’s private questions and darkest thoughts about their own jealousy and vanity. It also deals with rivalry and murder in a family, as the queen is Snow White’s step mother. Those are classic themes which are also dealt with in Greek mythology.

This link with Greek tales is even more obvious when the Evil Queen is compared to another famous jealous character: Hera. Hera was Zeus’s sister and wife. Zeus was depicted as a very unfaithful husband, which forced Hera to become a jealous and revengeful wife. Most of the Greek tales about her tell the stories of her different plans to harm or kill Zeus’s numerous mistresses and their children. This shows that the image of the cruel step mother has not been created by Disney, as Hera is the perfect example of the kind. The comparison with Snow White’s enemy is even stronger when the conflict between Hera and Paris of Troy is evoked: The Judgment of Paris. During Peleus and Tetis’s wedding on the Mount Olympus, a golden apple (The Apple of Discord) was thrown to the guests by an upset Eris who had not been invited. On the apple, it was inscribed “For the fairest”. Three goddesses claimed that the fruit was theirs: Athena (goddess of wisdom and justice), Aphrodite (goddess of love and beauty), and Hera. Paris of Troy was then appointed by Zeus to decide who was the most beautiful of them three. After being promised the love of the most beautiful woman on earth by the goddess of love, Paris chose Aphrodite.

Again, the faults of vanity and pride are attributed to women, just like in Snow White’s story. At least, it proves that the recent adaptations of the tale are not guilty about being the first to spread that idea. Moreover, it is also interesting to notice that once again the apple plays a very important role here: this fruit, when it is used in a story, is always the element which attracts bad events. Indeed, after choosing Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess, Paris obtained Helen of Sparta’s love, but he also caused a war and killed Peleus and Tetis’s son, Achilles.

Funnily enough, the Disney Studios decided, in 1997, to create an animated film about the Greek gods and goddesses, entitled *Hercules*. Hera is present in the film, but not as she should be: for Disney, she is Hercules’ mother, when Hercules is in fact Zeus’s illegitimate son. Therefore, the loving-mother image that is given to her seems rather quirky. But this can be explained by the fact that in the Disney Studios’ world, there is no adulterous affair and no bad parents (only bad step mothers in fact).

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24 The king of Troy’s son, Helen of Sparta’s lover.
25 Greek mythological hero, father of Achilles.
26 Sea nymph, mother of Achilles.
27 Goddess of chaos and discord.
Another answer can be given to the question of the public’s passion about Snow White: her story is one that completely reassures our society. In this tale, a young woman’s motto is “Someday my prince will come”, and her hobbies are baking pies and cleaning the house. This princess represents what the conservative society wants the young girls to see and to become. Snow White waits for a man to choose her and to change her into a wife and mother. That is her only goal in the Grimm’s original tale, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Once Upon A Time* and *Mirror, Mirror*. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, this changes because her fighting role is emphasized and she aims to take back her realm from the Evil Queen’s control. But it has been said before that even if she is presented as a strong woman in this film, the traditional scheme is respected as Snow White still needs men to survive. The tale reflects the ideal order wanted by a society where men are still seen as superior.

However old this tale may be, it still finds echoes in our modern civilisation. Advertising is a very good witness of people’s mentality. Adverts from the 1960’s are obviously always shown as examples of misogyny, as made obvious by following ad.

![The Hoover Company (1960)](image_url)
But a more recent ad, and this time in France, proves that minds have not completely changed when it comes to the image of the world associated with women:

![Géant Casino’s advert (2012)](image)

Both companies—Hoover in the 60’s and Casino today—seem to think that women, and in particular wives and mothers, dream of receiving a Hoover and household products as presents. Maybe those “gifts” would have pleased Snow White. And if the publicists who created those ads only have the young princess—most probably, the Disney version of her—as the ideal representation of the fair gender, this could explain why they came up with those adverts.
The recent adaptations of the Snow White tale all have something in common, and it has been mentioned before in this dissertation: they aim to modernize the young princess’s image by turning her into an independent woman who is ready to fight for what she wants and what she believes in. The audience can see in the two films and the TV series Snow White’s transformation from the innocent and scared damsel in distress, wearing dresses, to the determined and fearless warrior. All the trailers for *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Mirror, Mirror*, and *Once Upon A Time* emphasize this feminist image, even though we do not only see that aspect of Snow White in the adaptations. But after watching the films and the series, we realise that this will to turn Snow White into a feminist character seems only linked to marketing. This is only a way to sell the adaptations to audiences who are looking for new images of women in cinema and television. Indeed, even if mentalities have not really changed about women’s role in society, it is always more politically correct to claim that nowadays people want to see strong and independent women. But we cannot really talk about a striking evolution when looking at the recent adaptations of Snow White’s story. As mentioned before, the fairy tale pattern remains unchanged: the young woman escapes from the Evil Queen, thanks to a hunter; she is then rescued by the dwarfs, for whom she does a lot of household cleaning (but, it should be pinpointed that there is no cleaning involved in *Snow White and the Huntsman*); and finally, a kiss provides her with a husband and gives her the status of a wife. The “happy ending” is only complete when the princess gets married.

As evoked, *Snow White and the Huntsman* differs on two points: the housemaid role and the wedding. Rupert Sanders’ dwarfs do not lead Snow White to their house but instead to an enchanted forest. The classic “Whistle while you work” scene obviously cannot be performed there. But we are left wondering if this scene was indeed cut to favour the feminist aspect of the film, or if it was just dispensed with artistic and financial reasons: the forest scene, with all the flying butterflies and fairies, the animals and the moving flowers, is the best time of the film to give 3D fans what they came for. As for the missing wedding at the

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29 Snow White’s song when she cleans the dwarfs’ house in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
end, the audience can guess that the director kept an opportunity to make a sequel. The princess is saved by the widowed hunter’s kiss, not by the prince’s. At one point in the film, the huntsman can also be heard saying to the young woman that she reminds him of his late wife. These elements are obviously hints given to the audience about a burgeoning love story. In the light of those facts, among the three contemporary adaptations, it is *Snow White and the Huntsman* that indeed appears as the film which respects the most its “independent woman” promises. The young princess seems to be more interested in taking back her realm and killing the Evil Queen than about falling in love. But the film still follows the fairy tale, as Snow White could not have been able to do anything without the dwarfs, the prince and, mainly, the huntsman.

The will to present to the world a new image of women was also Disney’s plan in 2012. The studios’ latest animated film, *Brave* features as its heroine a Scottish princess called Merida. As distinguishing features, the young girl was offered a bow, a quiver with arrows, a boyish attitude and rebellious curly red hair. She is therefore completely different from what we have been used to see in Disney princess films. Once again, in the trailer, the audience could see an independent girl who refuses to marry someone just because she is told to do so. The film also presents a conflict between Merida and her mother, who wants her daughter to be what a princess is expected to be: nice, pretty and obedient.
The French title of the film is *Rebelle*, which proves how much the cartoon is based on that aspect of the heroine’s personality. But, again, this film does not really keep its promises. Merida, the so-called rebel princess, is shown as a stubborn and ungrateful girl. She refuses to listen to any advice or to obey the people who care for her. Her will to live her life the way she wants to is presented as a caprice. Throughout the film, I had the impression to watch someone going through an adolescent crisis. And it is probably what Disney had in mind because, in the end, Merida realises that she cannot continue being like this, and that to save her mother (who has been turned into a bear because of her) she has to come to her senses. This means that, as a princess, she cannot choose what she will do with her life. The film ends with the mother and the daughter getting along at last. Merida is not married, but it said that one day she will be, to someone that she loves. Thus, Merida becomes the classic Disney princess.

A few months later, the Disney draughtsmen proved that point. Indeed, on May, 11 2013, Merida officially entered the private circle of the Disney princesses. A ceremony even took place at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. For the occasion, a make over was offered to the red-haired heroine, to make her look more like “a princess”:

Merida, before and after.
As we can see, Merida has lost quite a lot of her “rebel” image. Her frizzy mane of hair has been turned into a docile hairdo. She has been given a more suitable dress for a young princess, to probably look more feminine. Her weapons have disappeared, her quiver having been changed into a fashionable golden belt. She has been made up, and she strangely looks slimmer. All the efforts put into the promotion of the film have been ruined thanks to one picture. Disney now has to face a huge backlash from all over the world. Even Brave’s director, Brenda Chapman, has said that she is completely against Merida’s new “sexualised” image:

I think it's atrocious what they have done to Merida. When little girls say they like it because it's more sparkly, that's all fine and good but, subconsciously, they are soaking in the sexy ‘come-hither’ look and the skinny aspect of the new version. It's horrible! Merida was created to break that mould. To give young girls a better, stronger role model, a more attainable role model, something of substance, not just a pretty face that waits around for romance.30

Snow White’s recent adaptations can be compared to Merida’s situation here. Even if directors might have had the best intentions when making their versions of the tales, in the end, the results are not very satisfying. The films and the series wanted to give a new and fresh vision of the tale: indeed, they do offer new artistic universes to the viewers, but the core of the story does not change. It is not because the directors added some new scenes, new characters or new adventures into their works that the message conveyed changes.

I would like to end this dissertation with a test used to decide whether a film gives a good representation of women or not. It is called the Bechdel Test, named after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel. In her 1985 comic strip Dykes To Watch Out For, one of the characters has the idea to create the test. It does not evaluate whether a film is good or not, or whether it is a feminist film or not: it only judges the presence and importance of female characters. Three questions make up the evaluation: firstly, are there at least two female characters and do they have names? Secondly, do they talk together? And lastly, do they talk about something else than men?

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30 Brave director criticises Disney’s ‘sexualised’ Princess Merida redesign, written by Ben Child and published on guardian.co.uk on 13 May 2013
Most of the results of the test are regularly put on a website\textsuperscript{31}, and just like for Wikipedia, anyone can contribute to it. According to the website, \textit{Snow White and the Huntsman}, \textit{Mirror, Mirror} and \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs} pass the test. As it is not a film, \textit{Once Upon A Time} is not on the website, but it does respect the three points of the evaluation. However, the Bechdel test, even if it is largely used and talked about when it comes to evaluate women’s presence in films, does not give real indications about some elements. For example, \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs} passes the test because Snow White and the witch talk about the apple and pies together. This cannot be called a real conversation as it only last a few seconds, and the subject is far from being well-grounded. Also, in all the adaptations, the two female characters have only bad things to say about each other. Can it be said that women are well represented when all the Evil Queen and Snow White talk about is how malicious the other one is?

Maybe it would have been interesting to add a few points to the Bechdel test. I would suggest to ask whether the female characters play important roles in the film, whether they aim at finding something else than a husband, and also if the female characters help each other or not. The Bechdel test is a good way to denounce some films where women are badly depicted, like, according to the website, \textit{The Dark Knight Rises}\textsuperscript{32} (women do not talk to each other) or \textit{The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey}\textsuperscript{33} (no named female character). Yet it has to be taken with caution because a film like \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs} cannot really be designated as a film where women are well represented.

\textsuperscript{31} \texttt{http://bechdeltest.com/}
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{The Dark Knight Rises} , directed by Christopher Nolan (2012).
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{The Hobbit : An Unexpected Journey} , directed by Peter Jackson (2012)
Conclusion

The recent adaptations of the Snow White tale have been presented to us as modern visions of the young princess. At first sight, the young princess seems to be transformed into a warrior who does not fear anything, and who wants to fight for what she wants. The audience can even see Snow White changing during the films and the series. On the other hand, the Evil Queen is given all the defects usually attributed to the fair gender. In the modern works that we studied, the queen’s worst enemy is not Snow White, but rather her fear of being rejected because of the aging of her body. Even in Once Upon A Time, where the queen’s motive is revenge, she seems to be thinking that she will not be loved anymore—now that she has lost her lover—because she is not good enough. Snow White is then transformed into a sort of “punching bag” because she is young, beautiful, and also loved by her prince charming.

The story of Snow White in fact shows a strange conflict between two women, and this is only solved thanks to men’s interventions. First the hunter, then the dwarfs, and lastly the prince (or the huntsman again, in Snow White and the Huntsman). The young princess only owes the “happy ending” of her story to the men who helped her to fight against the queen. The importance of a man in her life is even at its peak when her life is saved by a kiss given by her male saviour. The modern versions of the fairy tale do not change that: the so-called independent woman promised by the films and series’ trailers is in fact only a mirage used to promote these adaptations of Snow White’s story.

This fairy tale is loved because good defeats evil. But behind this pleasing appearance, this story hides a few problematic elements that we wanted to insist on in this dissertation. Disney’s version has been so popular through the generations that now, when filmmakers want to create something new about Snow White, they have to take in consideration what Walt Disney changed in the tale. Even if it means keeping elements which do not give a fair representation of women.
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