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## 'Sorry, I Don't Speak Bear' Voice, Agency, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Disney-Pixar's *Brave*.

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### Abstract

This paper draws on Kristeva's theories on abjection, studies on motherhood, and children's literature scholarship to better understand the relationship between Merida, the adolescent protagonist, and her mother, Elinor, in the Disney-Pixar film *Brave*. At first glance, it seems as though Merida has a strong voice, and by standing up to her parents and refusing to go through with the betrothal they have arranged, it does seem as if she has agency and an established subject position as a headstrong tomboy. During the course of the film, however, Merida feels the need to silence her mother (by turning the latter into a bear) in order to be heard. Although Elinor is a bear for almost half the film, I argue that the maturity and subjectivity of the adolescent protagonist as daughter and princess come not just from a sense of agency, but also as a result of the bond she shares with her mother, a feature often missing from Disney princess films. I begin by examining the queen's transformation into a bear (which is at once masculine, sexual, monstrous, and abject), and what that entails for both Merida and Elinor. Given that teen transformations traditionally reflect anxieties about becoming "the wrong kind of adult," I am interested in examining the underlying reasons behind the adult mother's transformation (Waller 2009, p. 44). Finally, I analyze the process of female community building, both with regard to speech (and consequently, silencing), and the rituals of feeding and eating.

**Keywords:** mother-daughter relationships; voice; agency; metamorphosis; Disney

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### Introduction

Western civilization has a double standard about parenting. As Mary Pipher notes in *Reviving Ophelia*, relationships with fathers – in literature and film – are almost always

portrayed as being productive and growth oriented, while relationships with mothers (especially for children during their adolescence) are considered regressive and dependant. Mothers cannot be involved too much or too little – their involvement has to be precisely the ‘right’ amount. Distant mothers are scorned, even as their close and loving counterparts are criticised for being smothering and overprotective. Dawn Heinecken supports this argument in her own observations about motherhood with regard to current trends in popular culture such as women’s magazines that ‘promote the values of “intensive mothering,” an ideology of unachievable standards of perfection’ (Heinecken 2014, p. 68). According to Pipher, the messages to mothers are most contradictory with regard to their teenage daughters: ‘mothers are expected to protect their daughters from culture even as they help them fit into it. They are to encourage their daughters to grow into adults and yet keep them from being hurt’ (Pipher 1994, p. 103). Upon ‘growing up,’ daughters are expected to reject and break away from the person with whom they have, until then, closely identified. Predictably, the expectations placed upon fictional mothers seem to mirror their real life counterparts. This study will examine the mother-daughter relationship in Disney-Pixar’s *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman 2012) with special regard to voice, choice, and agency of the female characters, to the subject formation of the adolescent protagonist as daughter and princess, and to the community building between women.

While lot of attention has been paid to fairytale mothers, and mothers in studies of gender stereotypes (see Warner 1994; Purkiss 1996; Blackford 2012; Francus 2012; Faustino & Coats 2016), there exists relatively little scholarship on the mothers of Disney princesses. This is not surprising given that Disney’s ‘classic’ princess protagonists, at best, have no mother, or at worst, a wicked stepmother following in the fairytale tradition: both Snow White and Cinderella have evil stepmothers, although admittedly, only Snow White’s tries to kill her (Hand, et al. 1937; Geronimi, et al. 1950); Ariel and her six sisters in *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker 1989) have no mother, despite the presence in Andersen’s version of the tale of a grandmother, who functions as a mother figure). Similarly, in *Aladdin*, Jasmine’s mother is long dead (Clements and Musker 1992). Arguably, Disney’s princesses have changed markedly in the last ten years, stepping out of the confines of the home and hearth,

and standing up for what they believe in. Nonetheless, their relationships with their mothers have not changed much. Tiana in *The Princess Frog* (Clements & Musker 2009), Rapunzel in *Tangled* (Greno & Howard 2010), and Elsa and Anna in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee 2013) all have loving mothers. Tiana, however, is a frog in the Bayou for most of the movie, Rapunzel is kidnapped and enslaved by Mother Gothel (who is clearly a wicked witch), and Elsa and Anna's parents die when they are still very young. In each of these movies, and in keeping with fairytale tradition, the mother figure is almost always either absent or substituted for an evil witch or stepmother. There is, therefore, hardly any time or space for intergenerational bonding between mothers and daughters in Disney movies featuring female adolescent protagonists.

Disney-Pixar's *Brave* seems to be an exception to this rule. Not only does the protagonist have a mother who is seen and heard, but both mother and daughter spend more than half the movie renewing their strained relationship. The protagonist, Merida, is at odds with her mother, Queen Elinor, because she prefers traditionally 'masculine' activities to performing the duties of a princess. When Elinor invites the sons of neighbouring clan leaders to compete for her daughter's hand in marriage, a fight ensues between mother and daughter. Incensed, Merida buys a spell from a witch to change her fate; as a result of Merida's actions, Elinor turns into a bear. Elinor and Merida then try to reverse the spell by 'mend[ing] the bond torn by pride,' which Merida interprets to mean sewing together a tapestry she tore during their worst fight (*Brave*, 2012). Meanwhile, Fergus, the King and Merida's father, has a vendetta against bears, and will not rest until he has avenged the leg he lost in a bear attack.

Robyn McCallum argues that '...individuals' consciousness and sense of identity is formed in dialogue with others and with the discourses constituting the society and culture s/he inhabits' (McCallum 1999, p. 3). If it is true that the formation of subjectivity is shaped by social ideologies, it follows that one can achieve agency by speaking/working against dominant social ideologies. Indeed, one has power when he/she establishes a sense of individuality and the capacity to act consciously, independent from his/her social group.

McCallum understands the terms 'subjectivity' and 'agency' as follows: 'subjectivity is an individual's sense of personal identity as a subject – in the sense of being subject to some measure of external coercion – and as an agent – that is, being capable of conscious and deliberate thought and action' (McCallum 1999, p. 4). At first glance, at the very beginning of the film *Princess Merida* does seem to have achieved subjectivity as a strong, independent character. Unlike the Disney princesses before her, who are 'traditionally' pretty (read: thin with large eyes and a delicate countenance), Merida has untamed red hair, a temper to match, and utter disregard for the way she looks. She disagrees with her parents' decision to find her a husband; in an attempt to escape marriage, she even competes for her own hand (and wins hands down), which embarrasses her family and the members of the other clans. Not only is Merida adept at using weapons, which can easily be interpreted as phallic symbols, but she is very vocal about her impending betrothal as well: 'I suppose a princess just does what she's told!' she says with derision, when her mother tells her that the Lords have accepted the invitation to fight for her hand (*Brave* 2012). Later, when Elinor tries to placate Merida and explain that becoming Queen is what she has been preparing for her whole life, Merida vehemently argues, 'No! That's what *you've* been preparing me for my whole life! I won't go through with it! You can't make me!' (*Brave* 2012).

Merida, therefore, clearly has a voice early in the film. And by standing up to her parents and refusing to go through with the betrothal, it does seem as if she has both agency and an established subject position as a headstrong tomboy. She uses her mother's language – 'That's what *you've* been preparing me for' – against her, to establish her own position on the issue. Merida represents the capacity to act independently of social restraint: her vehemence at the idea of marriage does, in a way, make the viewer question dominant social ideologies, especially as Merida opposes the marriage plot trope, where Disney Princesses before her rarely question the concept of falling in love and/or getting married. (As a matter of fact, the heteronormative romance between princesses and young men they hardly know drives the plot of almost every Disney film mentioned above.) More importantly, Merida's anger shows her resisting learning the social codes expected of her as a princess. The focus of the film, however, is more upon the nature and development of the

mother-daughter relationship, than it is upon Merida's independence. Despite the fact that Elinor is a bear for almost half the film, I argue that the maturity and subjectivity of the adolescent protagonist as daughter and princess come not just from a sense of agency, but also as a result of the bond she shares with her mother – a feature often missing from Disney princess films. I begin by examining the queen's transformation into a bear, and considering what that entails for both Merida and Elinor. I then go on to analyse the process of female community building, both with regard to speech (and consequently, silencing), and to the rituals of feeding and eating.

**'Twelve feet tall with razor sharp claws': The bear body and abject motherhood (*Brave* 2012)**

Lydia Kokkola contends that

fictional children and adolescents are far more likely to undergo metamorphosis than their adult counterparts, suggesting that [...] the beastly nature of the youngster is an omnipresent source of uncontrolled power that can be leashed at any minute. (Kokkola 2013, p. 145)

This is true of most fiction featuring metamorphs: as Alison Waller observes, 'there is a clear correspondence between metamorphosis and the physical changes at puberty, as well as more oblique metaphysical changes to other developmental transformations in physical and social realms' (Waller 2009, p. 44). In other words, teen transformations traditionally reflect anxieties about becoming 'the wrong kind of adult' (Waller 2009, p. 44). It is interesting that in *Brave*, however, the adolescent protagonist does *not* undergo metamorphosis; rather unusually, the witch's spell transforms the adult mother into a bear.

The figure of the bear is symbolic of that which is abject. Barbara Creed uses Kristeva's theory of abjection to explain the abject as

'the place where meaning collapses,' the place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (Creed 1996, pp. 37-38)

The concept of abjection is closely linked to the changing, 'metamorphosing' adolescent body, as both '[breach] and [challenge] boundaries' (Coats 2004, p. 143). It is important to note that despite (or perhaps *because* of) Merida's adolescence, it is her mother's body that evolves. During transformation, Elinor's body signifies the collapse of the boundary between human and animal. Moreover, as long as she's in the bear's body Elinor occupies a special position: she cannot speak, yet is able to express herself quite clearly to her daughter; she thinks like a human and even believes she is one (she continues to wear a crown, and uses a bedspread to cover herself, although, as Merida points out, she has fur and is therefore not naked). Finally, she does not know instinctively how to survive in the wild, and she demands that her food be cooked before she tries it. This puts Elinor in the unique position of both being and not being a bear *and* being and not being a human. As Creed notes, abjection 'occurs where the individual fails to respect the law,' and abject things '...highlight the "fragility of the law" and which exist on the other side of the border that separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction' (Creed 1996, p. 39). Through her very existence, then, Elinor-as-bear literally challenges the law of the father: no bears.

As a woman, Elinor signifies the human potential to return to a more primitive state of being, and as a bear she is able to restrict the shaping, manipulation and stereotyping of the female body. Indeed, the female body is almost always abject because

...unlike the male body, the proper female body is penetrable, changes shape, swells, gives birth, contracts, lactates, bleeds. Woman's body reminds man of his "debt to nature" and as such threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized. (Creed 1995, p. 87)

More importantly, Creed uses Kristeva to argue that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother; ‘...but abject is not something of which the subject can ever feel free – it is always there, beckoning the self to take up its place, the place where meaning collapses’ (Creed 1996, p. 39). It does seem, therefore, that the bear-as-body represents a brutality that requires overcoming, as both mother and daughter seek to repair the bond that was broken so that Elinor can become human again. Feminist scholars including Susan Bordo (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) have, however, critiqued the Cartesian split of the body and mind, demonstrating how the materiality of the body produces certain types of knowledge. The following sections examine the seemingly conflicting roles of the bear, both as an abject body, and as a functioning mind inside the body.

The fact that Elinor gets turned into a bear comes as no surprise: the witch’s cottage Merida stumbles upon is full of bear carvings. On a superficial level, the viewer is expected to read the figure of the bear as being synonymous with the body: the bear is unruly, large, disruptive, and in need of direction, and Mor’du, the demon bear, supports this description. Mor’du was the legendary Prince who broke away from his family and bought a spell from the witch. He asked for the strength of ten men, and was turned into a bear. Since he did not break the spell by making up with his brothers, Mor’du remains a bear until his death. Marina Warner points out that, historically, ‘the bear figures as the totem of the wild man, the dweller in the untamed forest, all natural appetite and ferocity’ (Warner 1994, 300); here, too, the bear is coded male and is symbolic of brute force and uncontrolled strength. In other words, Mor’du is the consequence of ‘too much freedom’ that Elinor warns her daughter against, and is also what she is in danger of becoming if the spell isn’t broken by the second sunrise. More importantly, Mor’du shares a history with both Elinor and her husband, Fergus. The film begins with Elinor playing with Merida, and watching as she learns to use a bow; only after Mor’du attacks for the first time does she become increasingly restrictive of her daughter’s actions. The king, too, is changed by the bear attack. He stays behind to fight Mor’du as his wife flees with their daughter. Fergus loses his leg in the fight,

and this castration anxiety makes him want to 'avenge [his] leg' by killing any bears he sees (*Brave* 2012). The bear, therefore, by the very being of its existence, expresses insatiable needs and desires. It also functions as a metaphor for uncurbed carnality that threatens male authority and patriarchy.

Reduced to her body, the once articulate Elinor is defined by her animalistic needs. Elinor-as-bear embodies monstrous motherhood. She is physically overwhelming, monstrous in shape and size, and dominates space and situation; in short, she is too large and too powerful to ignore. As Marilyn Francus observes, '...the fecund female and her parasitic progeny evoke the uncontrollable nature of femininity and maternity, and not surprisingly, the image functions as a locus of male disgust with, and fear of, female sexuality and reproduction' (Francus 2012, p. 19). Having bears on the loose in his castle, then, challenges the law of the father and shakes the sense of security that King Fergus has in regard to his own hold on power. 'Since the monstrous mother refuses to be sexually or socially passive, she violates the codes of proper female behavior,' (Francus 2012, p. 26) and this inevitably leads to a bear hunt organised by the King. *All* the men in the castle go on a massive bear hunt, in an attempt to find and kill that which threatens their existence. King Fergus refuses to accept that the bear in his castle is actually his wife: even when Merida throws herself in front of Elinor-as-bear and says, 'I refuse to let you kill my mother,' (*Brave* 2012) Fergus merely asks her to step aside. It does seem that '...what constitutes strength in the female weakens the male, and therefore female power must be reinterpreted in order to be subjugated' (Francus 2012, p. 27). Only Merida is able to see that the bear is her mother, and with good reason: Elinor's inability to control her fertility (Merida's three younger brothers eat some of the abject cake and turn into bears as well) and repress her sexuality make her 'monstrous' in male eyes.

Being a bear gives Elinor a great deal of physical strength and power. She protects her daughter almost as much as her daughter protects her. In the final scene with Mor'du, for instance, the castrated father is swiped aside by the angry bear. Elinor-as-bear breaks free of the ropes that bind her and attacks Mor'du in order to protect her child. Interestingly, by



pushing Mor'du against a menhir, she uses two seemingly binary aspects of her self – brute force and human thought – to conquer and kill her foe. By killing Mor'du and releasing the spirit of the Prince that had hitherto been trapped in the bear's body, Elinor-as-bear metaphorically kills the bear in herself. Put another way, Elinor uses her human mind in her monstrous body to combat the (literally) all-consuming animal body that is Mor'du, which in turn releases the human in her. The 'winning' of the human over the animal, then, is clearly linked to a sense of community because Elinor primarily thinks of her daughter's wellbeing over her own. While this invariably brings to mind the trope of the maternal sacrifice, it nevertheless also allows Elinor an opportunity to establish a bond with Merida. This sense of community building is further exemplified with regard to speech and silencing, and relationships with food.

### **'Sorry, I don't speak Bear': Speech and silencing (*Brave* 2012)**

Human to animal metamorphs are characterised by their lack of human speech; more often than not, they represent the metamorphs' resistance to the law of the father, which in turn gives them some agency. For Irving Massey, animal transformations are a form of self-preservation, and represent the act of refusing to identify with a communal body, or given norms of a system. Arguably, metamorphs '...are engaged in protecting themselves from the demands of public communication, from the requirement that they utter, and that they fit into a verbal social order by confessing to a name' (Massey 1976, p. 32). The metamorph, therefore, traditionally attempts to *escape* the possession of language. The subject, on the other hand, is constructed in and through language, and individual growth is considered possible only once the adolescent character separates from parental authority (see Trites 2000; Coats 2004; Waller 2009). Merida, feeling a threat to her freedom and independence, gives her mother a spell to turn her into a bear to actively *punish* her. Despite Merida's desire to acquire agency by silencing her mother, Elinor-as-bear *needs* Merida to authenticate her existence since she cannot speak. (Merida is the only person in the film who recognises her mother despite the latter's embodiment as a bear.) Merida's presence authenticates Elinor-as-bear as the latter's is '...an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm' (Creed 1996, p. 41). Unlike traditional

adolescent protagonists who try to break away from parental authority, Merida needs her mother. This potential lack of a mother – what Lacan would call the symbolic break from the dyad – frightens Merida more than the bear does.

Susan Bordo notes that disciplining of the female body occurs from within. Quoting Foucault, she argues that ‘power works from below, prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity’ (Bordo 1993, p. 27). Notably, it is Elinor, and not Fergus, who upholds the rules of patriarchy. Moreover, she is able to give in completely to her bear body only after she has removed her crown, which functions in this reading as a panopticon. In other words, Elinor can only be a companion to her daughter when she is no longer a queen under the direct gaze of the patriarchy. Lack of language in this regard does not mean complete silencing. Elinor is a human occupying a bear’s body: she walks on two feet, understands human language, communicates with grunts and charades, and is aware of complex human relationships, both personal and communal. Elinor’s inarticulacy, then, is far from a simple ‘silencing’; instead it represents the lack of patriarchal ‘royal’ language.

Women are socialised into ways of talking: Elinor speaks like a Queen, and trains Merida to do the same. In the first ten minutes of the movie, we see Merida speaking to an empty hall, with her mother pacing and providing comments and preparing her to be part of the symbolic order:

Merida: ‘Aye Robin, jolly robin, and thou shalt know of mine-’

Elinor: ‘Pro-ject!’

Merida: ‘ – AND THOU SHALT KNOW –’

Elinor: ‘Enunciate! You must be understood from anywhere in the room! Or it’s all for naught.’ (*Brave* 2012)

Elinor writes official letters, speaks to the Lords, and handles other important matters of State. She has been socialised into speaking like a queen, especially since she does not have the brute strength of her husband, for this is the only way she can be part of the patriarchal

System. In the above excerpt, we see one of the many ways in which Elinor trains her daughter (but not her sons) to do the same.

Moreover, Merida and Elinor have a unique relationship with regard to language. Each accuses the other of not listening. In the classic scene, after Merida storms off during dinner, Elinor talks to Fergus while Merida talks to her horse, Angus. The viewer gets both characters' perspectives on the subject of betrothal, as the camera intercuts between the castle and the stables:

Elinor: All this work, all this time spent in preparing you, schooling you, giving you everything we never had. I ask you, what do you expect us to do?

Merida: Call off the gathering! Would that kill them? You're the queen. You can just tell the lords the princess is not ready for this. In fact, she might not ever be ready for this. So that's that. Good day to you. We'll expect your declarations of war in the morning.

Elinor: I understand all this might seem sudden – unfair, even. I faced reservations when I faced betrothal. But we can't just run away from who we are.

Merida: I don't want my life to be over. I want my freedom.

Elinor: But are you willing to pay the price your freedom will cost? (*Brave* 2012)

Read/viewed together, it almost seems as if mother and daughter are on the same page. But since the characters are not in the same scene, neither is able to communicate to the other what she really feels, although both conversations occur side by side. While mother and daughter are able to talk about their feelings to practically everyone else, they are unable to confide in each other for a variety of reasons. In fact, both of them finish with these lines:

Elinor: I think you'd see if you could just...

Merida: I think I could make you understand if you would just...

Elinor: Listen.

Merida: Listen. (*Brave* 2012)

'Listen,' uttered by Merida and Elinor is delivered almost simultaneously, and emphasises the idea that both characters have the same goal; being heard by the other. It is not surprising, then, that Merida's spell silences her mother, given that what Merida really wants is to be listened to. (In a previous scene, we see Merida describing her adventures, and the Queen hardly listens.) However, 'silence' as a noun is not necessarily a bad thing. Patricia Laurence notes that women sometimes adopt 'a stance of silence' through which they are able to find their voices (Laurence 1994, p. 157). Moreover, '...women's silence, viewed from the outside, is a mark of absence and powerlessness'; however, if 'the same silence is viewed from the inside, and women's experiences and disposition of mind inform the standard of what is real, then women's silence can be viewed as a presence, and as a text, waiting to be read' (Laurence 1994, p. 157-158). Indeed, speech cannot not exist by itself; in order for a speaker to be effective, he/she must be heard. The speaker and listener come together, then, in creating this 'ritual of truth,' and '...there is a power in listening or in not listening, as well as in speaking or in not speaking' as shown by Elinor's transformation into a bear (Laurence 1994, p. 158).

Unable to fall back on the rules of what a princess must and must not do, Elinor's metamorphosis 'undercut[s] imposed identities and assert[s] a nonverbal level of individual authenticity' (Clarke 1995, p. 55). Since Elinor-as-bear cannot use human language as a medium of communication, both Merida and Elinor need to work harder at understanding and being understood. Although Merida uses her mother's lack of human speech as an opportunity to not heed her pedantic advice – 'Sorry, I don't speak Bear' – it is significant that she is the only person who is able to recognise the bear as her mother and, consequently, communicate with her nonverbally. Hélène Cixous has argued that since women exist outside the Symbolic Order, they 'must write through their bodies,' and 'must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes...' (Cixous 1976, p. 886). Denied the masculine language of the king

and the clan(s), both mother and daughter turn *to* their bodies and create a (sign) language inaccessible to others.

A clear example of forging a bond despite the language barrier and of working together occurs when Merida and Elinor-as-bear sneak back into the castle to mend the tapestry. The disappearance of the princess causes a rift between the clans, and the men – all quick to anger – are fighting in the dining room. Merida emulates her mother, walks amidst the warring lords, and begins her speech. To stall for time she begins with the legend that her mother told her of the Prince Mor'du, repeating it almost exactly word for word. She talks to the lords about how they joined their forces together, and saved each others' lives. In the second half of her speech, however, Elinor-as-bear (who is in the process of sneaking up the stairs) stops her daughter from committing to a betrothal she does not want. Instead, she decides to break tradition and allow both her daughter and the Lords' sons a chance to choose their own partners. Merida speaks to the lords as Elinor-as-bear mimes from behind them. Elinor-as-bear's miming is akin to a game of dumb charades. Although both the film's audience and Merida can see the gestures, only Merida is able to interpret her correctly and in her very first try.

Until Elinor transforms into a bear, the two women talk past each other, and may be speaking two languages as different as English and Bear. As McCallum notes, 'meanings are always, to some extent, culturally constructed, and the learning of another language entails learning the cultural codes through which a linguistic community represents and makes sense of the world' (McCallum 1999, p. 110). Both Elinor and Merida need to learn to speak each other's 'language' in order to communicate, a task they are able to achieve only when faced with dire consequences. Arguably, this language difference is also one of inter-generationality. Although Merida does initially find it difficult to understand her mother's gestures, she acquires and gains competence in following her mother's signs. In the scene described above, Merida's subject position as a princess is possible only when she begins to understand herself in relation to not just her family, but also her Scottish community: 'I have

been selfish,' she concedes, towards the end, and this acts as the beginning of bringing about a change (*Brave* 2012).

**'How do you know you won't like it if you don't try it?': The rituals of feeding and eating (*Brave* 2012)**

Another instance of community formation between mother and daughter occurs in relation to food, its functions and consumption (or lack thereof). Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argue that food does not simply satisfy hunger. They explain that '[food] is a highly elaborated social artefact – [it] is produced, bought, cooked, prepared, consumed in a mannered form – and this transcends the demands of hunger and inexorably functions symbolically' (Keeling and Pollard 2012, p. 3). More importantly, food is 'an intergenerational matter between mothers and daughters' and plays a large role in the socialising process (Blackford 2012, p. 42). Blackford goes on to point out that in many girls' novels, female adolescent characters 'apprentice' their mothers in the kitchen, where the ritual of serving food is emphasised over and above eating. We see this transition or role reversal with regard to Elinor and Merida in *Brave*.

Images of food and feasting abound from the very beginning of the narrative. Viewers are introduced to teenage Merida as she bites into an apple just as the door to the throne room opens, much to the exasperation of her mother. Most revealing is the dinner scene after Merida returns after a day in the wild when she '[doesn't] have to be a princess' (*Brave* 2012). She steals food from the kitchen, and walks into the dining room, carelessly tossing an apple core behind her. She carries in a plate of cakes, although the table is strewn with a lot of other dishes. Fergus' plates are piled high with meat which he alternately eats and waves around with gusto, until his hounds leap onto his lap and eat from his plate; her brothers play with their food, sculpting it into funny faces or throwing it on each other. Elinor alone does not eat. Instead, she reads several letters and attends to matters of State. Moreover, she tries to control her family's eating: she begins to tell her husband to not allow the dogs on the table, but gives up halfway through her sentence; she disapproves of the

fact that Merida's plate is full of cakes and exclaims, 'Fergus! Look at your daughter's plate!' (*Brave* 2012) in an attempt to invoke the paternal law; she tries to coax her sons to eat their food and not play with it. Indeed, 'food has significance for women because it is a means of nourishing, sustaining and protecting – and therefore controlling – the bodies into which it is instilled' (Purkiss 1996, p. 108). Although we don't see her cooking the food, Elinor plays the role of the traditional mother, establishing socialisation rituals and attempting to set boundaries between what is acceptable and not by determining what can be eaten, and how it should be eaten. In fact, Elinor's body is the embodiment of control in the above mentioned scenes, especially when compared to Merida's: she dresses formally, always wears a crown, and significantly, her dark hair is constantly tied down in two long braids.

Merida, on the other hand, has a more destructive relationship with food. Holly Blackford's observation that '...in fairytales that signify intergenerational dynamics, we find that the young make a Prometheus stand against elders who control food and thus hold power' (Blackford 2012, p. 42) is true with regard to this film as well. Not only does Merida disrupt the meal described above by barging in late, but she also causes her father to knock over the dining table (thereby destroying the whole meal) when she storms out; by feeding her brothers sweets under the table and later, bribing them with dessert, she challenges the family hierarchy, especially as Elinor tries unsuccessfully to get her sons to eat a healthy meal. Moreover, eating the wrong foods (cake) and eating at the wrong times (during official duties) only serve to distance Merida from her mother as the former attempts to assert her own authority over the System (in this case, both family and country). Merida's most calculated and disastrous act in the film, however, is when she buys a spell in the shape of a cake from a witch. Here, the cake represents not just a deceptive truce between mother and daughter, but also Elinor's subsequent disembodiment.

The figure of the witch, complete with a bubbling cauldron, serves 'as [a] cannibalistic [inversion] of the mother' (Blackford 2012, p. 43). Purkiss supports this reading of witches, especially since providing the child with its first sustenance is crucial to the identity of the mother. Therefore, when Merida buys a spell, the significance of the food changes: '...the

witch's food reverses this positive charge [of the mother's food]; instead of sustaining, it destroys' (Purkiss 1996, p. 108). The witch's spell is abject, for although the cake itself is solid, its properties are neither here nor there. Both the abject cake and the process of making it represent '...rage at rituals that ask girls to ingest the maternal body and internalise its role, as if it were their own inner desires' (Blackford 2012, p. 43). Indeed, that is how Merida introduces the viewer to her mother: 'My whole life is planned out,' she says in the voice over, 'preparing for the day I become... well, my mother' (*Brave* 2012). Before she tears the tapestry and flees her home, she tells her mother, 'You walk around telling me what to do, what not to do, trying to make me be like you. Well, I'm not going to be like you! [...] I'd rather *die* than be like you!' (*Brave* 2012). Giving her mother the abject cake, then, not only literally changes her mother into a bear, but that action also reverses roles and power structures.

In traditional fairytales, '...the mother figures that cook the food have omnipotent powers over the young' (Blackford 2012, p. 42). In this case, however, because of the abject nature of the food, and the person who made the food (the witch), Merida gains power over her mother. However, this power is both transient and temporary – the spell becomes permanent (and her mother, a real bear) unless they break the spell by the second sunrise. Merida now has to provide for Elinor, feed her and find her shelter, in much the same way as a mother would provide for her offspring.

Even in the wild, Elinor-as-bear retains human eating habits for a short while: she lays out a table for breakfast, does not allow Merida to put her bow on the table, and proceeds to cut her berries (arranged on a flat plate like stone) with twigs shaped like a fork and knife. When working with the makeshift cutlery proves futile, she proceeds to eat the berries very daintily with her claws. Not surprisingly, Elinor-as-bear needs to eat, although the human Elinor does not. Unfortunately, she does not know what she is eating, or how to fend for herself in the wild. Even when Merida informs her that she's eating nightshade berries, Elinor-as-bear does not stop until her daughter tells her, 'They're poisonous' (*Brave* 2012).



Merida then provides for her mother by not just catching her fish from a nearby stream, but also cooking it for her. Interestingly, Merida does not eat; she only catches the fish, cooks it and feeds her mother, thereby echoing what Blackford notes about adolescent girls: ‘...cooking at the expense of eating, partaking in the politics by which girls learn to curtail their own desire and sacrifice for others’ (Blackford 2012, p. 42). Although Merida is not self-sacrificial in the traditional sense, cooking for her mother becomes a form of self-control, especially since, as a young woman, cooking is at the centre of socialisation rituals for Merida. Therefore, it prepares her for repressing her otherwise unrestrained emotions, both desire and anger. Merida goes on to teach her mother to fish, and consequently, to feed herself. In other words, a role reversal happens: the mother-as-bear is infantilised, and her daughter becomes the provider. Feeding, then, puts Merida in a position of much wanted authority: her mother has to listen to her if she is to survive. Merida is a gentler provider, however, who does not enforce the food rules her mother previously imposed on her including, ‘[a] princess does not scarf’ (*Brave* 2012). Cooking, feeding, and eating begin the process of repairing the bond between the mother and daughter; if Merida is to repair the bond that was broken by feeding her mother abject food, she must do so by procuring and cooking good, nutritious fare.

**‘We both have [changed]’: Rebirth and re-awakening (*Brave* 2012)**

According to Michelle Walker,

...the pre-verbal bond between mother and daughter is awakened in women’s literature when the daughter gives birth herself. In this act, she recaptures the intense attachment to her own mother’s body, an embodied memory that exists prior to, and beyond, language. (Walker 1998, p. 160)

Here, Elinor’s metamorphosis can be interpreted as rebirth: in trying to change her fate, Merida unknowingly changes both her mother and herself. Transforming her mother into a bear, Merida symbolically ‘gives birth’ to a newer, more responsible version of herself, as she learns traditionally maternal acts to provide for and feed her mother. She learns not only

to speak like a princess, but more importantly, to listen and to communicate in a meaningful way. Reduced to the pre-verbal infantile body ruled entirely by needs, Elinor too, learns to reuse language, and to entrust her daughter with the reins. Therefore, as Walker might say, ‘...daughters become mothers, and mothers remember themselves as daughters in a process that blurs the stability of distinction’ (Walker 1998, p. 161). Independence and rebirth, therefore, seem to go hand in hand.

I have shown how Merida uses her knowledge to survive in the forest while she also physically looks after her mother. She teaches and trains Elinor in the ways of being a bear, in much the same ways as her mother trains her to be a princess. Merida, however, is unaware of the fact that she is mirroring – and in some ways *becoming* – her mother, despite her earlier reluctance to do so. Moreover, Merida not only learns to speak her mother’s language, as shown above, but also to speak like a princess, thereby commanding the respect of others who are predominantly males. Silencing the Queen leaves Merida no choice but to take on the role herself. She single-handedly gets the clans to stop fighting with one another – an act her father, the King, has been unable to accomplish. She walks into the hall regally – much like her mother – and attempts to salvage the situation, putting the kingdom’s needs ahead of her own. For Merida, speaking for her mother (literally) and speaking for herself become intertwined as she writes herself into the symbolic domain. Using human language to her advantage even as she interprets her mother’s gestures, Merida demonstrates her ability to be part of both feminine and masculine worlds through the pre-verbal knowledge that Elinor-as-bear represents, and the human language needed to access (and even control) the symbolic (patriarchal) order. Arguably, Merida needs access to both to survive.

Trites notes with regard to *Brave*, despite the fact that Elinor ‘quite literally enacts the [clichéd] script of the “Mama Grizzly,”’ that ‘...for the first time, Pixar has created a film that manages to avoid the Pixar maturity formula’ in which fathers grow as much as their children do (Trites 2014, p. 94). This is possibly because unlike traditional Disney-Pixar films, it is the *mother*, not the father, who is flawed and allowed to grow. Before her

transformation, Elinor exudes a sense of rigidity and a penchant for following rules. Admittedly, demeanour plays a significant role in allowing a woman to keep her place – and control – in a male dominated world. A clear contrast here occurs with her husband, Fergus, who copes only because of his brute strength. Getting turned into a bear, therefore, puts Elinor in a compromised position for two reasons: she loses access to verbal human language, and consequently, the patriarchal system, and she now has to give in to all the needs of the body that could hitherto be controlled. Elinor-as-bear, however, is able to experience certain freedoms and the bear body becomes symbolic of rebirth and re-awakening. Becoming a bear is not just Merida's punishment for her mother, but also a resurfacing of both Elinor's and male society's repressed anxieties regarding 'too much freedom.' Moreover, the bear body gives Elinor access to physical strength; she uses her body as a weapon in her fight with Mor'du, thereby revising her original opinion that 'a princess should not have weapons' (*Brave* 2012). Admittedly, brute strength is not the solution to social issues: it is a combination of human relations and force that enables Elinor to protect her daughter and break the spell. Finally, with regard to food, Elinor-as-bear is forced to relinquish control, and allow her daughter to feed her. Unknowingly, Elinor-as-bear empowers Merida by giving up her maternal role, and entrusting in her daughter a role traditionally reserved for the adult.

While *Brave* is no doubt an empowering movie, it does seem as though adolescent empowerment can happen only at the expense of female adult sacrifice: Elinor spends the first half of the movie trying very hard, with little success, to make her daughter behave like a princess; she gets turned into a bear for her efforts and – despite the happy ending – is entirely dependent on her daughter for both her survival as a bear, and her chance to turn back into a human. Moreover, since Fergus seemingly supports a feminist agenda by giving his daughter weapons and letting her do whatever she wants, the mother inherently becomes 'the villain.' Further, although the movie attempts to step outside the brand of 'perfect mothering' advertised in most other Disney films, it leads us to question whether women have a language outside of the patriarchal symbolic order. The fact that both Merida and Elinor have access to a pre-verbal semiotic knowledge suggests that they do. Their

relationship with food suggests that the roles of 'mother' and 'daughter' are reversible, and that the boundaries between the two are fluid, however, it is difficult to ignore or even justify the fact that the mother has to be metamorphosed for such a relationship to occur, which sends a rather disconcerting message to young audiences.

Nonetheless, *Brave* is one of the first Disney-Pixar movies where female bonding and community building takes place. It reminds audiences that agency comes not just from brute strength and weapons, but also from the ability to manipulate language to challenge the patriarchal system from within

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