

BETTER TOGETHER? REPRESENTATION OF THE FAMILY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN PIXAR FILMS

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Abstract

Disney has a longstanding tradition of marginalizing and/or erasing biological parents in their films. Through its Pixar Animation Studios subsidiary, Disney has released several films that do explore the topic of parenthood. This study will focus on Pixar's depiction of the biological parents in *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*, while also visiting other Pixar and Disney releases to provide additional examples. By first setting out the stereotypical way mothers and fathers are usually portrayed in animated film, this study will then explore how Pixar portrays its biological fathers, followed up by an analysis on the portrayal of biological mothers with the central argument being that Pixar has both traditional as well as progressive portrayals of parenthood and gender roles within their films.

Keywords

Pixar; family roles; gender; masculinity; femininity; motherhood; fatherhood

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Introduction and Literary Review

Movies are a powerful tool for cultural storytelling. Argued by Robert Sklar in his book *Movie-Made America*, film has worked to subvert traditional societal values and has provided alternative ways of understanding the world.¹ This ability of film to provide insight into cultural phenomena is not limited to those that are aimed at adults. Animated film, although primarily marketed towards children, also takes up a big part of the film industry and is thus worthy of exploration. Four out of the twenty highest-grossing films of all time are animated films, all of them stemming from Disney or one of its subsidiaries (i.g. *The Lion King*, *Frozen II*, *Frozen*, *Incredibles 2*).² Disney is a producer of animations that due to its ubiquitous presence in the Hollywood film industry and enormous popularity among audiences of all ages has been considered a key influencer of cultural perspectives,³ which makes it unsurprising that its releases have captured the attention of scholars.

Disney's most successful subsidiary to date is Pixar Animation Studios. With most of their releases being huge box office successes,⁴ it is clear that these films are well received by audiences. In addition to their popularity in the cinemas, many of Pixar films are also critically acclaimed. The studio has accumulated thirteen nominations for best animated feature at the Academy Awards, winning ten of them.⁵ This makes them the best performing animation studio at the Academy Awards, with second place being held by Disney Animation Studios with eleven nominations and three wins.⁶

This reception means that Pixar's films resonate with people, audiences apparently identify with the central characters, plot, and themes. But what are they learning? This thesis explores the insights into society that Pixar provides. It focuses on the gendered constructions of the family, with fatherhood and motherhood at the center of the following analysis. It will specifically focus on four of its releases: *Finding Nemo* (2003), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Brave* (2012), and *Incredibles 2* (2018). These releases were selected because of the significant amount of screen time for biological parents in each of these films.

¹ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

² "Top Lifetime Grosses," Box Office Mojo, updated 2 July, accessed 2 July, 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW&ref_=bo_cso_ac.

³ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, "Learning with Disney" in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). 59.

⁴ "Box Office History for Disney-Pixar Movies," The Numbers, 2020, accessed 2 July 2020, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/production-company/Pixar>.

⁵ "The Official Academy Awards® Database," Oscars.org, updated 9 February 2020, accessed 2 July, 2020, <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/search/results>.

⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 1 will explore the tropes surrounding parents in animated film, such as matricide and problematic fathers, and if Pixar's animations also contain these tropes. Chapter 2 will then explore the way the biological fathers are portrayed while taking a close look at how they perform gender. Chapter 3 will take a similar approach as the previous chapter, but with a specific focus on the biological mothers. While the analysis will focus on *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*, additional animations by Disney and Pixar are visited to provide additional examples to support the findings in this study.

The analysis on gender performance draws from Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, which argues that no one is born a certain gender and is instead cultivated into the idea of what a man or woman should behave like. How masculine or feminine someone behaves is not born in them but something completely separate that is constructed.⁷ This theory is applied to evaluate the performance of the biological fathers and mothers in Pixar films, and if they are nonconforming, what the consequences are on their lives and what message this sends to audiences.

It is important to look into the displayed behavior and hidden messages that these characters carry with them because research suggests that there is a correlation between the consumption of media and the imitation of behavioral practices depicted in these media products.⁸ Especially film appears to be a powerful tool for cultural influence, considering they can be consumed within a short time frame and are thus often consumed repeatedly.⁹ Some studies specifically focus on the influence of film on attitudes toward gender roles and found that exposure to nonconforming gender identities in film stimulates acceptance and understanding in real life.¹⁰

Works such as Amy Davis' *Good Girls and Wicked Witches* dissect the gendered representations of female characters that exist within the Disney universe.¹¹ She made a similar publication on male characters, *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains*.¹² She notes that male and female characters in Disney films can be easily categorized in a handful of

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* 10 ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸ Stephen L. Black and Susan Bevan, "At the Movies with Buss and Durkee: A Natural Experiment on Film Violence," *Aggressive Behavior* 18, no. 1 (1992), [https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/1098-2337\(1992\)18:1<37::AID-AB2480180105>3.0.CO;2-3](https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/1098-2337(1992)18:1<37::AID-AB2480180105>3.0.CO;2-3);

Erica Scharrer, "Hypermasculinity, Aggression, and Television Violence: An Experiment," *Media Psychology* 7, no. 4 (2005), https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_3.

⁹ Black and Bevan, "At the Movies with Buss and Durkee: A Natural Experiment on Film Violence." 38.

¹⁰ Michelle A. Mazur and Tara M. Emmers-Sommer, "The Effect of Movie Portrayals on Audience Attitudes About Nontraditional Families and Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 1 (2003), https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n01_09.

¹¹ Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches* (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing 2006).

¹² Amy M. Davis, *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing 2015).

archetypes that keep coming back throughout the years. However, a study done by Hine, England, Loppreore, Horgan, and Hartwell indicates that the representation of traditional gender roles is changing and that Disney appears to go into a more androgynous direction with their characters in recent releases.¹³

In the book *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*, Åström discusses the absence of mothers in popular culture. She attributes the absence of the mother in Disney films to a subconscious elevation of the father, promoting a heteronormative, conservative view on family structure with a patriarch father and submissive mother, so submissive that she can be written out of the story altogether.¹⁴ Wooden and Gillam have argued that Pixar is very similar to Disney in this sense in that female-headed single households are presented as damaging, while male-head single households are not considered to be dysfunctional to nearly the same degree.¹⁵

Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca explored the topic of caregiving in Disney film further and analyzed who was caring for the children in Disney films in the mother's place and what the implications of this caregiving were.¹⁶ Zurcher, Webb, and Robinson have analyzed the structure and function of Disney families over generations and noticed an overrepresentation of nontraditional family structures but also an increase in non-dysfunctional, warm family climates, especially in releases from the 21st century.¹⁷ This raises the question of why this is changing because contemporary audiences now relate more to stable families than unstable ones.

With Pixar being a studio that has released their films for the most part in the 21st century, scholars have looked into the addition Pixar has made in this field with regards to parenting. Several studies have been done that focus on individual case studies about the representation of parenting in Pixar films. Examples are Suzan Brydon's articles on male

¹³ Benjamin Hine et al., "The Rise of the Androgynous Princess: Examining Representations of Gender in Prince and Princess Characters of Disney Movies Released 2009-2019," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 12 (2018), <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.3390/socsci7120245>.

¹⁴ Berit Åström, "Explaining and Exploring the Dead or Absent Mother," in *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*, ed. Berit Åström (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017). 2.

¹⁵ Shannon R. Wooden and Ken Gillam, *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2014).

¹⁶ Jeanne Holcomb, Kenzie Latham, and Daniel Fernandez-Baca, "Who Cares for the Kids? Caregiving and Parenting in Disney Films," *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 14 (2015), <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0192513X13511250>.

¹⁷ Jessica D. Zurcher, Sarah M. Webb, and Tom Robinson, "The Portrayal of Families across Generations in Disney Animated Films," *Social Sciences* 7 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030047>.

mothering in *Finding Nemo*,¹⁸ and empowered and collaborative parenting in *Incredibles 2*.¹⁹ Gillam and Wooden also analyze how Pixar evolves the character of Mr. Incredible/Bob Parr from an unengaged father to a family man, along with several other hypermasculine Pixar characters.²⁰ This paper seeks to add to this conversation on gender performance in Pixar film by centering around the question: how are biological parents portrayed in terms of gender in *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*?

¹⁸ Suzan G. Brydon, "Men at the Heart of Mothering: Finding Mother in *Finding Nemo*," *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 2 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230902812448>.

¹⁹ Suzan G. Brydon, "'I've Got to Succeed, so She Can Succeed, so We Can Succeed': Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in Incredible Parenting," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7110215>.

²⁰ Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden, "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.36.1.2-8>.

Chapter 1: Mothers and Fathers in Animated Film

2.1. *Matricide and Motherly Absence*

There are several Hollywood tropes about family relations that Pixar also utilizes, like the absence of both parents. It is quite commonplace in animated film to kill or otherwise omit the protagonist's parents because it "allows the young hero(ine) to mature through the precarious position it places the orphaned children in."²¹ The unique position of orphan gives filmmakers a great amount of freedom in the plot because the protagonist will not be held back in their decisions by the presence and influence of a stable family base. It also allows them to make the protagonist act more independently and irrationally because there are no parental consequences. Additionally, family dynamics take time to set up and omitting the family from the plot thus frees up space for the exploration of other themes or the introduction of new characters. Don Hahn, an executive producer at Disney, made the following statement confirming the reasoning behind this trend of parental absence: "it's much quicker to have characters grow up when you bump off their parents. [...] it's a story shorthand."²²

Another common occurrence is the absence of one parent. During the 1990/2000s almost half of all animated families in Disney movies were single-parent families.²³ A pattern is that when one of the parents is killed or absent, it is usually the mother. The biological mothers are often already dead before the beginning of the film or die shortly thereafter. For example, six of the twelve official Disney princesses have a deceased mother and if the mothers are alive, they are usually not a figure that the heroine can rely on because they are absent from their lives or, in the case of non-biological mothers, just plain evil.²⁴ Especially stepmothers tend to be used as villains throughout Disney's history (e.g., the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Lady Tremaine from *Cinderella* and Mother Gothel from *Tangled*). The absent but still living biological mothers are generally represented in a positive light but are given very little screen time and/or play a very limited role in the film.²⁵

Pixar also tends to kill their mothers or not include them as essential characters to the plot. The opening sequence of *Finding Nemo* (2003) portrays the death of Coral, the mother

²¹ Brydon, "'I've Got to Succeed, so She Can Succeed, so We Can Succeed': Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in Incredible Parenting."

²² Don Hahn, "Why Most Disney Heroines Don't Have Mothers and So Many More Secrets From the Disney Archives," interview by Jessica Radloff, *Glamour* 2014, <https://www.glamour.com/story/disney-secrets-beauty-and-the-beast>.

²³ Zurcher, Webb, and Robinson, "The Portrayal of Families across Generations in Disney Animated Films."

²⁴ Lynn H. Collins, Joan C. Chrisler, and Michelle R. Dunlap, *Charting a New Course for Feminist Psychology* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 94.

²⁵ Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca, "Who Cares for the Kids? Caregiving and Parenting in Disney Films."

of the titular character Nemo. Remi's mother from *Ratatouille* (2007) is also completely absent and Remi and his brother are raised solely by their father, implying that the mother is dead. Both Russell's mother from *Up* (2009) and Miguel's mother from *Coco* (2017) only have a few seconds of total screen time in which Miguel's mother says next to nothing and Russell's mother has no dialogue at all. Riley's mother from *Inside Out* (2015) is present occasionally throughout the film, but is not given an actual name and instead simply referred to as 'Riley's mom'. In fact, except for Coral from *Finding Nemo*, Helen from *The Incredibles*, Elinor from *Brave*, and Momma Ilda from *The Good Dinosaur* (2015), all the other mothers of Pixar's protagonists did not have their name mentioned in the film or received one at all.

This recurring and persistent absence of biological mothers and reliable mother figures in Pixar films and animated film in general is intriguing considering the cultural emphasis on mothers as being the primary caregivers for their children.²⁶ Perhaps there is a correlation between having a dead mother but a living father. It seems as though mothers are written out of the story so the father (figure) is able form a closer bond with their children. To illustrate, Coral is killed in *Finding Nemo* and as a result Marlin develops a close relationship with Nemo because he is the only parent left. Another example is the lack of motherly presence in *Up* and *Coco*, which allows the children of these movies to develop a relationship with a father figure (Carl and Hector, respectively). This implies that if the mother is present, she is gatekeeping the relationship with her child and does not allow room for anyone else, such as the father. With a mother present, fathers are apparently unable to make a meaningful connection with their children, so the mother dies an untimely death, forever remembered in her perfection but no longer an obstacle between father and child.

2.2. Problematic or Incapable Fathers

While the mother is often dead or absent, male parents are subject to their own set of narrative tropes. They stem from the use of motherly absence as a fast way of growing up, which implies that fathers are thus perceived to be unable to raise their children. To underscore this point, six out of the twelve Disney princesses have a deceased mother. When looking at the fathers of these princesses, however, the numbers look very different: only three out twelve have a dead father. Notably, two out of the three deceased fathers have screen time or at least a description in their respective films. The only father that goes completely unmentioned is that of Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

²⁶ Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca, "Who Cares for the Kids? Caregiving and Parenting in Disney Films."

This is in stark contrast with the deceased mothers who were often not mentioned or depicted at all. It implies that fathers are considered more important, even when they are dead. While dead mothers are often just mentioned to confirm that they existed, fathers are still given a personality or significance in the story. For example, Linguini's dead mother from *Ratatouille* is only significant because she wrote a letter that would get her son a job in his father's famous restaurant, thus setting off the buddy plot that lays at the center of the film. The dead father, however, is constantly present throughout the film. Pictures of his face are everywhere and the employees of his restaurant debate constantly about his legacy.

Fathers are thus less likely than mothers to be solely used as a story shorthand or plot device. This tendency, however, is not exclusive to the animated genre. While mothers are marginalized, fathers are placed at the center of the story. It is argued that fathers are "the key problematic of contemporary Hollywood's biggest hits,"²⁷ meaning that the reason why there exists conflict within the family is often because of a problematic father (figure).

Pixar also has many fathers that can be deemed problematic, some having a more direct influence on the plot than others. While *Toy Story* (1998) and *Toy Story 2* (1999) also depicted a family with an absent father who likely has left his wife and children, his absence did not appear to be consequential to the lives of the family. Marlin from *Finding Nemo* is an overly controlling presence in his child's life, therefore creating resentment that ultimately leads to his son's kidnapping. Django from *Ratatouille* deliberately discourages Remi, his son, to pursue his dreams and instead forces him into a job that clearly makes Remi unhappy. Russell's father from *Up* is neglecting his son because he has a new girlfriend. He does not even show up to an important event in his son's life, even after promising Russell he would. *Coco* has the heaviest focus on the problematic father trope of them all, considering the plot revolves around Miguel's great-great-grandfather leaving his wife and child, scarring the family for generations. Years later, Miguel sets out on a journey to search the afterlife for this missing father figure that has uprooted his family.

This high frequency of problematic fathers in Pixar reiterates the belief that men are not capable enough to care for their children. After all, most of these fathers operate without the presence of a mother, as previously demonstrated. Yet even though problematic fathers are present, the problem is treated very lightly within Pixar films.²⁸ All the children of these fathers appear to be coping perfectly fine on their own and the fathers that are still affecting

²⁷ Peter Krämer, "Toy Story, Pixar and Contemporary Hollywood," in *Toy Story: How Pixar Reinvented the Animated Feature*, ed. Susan Smith, Noel Brown, and Sam Summers (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

²⁸ Krämer, "Toy Story, Pixar and Contemporary Hollywood." 16.

their children (i.g. *Finding Nemo* and *Coco*) redeem themselves at the end of the film. It seems that Pixar takes a playful jab at a trope that has existed in Disney discourse for years by undermining the effect the problematic fathers have on their children or otherwise making them redeemable.

Chapter 2: Fatherhood and Gender Performance in *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*

2.1. Male Mothering in *Finding Nemo*

One of those redeemable fathers was also the first father that was written as the main character in a Pixar film. *Finding Nemo* (2003) explores the relationship between Nemo and his father Marlin and the sacrifices he is willing to make to save his son and fix his toxic behavior that pushed Nemo away in the first place. Not only was Marlin the first present Pixar father, but also the first time in animated film a father was allowed to be an active caregiver for their child instead of the, as previously discussed, stereotypical absent or authoritarian presence.²⁹

At first, the film hints at Marlin being another traditional father in line with the Disney norms with him boasting about his accomplishment of finding Coral, his wife, a suitable house to live with their family while also admitting to Coral that he is worried their children will not like him. He does not only establish himself as a successful breadwinner in this scene but also as a male who is uncomfortable with the idea of parenting and that his upcoming role as a father feels unnatural to him.³⁰

Yet the film quickly turns these assumptions about Marlin around when Coral and all the unhatched fish eggs but one are killed and eaten during a sudden barracuda attack. Marlin is knocked unconscious while trying to protect his wife, who was in turn protecting their unborn children. This reinstated that Marlin's priorities initially were not with his children, while Coral priorities were. When he wakes up later, he is devastated when he learns that she is dead, openly expressing emotion. Yet the most interesting emotional display in this scene is when Marlin discovers the single egg that survived the attack.

To understand how significant Marlin's reaction is to this discovery, it is important to first establish how previous Disney fathers approached their children. Even after the mother dies, fathers usually remain an authoritarian or distant presence instead of a hands-on caregiver. For example, another Disney film that contains animals as their main characters and also features a death scene of the biological mother is *Bambi* (1942). The response from the father, however, is completely different from Marlin. When Bambi's mother dies, Bambi is first left alone, running through the forest until he is found by his father. He quite literally looms over Bambi, makes no attempts to use physical closeness to comfort his son, and

²⁹ Brydon, "Men at the Heart of Mothering: Finding Mother in *Finding Nemo*." 138.

³⁰ Ibid.

instead simply states matter-of-factly: “Your mother can’t be with you anymore. Come with me, my son.” He then walks away, implying that Bambi should follow him. Notably, he does not walk next to Bambi as his mother did, but in front of him, establishing the father’s authoritarian presence.

In *Finding Nemo*, as soon as Marlin discovers the egg he immediately begins cradling and talking to it while protecting it with his fins, similar to how mothers hold their newborn babies. Marlin also says to the egg at that moment: “I promise to never let anything happen to you,” establishing himself as an emotionally connected father that cares about the safety of his child. It is clear that Marlin’s reaction does not follow the path Disney usually goes for. Instead of distancing himself from his child, everything indicates that Marlin from this point onward chooses to embody mothering in the film.³¹

This embodiment shows itself through the fact that Marlin engages in behavior and activities that are generally attributed to motherhood rather than fatherhood, such as preparing children for school, caring for them when they are sick, grooming, feeding, and providing emotional support.³² This is not to say that fathers do not engage in these activities at all, but that they are primarily seen as the responsibility of the mother while fathers mostly engage with their children through play.³³

Perhaps even more interesting, Marlin never complains about doing these activities or suggests that these are things he should not have to do. It comes as completely natural to him to take care of his son, showing audiences that fathers can also be engaged caregivers that are emotionally close with their children and that such a position is not solely reserved for mothers, as animated film often likes to imply. Not only is caregiving shown as accessible for fathers, but *Finding Nemo* also shows that they can *excel* in it. This is in accordance with Butler’s theory on gender performativity,³⁴ because even though Marlin is male, he still enjoys and excels in activities that society would label as feminine. Marlin is an example that even if you are born male, you do not necessarily grow up with only masculine qualities. The movie, therefore, opens up the conversation about the legitimacy of traditional fatherhood that leaves all the childrearing to the mother. This progressive attitude towards male mothering would not return in quite some time and Pixar released *The Incredibles* (2004) instead, a film that featured a very traditional, hypermasculine, unengaged father.

³¹ Brydon, "Men at the Heart of Mothering: Finding Mother in *Finding Nemo*." 138.

³² Caroline Gatrell, *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2005). 141.

³³ Gatrell, *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*. 141.

³⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*

2.2. Dethroning the Hypermasculine Father in *The Incredibles* and *Brave*

According to Townsend, fatherhood is composed out of four key elements: emotional closeness, provision, protection, and endowment, with provision being the element that generally carries the most significance and importance to fathers.³⁵ Townsend also suggests that because the ability to provide for their family is so crucial to traditional notions of fatherhood, men often feel that their place of employment determines their self-worth and success as a father.³⁶

This phenomenon can be seen in *The Incredibles*, a film that relies heavily on these notions of traditional parenthood, meaning that the father functions mainly as breadwinner while the mother concerns herself with housekeeping and caregiving.³⁷ Bob Parr loses the job that he truly prided himself in and was very good at, namely being a superhero. Instead, he now works at an insurance company, which is clearly not making him happy. While at work he is visibly bored and at home behaves agitated and is uninterested in the lives of his wife and children. He does not even really listen to what they say to him. For example, when Helen informs him that, "Dash got sent to the office again," Bob replies with a distracted, "Good, good." His only focus is to get his job as a superhero back because for him, that defines his whole self-worth and mood. This becomes even more apparent when Bob and his friend Lucius sneak out to fight crime in secret without their wives knowing. Bob appears to be a completely different person than who he was before while at work at the insurance company; he is now energetic and happy.

Not only is Bob presented as a very traditional father that is mostly focused on his employment and does not involve himself with domestic duties, his design and behavior can also be defined as hypermasculine. Bob shares this hypermasculine design with another biological father from Pixar, namely Fergus from *Brave* (2012). Similar to Bob, Fergus is also a father that leaves all the childrearing to his wife, Elinor. The moment that he is asked to have an important conversation with Merida about marriage, he pushes the subject to Elinor instead. That Bob and Fergus are presented to the audience as hypermasculine is in line with Disney's design of male characters in previous films, seeing as fathers are commonly

³⁵ Nicholas W. Townsend, *The package deal: Marriage, work and fatherhood in men's lives* (Philadelphia Temple University Press, 2002). 53.

³⁶ Townsend, *The package deal: Marriage, work and fatherhood in men's lives*. 53.

³⁷ Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca, "Who Cares for the Kids? Caregiving and Parenting in Disney Films." 1961.

designed with bulging biceps (e.g. Zeus from *Hercules*, Triton from *The Little Mermaid*, or Chief Powhatan from *Pocahontas*).

Yet what sets Pixar's hypermasculine fathers apart from previous films, is that their male dominance never lasts long.³⁸ Bob and Fergus both start as alpha males. As defined by Gillam and Wooden, alpha males are men with "unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, lack of visible or shared emotion, social isolation."³⁹

This definition applies to both at the beginning of their respective movies. Bob is a superhero whose superpower is the possession of enormous physical strength and he displays this by picking up a full-grown tree like it is a twig, crash through a building without a scratch, and stopping criminals with ease. He does this all while he is on his way to his wedding, subsequently showing up late to the service and leaving his soon-to-be wife waiting at the altar, showing no remorse or regret when he finally arrives. The film thus shows Bob prioritizing physical activities while trivializing emotional ones.

The opening scene of *Brave* displays Fergus, Elinor, and Merida on a field near their castle. Fergus is not shown to be engaging with his family except for the moment when he gifts Merida a bow and teaches her how to shoot with it, which is a typically masculine activity in this world. He thus only engages with Merida in a way that allows him to express his qualities as an alpha male, namely physical power through his expertise in archery. Elinor even underscores the inappropriateness of his actions by saying: "A bow, Fergus? She's a lady!" Fergus reacts to this not by having a meaningful discussion with his wife, but by simply pinching her behind and therefore avoiding the issue by engaging in sexual play.

When Merida returns to her parents with a story about seeing a magical creature, Fergus ridicules her and is unable to empathize with his daughter about her experiences, indicating emotional isolation for he is not allowed to be empathetic of his daughter's experiences. A few seconds after he walks away, a bear suddenly attacks the group gathered on the field, Fergus tells his wife and daughter to run while he himself charges the beast with, what appears to be, enthusiasm. His position of status and leadership is made clear by the other, notably much smaller, men referring to him as sire, establishing his position as king and thus his unquestioned authority.

As previously noted, the alpha position in Pixar films is fleeting. Bob's superpowers cause his own downfall due to his brute force destroying many city properties and injuring

³⁸ Gillam and Wooden, "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar." 4.

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

people he was trying to save. This spawns many lawsuits against superheroes and eventually results in 'Supers' being declared illegal and forced to pretend to be normal people.

Fergus alpha position is also quickly lost, for when the clans meet in his castle, he is utterly unable to control the crowd and demand respect. This indicates that his unquestioned authority is false due to no one in the room listening to him, despite Fergus being the king. What becomes apparent in this scene is that the one who does carry unquestioned authority is, in fact, Elinor. She can calm the crowd with ease, with the lords then explicitly apologizing for their behavior to her, not to Fergus. Fergus even apologizes to Elinor for his behavior along with the lords, making a half-hearted attempt to justify his actions before simply saying, "Yes, dear," when seeing that she has no interest in his excuses.

The subversion of male dominance in both *The Incredibles* and *Brave* shows that even though audiences tend to associate hypermasculine appearances and behavior with power and dominance, these two things can be asserted in many ways. Arguably, it is the women in their lives who hold all the power, with Helen being the glue that keeps the family together and making all the important decisions and Fergus being overpowered by Elinor in a situation where audiences were led to believe he would excel due to the excessive display of his power in the opening scene of the film.

These subversions of hypermasculinity show that it is possible to exert power without possessing incredible physical strength and that parents can be a better team if they place trust in mutual dependence. Elinor fled with Merida from the bear when Fergus told her to because she trusted he would be able to handle the situation and recognized his strengths, while she stepped up at the gathering because she also knows that she possesses superior diplomatic skill compared to her husband. Fergus learns that he cannot bring back his wife with brute force and instead has to trust his daughter to take over. Likewise, Bob learns in the film that by depending on his wife and children instead of doing things all by himself, he can defeat an enemy he was not able to defeat before when he was determined on doing it alone. His family becomes his new source of strength and value.⁴⁰

Even though cultural products like Disney movies subconsciously communicate that "girls are weak and boys are strong,"⁴¹ films like *The Incredibles* and *Brave* show that boys, even hypermasculine ones, should be allowed to be vulnerable and dependent and that this should not be seen as weakness. According to Townsend, this is especially true for fathers, for it appears to be crucial for the emotional development and expression of children that fathers

⁴⁰ Gillam and Wooden, "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar." 7.

⁴¹ Justin Baldoni, *Why I'm done trying to be "man enough"* (TEDWomen 2017, 2017).

open up to them and display emotion, for fathers are the example that (especially male) children will copy later in life.⁴² This is, however, very difficult for most men due to patriarchal society associating masculine traits as positive and feminine traits as negative. While women are generally more allowed to step outside the feminine box and perform masculine traits or activities such as wearing suits or practicing mechanics, it is frowned upon when the reverse happens, like men wearing dresses or applying makeup. While the men in *The Incredibles* and *Brave* stray far from these feminine activities, Pixar does appear to carefully open up space for men to show vulnerability and dependency without being ridiculed.

2.3. Collaborative Parenting in *Incredibles 2*

As previously demonstrated, *Finding Nemo* was the first Pixar film in which a father is allowed to take on the role of an active caregiver in their child's life, yet it was not until the release of *Incredibles 2* in 2018, fifteen years later, that the studio would return to this concept. The film does differ from *Nemo* in its depicting of male mothering in that *Finding Nemo* explicitly killed the mother so Marlin would be able to take her place, further confirming the longstanding idea that children are essentially the mother's responsibility, with the father being the back-up in case the mother is absent, dead, or otherwise unable to care for her children.⁴³ This is not the case in *Incredibles 2*, where Bob and Helen are both alive throughout the entirety of the film. For the first time, a father is allowed to perform mothering while the mother is still alive and also capable to care for their children.

When comparing *The Incredibles* to its sequel, *Incredibles 2*, it is apparent that the filmmakers decided on a very different approach when it comes to family life. While *The Incredibles* focused mostly on Bob's renewed establishment as the successful breadwinner of the family while Helen was mostly concerned with caring for their children and worrying about her marriage, its sequel follows a similar pattern but with a twist. In *Incredibles 2*, Helen is offered a superhero job instead of Bob, which results in her being away from home for a couple of days. Bob thus has to step in and take on all the care for their three children.

Although Bob visibly has to swallow his envy and force himself to support his wife in a job he would have loved to have himself, harking back to his still present desire to be a successful breadwinner, he never verbally opposes or discourages Helen from taking the chance to pursue a career. That this desire is still present is not surprising considering the

⁴² Townsend, *The package deal: Marriage, work and fatherhood in men's lives*. 54.

⁴³ Susan Maushart, *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002). 121.

provider role for fathers is so normalized in heteronormative, white middle-class families.⁴⁴ Yet Helen can do all these things because Bob will be at home caring for their children, so he sets his envy and desire to the side to fully support his family in the best way he can at that moment: by being a successful caregiver so Helen can do her job without being held back by worry.

The film does not idealize the collaborative parenting situation nor does it pose this nontraditional distribution of familial tasks as easy for both parents. Because the standard of the father as breadwinner and the mother as homemaker has been there for so long, it is understandable that the exploration of new terrain for both Bob as well as Helen comes with a substantial dose of competition. Especially Bob becomes increasingly frustrated by his perceived incompetence to care for the children, expressed by both Helen as well as the children. When Bob talks to Helen on the phone and wants to tell her what Jack-Jack (the baby) did that day, Helen immediately jumps to the conclusion that something went wrong. When Dash is struggling with his math assignment and Bob is also having difficulties understanding it, Dash mutters, "I'll just wait for mom," to which Bob gets frustrated, "What? She won't be able to help any better than I can!" This constant mistrust in his ability to care for his children raises a level of competitiveness in Bob that propels him to stay up all night to learn 'new math' to help Dash with his homework and get a good grade at his test the following morning. Going the extra mile to help his children exhausts him, but he visibly takes pride in his accomplishment to do so, "I'm doing the math, fixing the boyfriend, and keeping the baby from turning into a monster!"

This is reflective of real-life situations where fathers get more involved in childcare after the mother is employed. When fathers become more involved in emotional labor and caregiving and are thus spending more time directly with their children, they are often reluctant to let this position go because they experience how gratifying this increased emotional closeness can be.⁴⁵ Edna, a family friend and their superhero costume designer, further underscores the importance of involved parenting when she says to Bob, "Done properly, parenting is a heroic act. Done properly."

The fact that a stereotypically gendered man is allowed to mother in *Incredibles 2* and, on top of that, allowed to enjoy it and take pride in it is extraordinary, especially considering the way fathers are usually treated in Disney discourse.

⁴⁴ Sara Ruddick, "The Idea of Fatherhood," in *Feminism and Families* ed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1997). 208.

⁴⁵ Gatrell, *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*. 145.

Chapter 3: Motherhood and Gender Performance in *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*

3.1. *Traditional Motherhood and Power in The Incredibles and Brave*

Considering the relatively low percentage of mothers in Pixar films compared to fathers, it is all the more interesting to look at Pixar's mothers when they *are* given a prominent role in their respective films. Two characters within Pixar's films are biological mothers and prominently featured, namely Helen Parr from *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2* and Elinor from *Brave*. Both are main characters and thus have significant screen time and dialogue within their respective films.

Both are also very much mothers in the most traditional sense, meaning that their portrayal of motherhood is a "state of gendered (historically female) action rooted in physical, time-consuming, hands-on care for children."⁴⁶ In *The Incredibles*, Helen is a stay-home mom whose only job is housekeeping and caring for the three children. Elinor from *Brave* is also constantly seen tutoring and monitoring her children, Merida in particular. Merida even states early on in the film: "She is in charge of every single day of my life."

Although their stories and settings are widely different with *The Incredibles* duology being set in a contemporary city and *Brave* somewhere in medieval Scotland, the characters are strikingly similar. Both women have husbands that are uninvolved with childcare and thus have to act as a relationship liaison between their husbands and their children to keep them aware of what is going on in the children's lives. Another clear similarity between Helen and Elinor is that their designs are both very feminine. Helen wears a tight-fitting superhero suit with thigh-high heeled leather boots and has perfectly styled hair. She is tiny compared to the men in the movie, especially her husband, and her body shape resembles an exaggerated hourglass figure with very broad hips and a tiny waist. Elinor's body is shaped quite similar, albeit more concealed by her loose skirts and long sleeves compared to Helen's superhero suit. Elinor also has perfectly styled and braided hair, wears a dress that accentuates her hourglass shape, and is adorned with many pieces of gold jewelry. She too is tiny compared to her husband.

Both are allowed to exert power and strength without being defeminized or having to resort to stereotypically masculine behavior for their respective worlds.⁴⁷ On the contrary, it

⁴⁶ Brydon, "'I've Got to Succeed, so She Can Succeed, so We Can Succeed': Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in Incredible Parenting."

⁴⁷ Brydon, "'I've Got to Succeed, so She Can Succeed, so We Can Succeed': Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in *Incredible Parenting*."

seems like they are allowed to be powerful because they are very feminine. Helen is portrayed as a strong and successful superhero while also caring for her family and having a very feminine figure. She is allowed to be powerful because, in addition to her power, she is also still a perfect housewife that cares for all the children and holds her marriage together. Her goal in *The Incredibles* is thus exactly that, keeping her marriage together. On the way to that goal she uses her powers, but it is all because she wants to save her relationship.

Elinor can take on and overpower the men in her film because she does this in a way that does not threaten their way of asserting dominance, through the display of physical strength and violence. So even though she is portrayed as an authority figure, she always makes sure to keep her authority from offending the men who dominate this world. When Merida also presents herself as an authority figure but in a way that directly challenges the men's way of asserting dominance, namely through military prowess, in this case, archery, she turns everyone against her. Elinor even yells at Merida, "You've embarrassed them. You've embarrassed me!" So women are allowed to have power in this world, as long as they only make use of the limited set of tools the patriarchy has granted them and not challenge it directly.

3.2. *The Value of Femininity in Brave*

According to Judith Butler, no one is born a certain gender. Instead, people are cultivated into the idea of being a man or being a woman throughout their lives.⁴⁸ She also notes that many parents who see that their child does not conform to traditional ideas of their respective gender react with incomprehension, essentially coming down to "why can't you be normal?"⁴⁹ Nonconforming gender identities constantly have to battle against the dominant heteronormative philosophy that is present all around them. *Brave* also depicts a battle on what it means to be a woman and how to express femininity through the strained relationship between Elinor and her daughter Merida.

A good scene to illustrate how Elinor wields her femininity would be the moment when all the men are fighting and Elinor resolves this simply by walking into the crowd determinately and stops the fight simply with her presence. This is in stark contrast with how all the men in the movie appear to tackle disputes, namely with physical violence. Elinor wields an eloquent and graceful type of soft power that allows her to seize control over the

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, "Judith Butler: Your Behavior Creates Your Gender " (Big Think, 2011).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>.

situation. Elinor has found power in perfecting and owning the perfect form of femininity according to the society she lives in. She is shown to be proud of this, she smiles when she is performing her favorite activities such as embroidering and playing music and enjoys occasions where she can use her diplomatic skill.

This type of power Elinor radiates is in line with what audiences see Elinor trying to teach Merida at the beginning of the movie with statements like: “a princess should not have weapons in my opinion,” and “a princess does not raise her voice.” This guidance from Elinor is met with a great deal of resistance from Merida’s side because she is almost her mother’s polar opposite. She loves physical activity, sword fighting, archery, and is not interested in her mother's more traditionally feminine hobbies.

It is important to note, however, that Merida is not masculine in any way despite being the opposite of Elinor ‘perfect’ femininity. Unlike Mulan from *Mulan* (1998), another character from the Disney Princess franchise, who had to mask her femininity and portray herself as a man to take part in masculine activities, Merida is still very much a girl. She has long hair, constantly wears a dress, and never expresses any interest in the violence and brawling which all the men in this world seem to have a penchant for. As one of the story artists from *Brave* stated in an interview: “It is not that she wants to be a boy, she is a girl, she likes being a girl, she just does not like some of the things that come with being a girl in that time.”⁵⁰

Merida also shows that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive and that one can express both at the same time. Even when the film shows Merida in her free time where she is free to dress and act however she prefers because no one else is around to see her, she still wears a dress and still has her long flowing hair loose while riding a horse, shooting arrows and climbing mountains. It is clear that Merida is comfortable with her femininity while still enjoying traditional masculine activities according to this society. Unfortunately for Merida, the society she lives in does not allow her to be both masculine and feminine at the same time. She can practice archery and sword fighting in her free time, but as soon as she is back in public and at the castle, she has to conform to this traditional form of femininity that Elinor embodies. When she stands up to her oppression by shooting for her own hand in marriage by secretly entering in the archery competition, this is met with immense shock by everyone present. Especially Elinor tries harder than ever to make Merida conform to the female gender identity of this society by taking her bow, the symbol for Merida’s resistance and everything she loves, and throwing it in the fire.

⁵⁰ Jenny Lerew, *The Art of Brave* (San Francisco Chronicle Books, 2012). p. 73.

Brave thus raises an interesting debate about the value of femininity and how rigid this concept should be. It pits Elinor's version of femininity against Merida's but, interestingly, never devalues either one or gives its audience a clear answer on 'who was right'. Rather, it is a story about a mother and a daughter trying to understand each other despite their opposing views on what it means to be a woman.⁵¹ This is not easy, but the film shows that it can be done as long as both parties are willing to listen. The conclusion of the film shows this when the spell that turned Elinor in a bear is broken, they are so happy to have each other back in their lives again, that they set aside their differences and are therefore willing to see the power and joy in each other's way of life. Merida is shown embroidering a tapestry with her mother, an activity Elinor loves and Merida previously had absolutely no interest in. In turn, Elinor is seen riding a horse together with her daughter, an activity Elinor disapproved of at the beginning of the film.

The relationship progression between Elinor and Merida is strikingly similar to contemporary 'coming out' stories of LGBTQ individuals. The parent pretends that nothing is out of the ordinary until they are directly confronted with the non-conformity of their child. At that moment, they have to choose to support their child in their way of life or go against them. Many parents (initially) choose the latter,⁵² just like Elinor did because their own way of performing gender comes so natural to them that they have difficulty seeing how it can be oppressing to their child. *Brave* can thus not only be read as a discussion on what it means to be a woman but also as a possible empowering story for LGBTQ individuals to relate to their own lives and struggles.

3.3. *Mother as Breadwinner in Incredibles 2*

Surveys show that among married couples with children living in the United States, the father was employed in 82.6 percent of the families. Around 30 percent of those fathers were employed while the mother was not. Yet only roughly 5 percent of families have an employed mother and an unemployed father.⁵³ Considering these statics, the fact that *Incredibles 2* chose to feature a married couple with children that has the mother function as the breadwinner while the father remains unemployed and at home with the children is remarkable.

⁵¹ Amanda Marcotte, "The Shocking Radicalism of "Brave";" *The American Prospect*, 3 July, 2012, <https://prospect.org/culture/shocking-radicalism-brave/>.

⁵² Roberto Baiocco et al., "Negative Parental Responses to Coming Out and Family Functioning in a Sample of Lesbian and Gay Young Adults," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 24, no. 5 (2015), <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10826-014-9954-z>. 1491.

⁵³ "Employment in families with children in 2016," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017, accessed 2 July, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/employment-in-families-with-children-in-2016.htm>.

That more women quit their job to care for their children as compared to men speaks to the longstanding idea that it is the mother's job to raise the children, not the father's. 36 percent of young mothers have been asked by their employers if having children would negatively affect their ability to work, while men are seldom asked similar questions.⁵⁴ According to Bianca Barrat, these questions point to a deeply rooted belief that women have to choose between having a career or caring for their children, they cannot have both, let alone be successful at both these things at the same time.⁵⁵

Yet even though Helen chooses to pursue a career in *Incredibles 2*, she is never portrayed as solely career-driven like Bob was in *The Incredibles*. The film's narrative does not force her to choose solely for her career or her family. Instead, she appears to take it as just one more thing in her life, similarly to how she also does not indicate that caregiving is her primary responsibility but that she shares that responsibility equally with her husband.⁵⁶ One of the final lines of dialogue from Helen further underscores that she sees having a career and being a mother not as mutually exclusive. She takes the baby in her arms and announces to Bob and Lucius, "You guys got the next shift... I'm beat," indicating that she sees mothering as a break from her job, not as her whole identity and that she can take the next 'shift' again if she feels like it.⁵⁷

Films that contain portrayals of families that have an employed mother and stay-home father are important to get rid of the stigma that still hangs around women choosing a career and fathers choosing to resign to care for their children. Helen being allowed to embrace both her career and position as a mother and being successful at both can put faith in young mothers that face prejudice in their work environment due to the assumption that caring for children is their identity.

⁵⁴ "Pregnancy and maternity discrimination research findings," Equality and Human Rights Commission 2018, accessed 2 July 2020, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>.

⁵⁵ Bianca Barrat, "These Are The Real Prejudices That Working Mothers Are Up Against," *Forbes*, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancabarratt/2019/03/29/these-are-the-real-prejudices-that-working-mothers-are-up-against/#316c424035d1>.

⁵⁶ Brydon, "'I've Got to Succeed, so She Can Succeed, so We Can Succeed": Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in Incredible Parenting." 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

By analyzing the gendered portrayal of biological fathers and mothers in *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, and *Incredibles 2*, this thesis has shown how Pixar tackles various topics such as engaged caregiving for both men and women, deconstruction of hypermasculinity and assertion of power for women. It is important to explore these portrayals of gender and parenthood because Pixar, due to their films being so popular and well-received, is in the position to influence its audiences' perspectives on the topics the studio displays and discusses in their films.

It has become apparent that while progressive in some aspects, like allowing space for male mothering without it being ridiculed by society, mothers are still marginalized by only being allowed to be powerful in a way that does not threaten their function as a caregiver in the family or directly threatens their male counterparts. It does appear that Pixar is trying more than ever to be inclusive after being accused of only focusing on white, heteronormative "boy stories" for so long.⁵⁸ Their most recent releases like *Incredibles 2* shows a willingness of Pixar to defy gender norms and present their audiences with something different than the tropes they have come accustomed to seeing, like the absent parent.

Pixar also has an extensive collection of short films called Pixar Spark Shorts which contain several portrayals of family relations. An analysis of these shorts is necessary to see if Pixar sends a different message in their short films for a small audience than in their mass-marketed feature films. While the feature films have always focused on heteronormative relationships, the short films have been more explorative, especially with their recent release, *Out* (2020), which focuses on the relationship between two men.

There are also new feature films by Pixar that could be of interest as an addition to this thesis. A new film by Pixar that focuses on family relations has recently been released in cinema. *Onward* (2020) is a story about two brothers who set out on a quest to bring back their deceased father. It will be interesting to look into the portrayal of the family in *Onward* to see if Pixar decided to continue the portrayal of progressive parenting similar to that of *Finding Nemo* or *Incredibles 2*. The film will perhaps also present an opportunity to explore the topic of a single mother household, considering the father is deceased, similar to *Finding Nemo* that explored a single father household after the mother died.

⁵⁸ "BOY STORY: A Gendered Analysis of Pixar's First Film," Youtube 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Tz85QuK8Fs>.

Another film set to be released by Pixar is *Soul* (2020), which is a story about a man that has his soul separated from his body due to an accident and has to find a way to return his soul to his body before he dies. This premise does not seem to have any particular relevance to the topic of family relations and gender but does feature Pixar's first black protagonist so considering previous films have focused mostly around white men and white families, it will be interesting to see how Pixar portrays black masculinity as compared to white masculinity. There have not been any other films announced yet by Pixar, so it remains to be seen if the studio will tackle the theme of family relations again in the future.

Yet even with the films that Pixar has already released about familial roles, they have provided their audiences with the tools to open up the conversation about reevaluating their perceptions of how parenthood should be performed, so we can soon allow room for a stay-home mom like Helen in *The Incredibles*, but also be accepting of a father choosing to care for his children like Bob in *Incredibles 2*.

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