

Film Criticism on the film Mulan

“You the Man, sort of” (Mushu). In the Disney Animated film “Mulan”, the main character Mulan is shown cross dressing as a man to save her father’s life. This film had the courage to say that not wanting to fit into stereotypes is okay. It has shown the LGBTQ+ community that they do not need to fit into social-norms through Milan’s constant changing of her attire to fit in. In the end she acts and dresses the way she wants to. Although “Mulan” is fictitious, it goes to show that portraying familiar social scenarios can make a film, even an animated one, more relatable.

In, *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, Summers, Claude J. says that, “the term *gay studies* signifies not merely the study of an issue associated with homosexuality, but also a positive attitude toward homosexuality, an appreciation of the complexity and variety of gay and lesbian experience, and an awareness of their difficulties”(1). I am going to encapsulate the difficulties of Queer (a term that can encompass people in the LGBTQ+ community) people’s experiences, through examples from the film. I will be giving examples from the movie, that parallel with the lives of Queer individuals that I have come to know from personal experience, as well as from the experiences of my friends in society. Although these situations do not pertain to all Queer people, I am simply trying to address the issues of stereotypes and social standards through this film analysis.

In the beginning of the movie Mulan is writing down notes on her arm. She is animated wearing long shorts and a tank top, not really showing clear femininity here except for her long black hair. We then see her change into a skirt and more feminine attire to serve her father tea

while he is praying for her to impress the matchmaker. This is the first initial change we see Mulan making to try to fit in or impress others.

The next time we see Mulan she comes into the scene riding on her horse bareback in the same outfit she wore to give her father tea, except now she is dirty and her hair is down with sticks in it. Moreover, here she is dressed like her mother and the other women in the town, she still does not fit in because of how careless she is with her looks.

The next scene is accompanied by the song, "Honor to Us All", which is diegetically sung by the groomers and people of the town, as well as her mother and grandmother. The groomer women in the film say, "We're going to turn this sow's ear, into a silk purse", implying that Mulan is imperfect the way that she is. The song also claims, "When we're through boys will gladly go to war for you with good fortune and a great hairdo, you'll bring honor to us all," implying that through changing herself she could get a man to go to war for her; when ironically she flips those stereotypes and goes to war herself. Furthermore, another line from the song that stands out is "Men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient, who work fast-paced, with good breeding and a tiny waist". This line exposes the sexist societal standards for a women: a women needs to be obedient to have a man and therefore is expected to want to have a husband.

Even though Mulan shows her intelligence by beating the old man in checkers and by being resourceful with making the dog feed the chickens, these were not the characteristics of an acceptable women in that society, which is what her family wanted her to be. This song and scene in general give a clear parallel of the standards LGBTQ+ people have experienced over time to fit in, and do what their family wants for them. It is a scene mirroring the grooming Queer people's parents do to them to make them "presentable" to family members. For example,

forcing them to hide their tattoos, making them put on makeup to seem more feminine, or making them take off makeup if they are a man, to make them appear more masculine.

In the scene where Mulan is getting her makeup done, she sees the way the makeup artist does her makeup and is repulsed by the way she looks, much like how Queer people feel when forced to dress or look how society wants them to look. Moreover, Mulan rushes into the line of women who look happy, while she looks distraught, confused, and out of place at the same time. She knows she has to try really hard to fit in, and we know the only reason she is trying to fit in is for her family's honor, as the song suggests. People in the LGBTQ+ community are forced to fit in everyday, whether it be for work or to please those around them and by hiding their true identity from everyone; they feel trapped, 'in the closet' as the cliché suggests.

The scene with the matchmaker goes poorly because of how hard Mulan is trying to fit in, and she ends up being shamed in front of her family and community. This scene is followed by the famous song, "Reflection", which embodies Mulan's identity crisis. We see her wiping off half of her makeup to show who she is inside. Her identity crisis, much like the identity crisis queer people experience their whole lives is secret and heartbreaking for her. This song emulates her feelings of pain and sadness because she cannot adequately fit in, and be "normal", but not of resentment towards her family. Furthermore, when talking to her father he suggests she is a flower that has not bloomed. However, showing his understanding and knowledge of her hidden personality, much like how family members of Queer people assume their hidden identities, but never confront them about it. Through the first 13 minutes of this Walt Disney Pictures film, Mulan goes through being shamed, feeling like she can never fit into her community, and feeling that she is hiding her true self. Additionally, all these themes mirror scenarios that LGBTQ+

community members have to deal with their whole lives, and they are impactful to people who have been shamed by their communities for being different.

Mulan knows that she won't be able to fit in, and be the perfect bride her family wants her to be so she cuts her hair, wears her father's armor, and goes to fight in his place. In, "How Disney's Mulan Brazenly Challenges Gender and Sexuality", by Soren Hough he states, "Mulan knows that not only will she never be the person her family expects, but that she won't even "pass for a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter." Note the use of "pass" here, a loaded sociological term that has meaning across the board, from race and religion to gender and sexual identity. Even the terms used in the film have strong ties to identity, and societal expectations. When Mulan's father tells her to "Learn your place", Mulan goes against the path set out for her and goes on the path she chooses. Near the end of the movie Mulan discovers, "Maybe I didn't go for my father, maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right, so when I looked in the mirror i'd see someone worthwhile". She realizes that the whole time she was "fighting for her family's honor", she really was learning things about herself and gaining her own independence and identity. A majority of queer people have to go through their own realizations of identity. They are not told if they are gay, or transgender, it has to be learned and they go through the process of discovering it on their own.

Additionally, she sees her mother devastated and makes the decision to take her father's place. For the fourth time she changes the way she looks, and the way she acts not for herself, but for her family and their honor. Even her horse doesn't recognize her in her fathers armour which shows how powerful an appearance change can be; similarly to how the change of a Queer, or transgender person's appearance can make them appear how they feel on the inside.

Mulan's parents and grandmother find out what Mulan has done but know they cannot go after her because if they do then Mulan will be killed. This fear has also been seen in Queer people when their parents do not tell their relatives about their identities out of fear they could be thrown out, or looked down on. The next scene shows Mulan's Ancestors (as ghosts) talking about Mulan and what she is doing to their family. One of her Ancestors even says, "Your great granddaughter had to be a crossdresser", by shaming Mulan and the choices she has made, much like the shame most families put on their Queer children who have the courage to come out.

When Mushu confronts Mulan he says, "If the army finds out you're a girl the penalty is death", again, much like how family members would disown their children if they find out their LGBTQ+ identity. Mulan also says, "I am nervous I've never done this before", supporting that most Queer people are uncomfortable with taking on their new identities, because no one usually teaches them what their identity means for their actual lifestyle.

Crossdressing to receive the role or job of a man has been done by women for decades. One example is that in 532 BC, women dressed up as men with no one's knowledge to be able to participate in theater. "Women were not allowed to be on the stage because it was considered "dangerous." ("Women in Theatre: A Historical Look.>"). Much like in Mulan's case, she would never be allowed to take her father's place in the army because of her gender. Furthermore, Mulan's representation of pants rolling is different because she is not just trying to pass as a man, but finding her new identity.

Mulan's themes of homosexuality and crossdressing are apparent, however in previous movies, crossdressing was portrayed as scary or dangerous. In *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Vito Russo discusses how "[Homosexuals], continued to emerge,

however, as subtextual phantoms representing the very fear of homosexuality.”(63). He also says that, “America’s ostentatious fascination with the difference between masculine and feminine behavior and society’s absolute terror of queerness, especially in men, continued to be served by the requisite yardstick sissy.”(66). Instead of the offensive homosexual stereotype of someone being blatantly overgirly or overly manly, Mulan is seen as hardworking, and determined, no different from any man.

Even though Mulan is trying to fit in with the men of the army, Mushu gets her in trouble and his “manly” advice is incorrect, and doesn’t help. We then transition to the “prince” in this princess movie who has to man up to his father's and societies standards as well. In the song “Make a Man Out of You”, it explains how to “be a man”, with stereotypical qualities like being strong and disciplined: this contrasts the stereotypes that were put on Mulan, which were to be calm and obedient. The societal standards both the men and women faced in Mulan mirror the societal standards put on all people. In, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films* Booker says that, “sexism is more subtly ingrained in American culture than is racism”(xii). He also says that “Moreover, pressure to adhere to certain preconceived norms of acceptability, especially from the Right, means that American children’s films are often oppressively banal”(xii). Because children’s films were safe, and boring, Disney tried to bring in societal issues on race, sexism, and possibly crossdressing to teach and further entertain, without angering parents.

Throughout the end of the movie Mulan gets exposed as being a women when she is injured, but that doesn’t stop her from saving China. Although she isn’t crossdressing anymore she dresses up the other soldiers as women to distract the guards: their cooperative crossdressing

proves effective, and shows that it is not a bad thing, in fact it saves lives. The end song talks about, "following your heart" and although this movie is a part of the Disney princess films genre; its talking about following your heart, and finding your true self, instead of finding a man. This empowering, and universal message can especially be impactful to people who are insecure in their identity, like Mulan was. This movie shows that by following your heart and breaking societal standards, you can make a change and a difference, as well as finding an identity that you can be comfortable with.

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