

“I’ll Make a Subversive Reading Out of You:” How Disney’s *Mulan* Works Against the Patriarchal Gender Binary and Compulsory Heterosexuality



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Identifying and being able to express one’s “true” self is a difficult task when one inhabits a society that urges people to conform to predetermined, constricting categories. Quite unforgiving, ideologies like patriarchy and its close cousin, compulsory heterosexuality, seek to subdue people under its crushing expectations of appearance and behavior, punishing those who deviate from its directives. These ideologies pervade American culture and its many productions, with stereotypical portrayals of romance between delicate women and strong men as the standard of experience. While certainly dreamy to some, such depictions grow stale and beg the emergence of a fresh dynamic that breaks up the monotony of outdated ideas on gender and sexuality. Enter *Mulan* (1998), an American film that tells the story of Fa Mulan, a young woman in ancient China who disguises herself as a male soldier to take her father’s place in the army, trains under the skilled Li Shang, and saves her country from the invading Huns. As closer analysis reveals, the characterizations of Fa Mulan and Li Shang throughout the story subvert traditional norms of gender expression and sexual orientation, both within their fictional society and the patriarchal, heterosexual society that produced the film. Indeed, despite being written with heterosexual intention, their behavior undermines such a narrative by building their relationship as queer.

Gender

Regarding gender, there is a lot to unpack regarding Mulan’s characterization throughout the film. The opening song, “Honor to Us All,” wastes no time in establishing the patriarchal ideology operating in this fictional Chinese society. As a culture, *patriarchy* privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles wherein men are seen as rational, strong, and protective while women are considered emotional, weak, and submissive (Tyson, 81). This idea is the basis for

America’s strictly-binary gender system, where the two genders are masculine and feminine – polar opposites with no in-between (Tyson, 105). Laying out expectations of appearance and behavior, village women try to mold Mulan into the “perfect woman” and “perfect bride” by doing her hair, makeup, and clothing, repeating that she will “bring honor to us all” because of it. The lyrics are a how-to pamphlet in “cultural construction,” the conventions that sanction how a person should “act” their body (Butler, 523). This patriarchal tendency to objectify women is apparent in the line “men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient...and a tiny waist” and the comparison of the brides to “perfect porcelain doll[s],” which appeals to the male gaze and paints submissive behavior as desirable. Further, women are deemed useless save for what they can do for men: “a girl can bring her family great honor in *one* way,” i.e. getting married to a man, “bearing sons,” and nothing else. Men do not have to go through this superficial circus act of being auctioned off like cattle, and can bring honor to their families by “bearing arms” and going to war.

This discrete separation between the masculine and the feminine is clearly defined, with no room to occupy a middle ground. As a result, the fact that Mulan does not conform to her society’s rigid standards of femininity anyway, right from the start, speaks volumes about her subversive role. Employing Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative, Mulan’s obvious discomfort at looking and acting feminine can be understood as her putting on an act (Butler, 529). For starters, she visibly frowns and appears uncomfortable throughout the entire makeover, and even messes up a piece of her styled hair intentionally as a small act of rebellion. The tight garments, perfectly-coiffed hair, and cakey makeup are like a costume for a role – a stylization of the body that indicates a specific gender identity (Butler, 519). Unfortunately it’s a role that she does not desire to fill and is not capable of performing with believability. She is doomed to fail at

performing her assigned gender, which she does in spectacular fashion when she meets the Matchmaker, forgets the lines she is supposed to recite, and fumbles her tea-pouring ceremony. Despite knowing the script she is supposed to follow, she cannot in good faith fake her way through the performance.

This leads to an examination of “Reflection,” the movie’s second song. Following her failure with the Matchmaker and feeling like she has brought dishonor upon her family, Mulan struggles to come to terms with the rigid expectations that society holds of her gender. “Reflection,” as the name implies, holds the double entendre of Mulan reflecting on her internal struggle but also being frustrated with the external reflection of her appearance, one that is dissonant with how she feels inside. After all, the main question she struggles to answer is “When will my reflection show who I am inside?” She appears to be *questioning*, unsure of her gender identity in light of her failure to perform as a woman and inability to save her father from war, also due in part to her gender (Tyson, 111). She laments, “I will never *pass* for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter.” In the context of gender, passing often refers to a transgender person who is perceived as the gender they aim to present as. Mulan’s view that she cannot pass as a woman indicates that though she is presenting feminine, it is not the right identity for her. She considers that she is “not meant to *play this part*,” revealing that she views femininity like a performative role, as Butler’s theory of gender performativity posits. Additional lines that support Mulan’s feelings that gender is an act are that her physical reflection of a girl is “someone [she doesn’t] know,” essentially a stranger because she feels so alienated from its form.

Gender performance always occurs under a situation of duress, and this is no exception for Mulan (Butler, 522). It seems that instead of expressing her gender how she desires, she is

hesitant because she wants to act in alignment with her family’s expectations – to not “break [her] family’s heart.” Indeed, Butler notes in her article how societies that hold binary gender systems in such high regard tend to punish those who fail to “do” their gender correctly along that binary, making Mulan’s worries about how her family will perceive her – or even worse, how society will judge her family if she fails to conform – indicative of her desire for cultural survival.

Overall, the song reveals that Mulan harbors the emotions of alienation from the feminine gender as a whole, and helplessness to act how others want her to, rather than expressing herself freely. Society and her family tell her that she must behave submissively and passively, refraining from action and acting as a pretty face to some random, domineering husband. But she is not docile, she is spirited and prone to action, making it difficult to stifle her true self, which is apparent when she says, “I cannot hide who I am, though I’ve tried.”

In contrast, she *is* able to perform the role of a man with some believability, subverting the gender guidelines in “Honor to Us All” by bearing arms, going to war, and defeating the Huns army – all of which are behaviors reserved for men. To accomplish this gender performativity, Mulan *cross-dresses* to become her male persona, Ping (Tyson, 111). Reversing the bridal makeover in the opening song that sought to create a feminine gender, Mulan’s second significant makeover in the film involves creating a masculine gender. Deciding to take her father’s place in the Chinese army because he is old and injured, she does not hesitate to grab his sword – which could be a phallic symbol of strength and masculinity – and cut off her long hair, a feminine trait. Throughout, instead of looking uncomfortable, she looks steeled with resolve. She then puts on her father’s armor, donning the “costume” of a man. This has the dual-meaning of 1) Mulan rejecting gender norms in order to save her father and 2) Mulan coming closer to

discovering her true identity, symbolically “cutting off” her submissive, feminine role in exchange for a dominant, masculine role that coincides better with her drive for action. Indeed, later on when her dragon sidekick, Mushu, compliments her by yelling “You’re the man,” she beams with pride; when Mushu backtracks with “well, sort of,” she glares at him. These responses indicate her pride and sense of belonging in presenting masculine.

Her pride is not unfounded, because the film shows how its women are oppressed by *sexism*. Men go to war because they are the only ones allowed to under Chinese law. Sons are told to enlist by the emperor, and in “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” Captain Li Shang insults the men by asking “did they send me *daughters*, when I asked for sons?” This line is poignantly a sexist insult, implying that anyone who is inexperienced, uncoordinated, or weak is like a woman. In this society, like many patriarchal ones, being biologically female alone is enough to discredit your abilities. This takes place later in the film when Mulan is exposed as a “woman;” Chi-Fu, the Chinese emperor’s advisor, calls her a “treacherous snake” and urges Li Shang to kill her, despite having saved the entire army from the Huns merely hours before. And when Mulan once again saves them from Shan-Yu, the Huns leader, Chi-Fu criticizes her by saying “she’s a woman; she’ll never be worth anything.” With sexist assumptions like this that overshadow any merit of one’s personal skills or achievements, Mulan’s desire to trade in her femininity for masculinity in order to receive respect and be taken seriously as her own person is understood as an attempt to escape an oppressed role.

As both Ping and Mulan, she shows an overlap of masculine and feminine qualities. When acting as a “man,” she cannot hide her disgust at some of her fellow soldiers’ violent and dirty behavior. She also cannot maintain a deep voice or walk with the bravado of a stereotypical male. Somewhat of a stretch, when Li Shang learns that his father has died in battle, Ping is the

only one who emotionally softens and tries to comforts him – nurturing is considered a feminine trait. When she returns to a feminine gender expression at the end of the film, though she dons a dress, she maintains her outspoken confidence, battle skills, and keeps her hair down instead of styling it into a bun. Because of the dynamic, back-and-forth overlap of masculine and feminine traits that she exhibits, she does not fit into a rigid gender binary like that of patriarchy. Instead, she rejects both ideals of “man” and “woman” by becoming her own, honest self that is neither of those things alone. Whether it be called queer, non-binary, or androgynous, she is a mix of gendered traits.

This film, as a text, undermines the patriarchal presumption of female weakness through Mulan’s flexibility of gender. As a biological female donning a masculine gender expression, we perceive her as strong through surpassing other soldiers during training, beating Li Shang in a hand-to-hand fight, and singlehandedly defeating the villainous leader of the Huns, Shan Yu. It also invites watchers to criticize blind *misogyny* (Tyson, 113) through antagonists like Chi-Fu, the emperor’s very-dislikable advisor who seems to despise women. Mulan gets to experience many of the things she was told she could not do on the basis of biological sex alone, thus proving the ideology to be presumptuous and false. And as a deviation to other heterosexual romances, she does not sit idly by and wait for a man to save her; using her own faculties, she saves herself, her father, her fellow soldiers, and all of China. The film’s romance is not its focus, instead focusing on Mulan’s personal journey to gain confidence in showing her true self to the world.

Sexuality

Though the discussion thus far has focused on gender expression, an analysis of the text would not be complete without a look at another deviation it takes from traditional norms: queer sexuality. In this endeavor, the focus shifts to Li Shang, the handsome, intelligent, and skilled Captain of the Chinese army. He embodies masculinity and strength, but he is also Mulan’s love interest, and it is this fact that triggers a queer reading of a seemingly-heterosexual movie.

As has already been mentioned, the song “Honor to Us All” serves as a good starting point for understanding the mechanics of fictional, Disney-fied Chinese society. It is through this song that compulsory heterosexuality is established as a natural given, something to be celebrated. All respectable women in Mulan’s village are beautified in the hopes of the Matchmaker finding them good husbands, and women are encouraged to bring honor to their families and emperor by “bearing sons.” This unconsciously prioritizes sexual reproduction as the end goal for Chinese couples while also programming people to believe in a “natural” heterosexual disposition (Butler, 525).

With this in mind, what can one make of the characterization of Li Shang? He can easily be read as a queer character when employing the concept of *homoeroticism* (Tyson, 307). His interactions with Mulan’s male persona, Ping, involve homosocial bonding and imply same-sex attraction. As Captain of the Chinese army, Shang trains and interacts with Ping and many of the other side-character soldiers. However, his relationship with Ping is portrayed differently because he has an affection and respect for him that he does not extend to any other soldier. Mulan and Shang end the movie as a couple, but their romantic chemistry does not begin at the film’s close when he learns she is a woman or when he visits her family’s home.

Instead, his attraction is established early on in the song “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” when Mulan is Ping. At first, Shang is critical of him and sees him as no different than the other clumsy recruits. Ping is weak and uncoordinated, and in the song Shang has to help him multiple times – like how to shoot an arrow, how to deflect weapons, or carrying bags of sand – because he is lagging behind, something that irritates Shang. Eventually, however, Ping dedicates himself to improving his physical abilities and ends up completing a task that Shang thought would be impossible: retrieving an arrow from high up on a wooden pole while holding heavy weights. It is this accomplishment that likely captured Shang’s attention on Ping’s abilities, earning his respect. Soon after, when Shang and Ping fight hand-to-hand during training, Ping swiftly beats him and knocks him to the ground. No words are exchanged, but Shang stares at Ping in awe, clearly impressed. It is this tender expression that holds *homoerotic* significance because it implies attraction to Ping.

If expressions aren’t enough, then maybe proximity would exemplify this feeling. In the beginning of “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” Shang grabs Ping by the collar and leans in close until their noses are almost touching. In many of their interactions, Shang tends to lean in close and get in Ping’s face...numerous times. While this certainly reeks of male dominance, it also implies sexual tension, especially when you consider that Shang does this to none of the other incompetent soldiers. Later on, when Ping is injured in battle, Shang is the first to run to his side and comfort him, again leaning in close to Ping’s face. He then paces back and forth outside of a medical tent, while Ping’s friends (who should be the *most* worried) sit and look on. While seemingly trivial details, the absence of such behavior towards other male soldiers endows them with significant meaning.

Most significantly, when Shang learns that Ping is really a biological female, he is not relieved or visibly happy, which a heterosexual man trying to stifle homosexual feelings would be. Instead, he feels betrayed and upset that Ping (now Mulan) lied to him about her identity. In addition, it could be interpreted that his response was indicative that he had accepted his homosexual feelings towards Ping, and was merely upset to find out that she was really a biological woman after having come to terms with his same-sex attraction. Not once from this point until the end of the film does he ask Mulan about presenting masculine, perhaps showing that it was of no real consequence to him.

Biologically, they are male and female, which begs to render the story heterosexual in mainstream interpretations. However, because Mulan is gendered throughout the movie as a mix of masculine and feminine qualities, and because Shang displays the majority of his attraction towards Ping pre-reveal, it would really make them a queer couple. They are both gendered masculine for a large portion of the movie, and Mulan retains some masculine traits even at the end. Thus, while the movie is heterosexual in intention, it has a significant queer dimension for its main couple that cannot be overlooked.

As these aspects of the film show, gender and sexuality cannot be accurately put into discrete, binary categories. The range of experience for humans is complex and broad, and limiting masculine and feminine as the only approved options for gender, or heterosexual as the natural form of attraction, is limiting and unrealistic. Not everyone naturally falls into line with these socially constructed, not to mention arbitrary, notions. Fa Mulan and Li Shang are perfect examples of that, because despite being the products of a patriarchal society that favors compulsory heterosexuality, these characters nonetheless exhibit traits that undermine traditional norms.

Reasoning

For this reading, I chose to employ both feminist and queer theory. Feminist theory was useful for dissecting the character and behavior of Fa Mulan in the context of her patriarchal society. Feminist concepts include patriarchal gender roles (Tyson, 81), the gender binary of masculine and feminine that I overlaid onto Mulan, and its inclusion of gender studies, which were more suitable for analyzing Mulan’s assigned role, rejection of feminine gender, and exploration of a new gender identity that works against patriarchy. I think that my connections between patriarchal ideology and specific examples of it operating in the film worked well. Mulan’s characterization undermines traditional notions of gender, which feminist theory looks for in a text, and she comes to embody androgyny at the close of the film. In that same vein, Judith Butler’s work on gender as a performative act was very relevant for analyzing Mulan’s conflicting attempts at gender expressions. Her “bride” persona and “Ping” persona are both roles that she performs with varying levels of success, before shedding discrete genders and arriving at an expression that is a nice blend of both.

I used queer theory when focusing on Li Shang’s character, which was quite suitable for the argument I was trying to make about his sexual orientation. His storyline focused more on sexual attraction, rather than gender expression. Queer theory’s concept of *homoeroticism* was the main idea I latched onto for Shang, because it adequately describes the particular way in which Shang shows favor and attention to Mulan’s male persona, Ping, compared to his other soldiers. Their detectable chemistry while both being gendered as men serves as an invitation for bringing a queer reading to the forefront of what otherwise would be considered a heterosexual text.

Works Cited

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