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Brave Directed by Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, and Steve Purcell (review)

Christy Williams

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characters is striking: the story is narrated by Lily's daughter, Sophia the Wise, and features an almost exclusively female cast with Lily, her friend Kim, Conor's mother Livia, Arcadia's freedom fighter Maud, and Maud's old friend Death as the central characters. Male characters, including even the handsome Conor, play supporting roles in the text and are generally portrayed as weaker and more passive than their female counterparts.

Much like *Snotty Saves the Day*, *Lily the Silent* is also a political allegory that asks its reader to reflect on gender roles, popular culture, and dominant ideologies. The texts also point to the importance of storytelling, although here it is not Professor Vale's notes but Sophia the Wise who, in narrating her mother's story, comments on the implications of this tale of the past for contemporary Arcadia. The reader thus learns more about Arcadia's current problems, which closely mirror not only those Snotty and Lily have faced but also our own inequitable society's and which are likely to feature prominently in the series' next installment about Arcadia's Lizard Princess Sophia. The stories, as Tod Davies's History of Arcadia novels ultimately suggest, serve as a civilization's backbone, and it is therefore in stories too that we can discover the potential for fundamental change and a better society.

Carmen Nolte
University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

Brave. Directed by Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, and Steve Purcell. Performed by Kelly Macdonald, Billy Connolly, and Emma Thompson. Walt Disney Pictures, 2012. DVD.

The newest film from Pixar Animation Studios, *Brave*, is a fairy tale about a Scottish princess who does not want to get married and tries to change her fate. Her parents, Elinor (Emma Thompson) and Fergus (Billy Connolly), invite the leaders of three other clans to bring their sons to compete for Merida's hand in the Highland Games. Merida (Kelly Macdonald) competes as the eldest child of her father, winning the archery contest and her own hand. However, winning only delays the decision and her mother insists that she still marry. Merida buys a spell from a witch (Julie Walters) to change her mother, but the spell has unintended consequences, and Elinor becomes a bear. Merida and Elinor seek out the witch, and in their search start to repair their damaged relationship. The more Elinor acts like a bear, however, the less control she has as a human, and when she eats, that control slips and Elinor is more bear than queen. The witch is gone, but she has left Merida a message explaining how to undo the spell: "Fate be changed, look inside. Mend the bond, torn by pride." Merida interprets this as needing to mend her mother's tapestry that she tore in anger, so the women return to the castle.

Without Elinor there to keep peace, the men have turned the main hall into a war zone. Merida intervenes and gives a speech in which she intends to say that she will marry one of the young men, conceding that “one selfish act can turn the fate of a kingdom.” Her mother motions her to stop and through gesture prompts Merida to suggest that there is a new way for the clans to proceed: they should “break tradition” and allow the young people of the clans to decide who they want to marry for themselves. She is successful, and as the men celebrate, Elinor and Merida sneak upstairs. However, Elinor loses control and attacks Merida. Fergus intervenes and goes after Elinor, locking Merida in with the tapestry. With her brothers’ help (triplets who accidentally have also been turned into bears by the spell), Merida escapes and chases after her father and the other men. The spell must be broken by sunrise, and Merida stitches together the tapestry on horseback with her brothers in tow. When she reaches her mother, who has been captured, Merida draws a sword and fights her father. Mor’dù, the bear who is Fergus’s nemesis for taking his leg, has been stalking Merida and attacks. Elinor breaks free to protect Merida and kills Mor’dù by pushing him into one of the standing stones, which crushes him. Merida throws the mended tapestry onto her mother, but the spell does not break until Merida cries, apologizing for her actions and taking responsibility for them rather than blaming others.

It is important to note that Elinor, not Fergus, is the one who tries to reinforce patriarchal tradition. Elinor is afraid for her daughter if she breaks from tradition, and the film clearly shows that Elinor acts out of love. She asks Merida, “Are you willing to pay the price your freedom will cost?” Showing Elinor’s fear is important in terms of demonstrating why not following “tradition” is much more serious than Merida’s understanding of it as a personal choice. As much as the film is about valuing individual choices, suggesting that women do not need to be married and that princesses can be heroes, it is also about recognizing that one’s choices affect others. Having a man reinforce the tradition of arranged marriage and present a competition to “win the fair maiden” would more easily make him a villain, whereas a woman doing it more obviously nods to patriarchal structures rather than individual villainy. There is no individual villain in this film; tradition is the problem. Elinor is not a villain; neither is the witch. Even Mor’dù, the bear set up as a villain in the opening scene, is not a villain in the structure of the fairy tale. A dangerous obstacle, yes, but Mor’dù has been cursed by the same spell as Elinor and has lost his humanity to the bear’s instinct. Mor’dù sought the spell to gain power as high king over his brothers, splitting the clans apart in the past, and he is presented as a parallel to Merida, a lesson for what awaits one who puts selfish desires before responsibility.

But not wanting to get married is not really a selfish desire, and the film does not present Merida's wish as unreasonable. Her selfishness is only that she does not initially see how her actions affect her family and her people. The transformation of Merida's mother and brothers shows that her individual choices have consequences, but Merida's choice not to marry also sends the clans to the brink of war. Breaking cultural tradition is not simply an individual choice. That Merida's choice ultimately has a positive effect for all young people in the kingdom is wonderful, but the film suggests that it could have been another way. It is when Merida puts her choice in the context of her culture and suggests a change to tradition rather than allowing her to be exempted from that tradition that she shows her strength as a potential leader. The young men forced to compete for marriage support Merida's choice and add to her argument, together convincing the clan leaders to change arranged marriage traditions. Merida's success in the film is not that she does not have to get married; it is that she changes her society for the betterment of all her people. The film subtly demonstrates that patriarchy is about structures, not individuals, which is a much more notable change to the princess fairy-tale film tradition than a princess who does not get married.

As enjoyable as *Brave* is, it has its faults, the most egregious of which is the gender and cultural stereotyping. The secondary and background male figures are reduced to one-dimensional warrior buffoons. While they do provide comic relief, they do so at the expense of Scottish culture and believable male characters. The royal family and witch are the only characters treated with any depth at all, and Elinor and Merida are by far the most complex. The lack of female characters in the background is also disturbing. Aside from three maids, women are seen only in the games scenes, fawning over the competing men. At the very least the mothers of the young men could have been at the games to support their sons; their absence is noticeable.

Brave's emphasis on the power and relevance of folklore is noteworthy. Elinor tells the story of four brothers who ruled over the clans until one broke the family bond and tried to claim power for himself, thus ripping the kingdom apart and setting the clans against each other. It is intended as a lesson about responsibility for Merida—a lesson Merida eventually learns—but she first rejects the legend as a story, only to learn of its truth when she discovers that the witch has worked the transformation curse once before, turning one brother into Mor'du. Elinor's early statement that "legends are lessons" reinforces this portrayal that legends and folklore contain truth, if only we will listen to them.

As one might expect, the bravery of the film's title is multifaceted, and the film shows bravery to be more than just swordplay and archery. As much as Merida can be admired for her warrior skills, that is not what changes her fate

or her people's traditions. Merida's understanding of her heritage and lessons in diplomacy from her mother coupled with her own eventual willingness to take her responsibility as a princess seriously facilitate that change, and her willingness to accept blame for her family's transformation and apologize for her actions breaks the curse. Although the initial plot may seem simple enough, the story is treated with complexity and depth. *Brave* is an enjoyable film that shows an implicit awareness and critique of the Disney fairy-tale franchise of which it is a part. Offering intact and loving families, *Brave* presents an ending that celebrates compromise and social change.

Christy Williams
Hawai'i Pacific University