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Not So Charming: Analyzing Disney's Non-Hegemonic Male Characters

Rikki N. Bergen

Western University, rbergen2@uwo.ca

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Critical Essay

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Not So Charming:

Analyzing Disney's Non-Hegemonic Male Characters

Disney's princes fall heavily into the category of hegemonic male. With their chiselled features, typically white complexion, athletic ability and hero complex, they might as well be the stars of a Bonnie Tyler song. These princes however are not the only male characters that Disney portrays. Characters such as *Beauty and the Beast's* LeFou, serve a different purpose entirely. Despite being a white male of presumably high economic class, LeFou does not measure up to Western masculine standards, and his desperate attempts to navigate homosocial relationships prove Disney has a fundamental understanding of this reality. Rather than use LeFou's differences to educate a young audience, film creators exploit them in favour of farce. Disney's use of non-hegemonic male figures as a comedic outlet contributes to the power imbalances maintained between different displays of masculinity.

It is worth noting to readers that this essay will focus entirely on the 1991, animated, edition of the Disney story of *Beauty and the Beast*, rather than the more recent, live-action adaptation, though many points can be read into both tellings, it is important to understand the differences and distinguish between the two. The primary reasons for this decision was due to the audience that animated versus live-action film reaches, as well as Disney's decision to portray LeFou as a homosexual character in the live-action adding an additional layer that does not appropriately lend itself to an essay of this length.

Throughout the film, LeFou serves as a selfless and adoring companion to the film's main antagonist. He is devoted, and loyal, never straying from his best friend's side. Despite his qualities, he is the brunt of many jokes, his lack of athletic skill is used as a point of hilarity and he can be seen being dropped or thrown, being hit in the head with the barrel of a gun and getting his abnormally sized head wedged in a variety of places including musical instruments (7:01, 18:05, 29:06, 1:09:55). Each attempt to catch an item thrown in his direction results in a hopelessly dropped object or an extravagant mess (6:41, 28:29, 29:07, 29:16). One can almost hear the proverbial laugh-track following each incident. LeFou's inadequate athleticism does not allow him to sufficiently "participate in highly homosocial... collectivities such as sporting groups" (Flood 355). Though there are no sporting groups in the film per se, this ideology lends itself to a certain ostracization that is understood as being acceptable due to LeFou's *lesser than* male status.

Athletic competency is not the only masculinity-based guideline that LeFou struggles to obey. LeFou does not follow "the traditional masculine script of standing one's ground" (Anderson 615) and is repeatedly emasculated by the people around him when he is grabbed by the throat, squashed underneath furniture, thrown into a muddy pond or a pile of snow, or hit by branches or his hero Gaston (6:54, 7:05, 9:17, 9:26, 17:45, 19:36, 27:15, 51:51). At no point in the film does LeFou stand up for himself to the hegemonic men around him. He remains a loyal follower, despite any personal suffering that may arise. Repeatedly taken advantage of by the self-appointed pack-leader, LeFou seems to accept his social position without much, if any, protest (26:55). Not only does this further Disney's depiction of the man as weak, and *unmanly*, but it reinforces the idea that the other characters' treatment of him is normal, acceptable, and not worth disagreeing with.

Arguably, *Beauty and the Beast* could be believed to be one of the Disney films that encourages divergent masculinities the most, due to the aesthetically atypical love interest, however upon transformation, he too becomes a hegemonic male character (1:17:48)

. LeFou, on the other hand, is a short, plump man with a big nose and missing teeth. His leader, Gaston, is a physical opposite. Gaston is tall, handsome, masculine and slender. He is brawny, powerful and confident in his looks, strength and abilities. In comparison to the hyper-masculine Gaston, LeFou's masculine shortcomings are emphasized. A critical component associated with the climb in hegemonic homosocial status comes from a man's interactions – typically romantic or sexual – with women (Anderson 604). In the 1991 version of the film, LeFou displays a sexual interest in the beautiful and flirty Bimbettes, none of whom pay him any attention (7:27). The three identical blonds swoon instead after Gaston who in turn rejects them dismissively (7:36, 8:44, 9:03, 17:54, 27:39). Many men “attempt to improve their position in masculine social hierarchies using... sexual achievements” (Flood 341). Due to his perceived lack of romantic experience, LeFou is unable to participate in these homosocial activities, like the girl-enthused conversations in the tavern, meanwhile, without any obvious effort, Gaston is able to get (nearly) any woman he wishes (18:30, 26:55). LeFou's failure to receive attention from any female characters further paints him as unworthy.

The example the LeFou-Gaston juxtaposition sets for Disney's young audience is a dangerous one. With Gaston revered and LeFou mocked, children are taught that the “variables (such as race, class, athleticism, and a certain body aesthetic) [which] fall in line with dominant cultural power positions” (Anderson 605) are ones that ought to be strived for. With a massive, young audience Disney is in a remarkable position to challenge popular thought and propose to a new generation a fresh way of thinking. Rather than doing so however, Disney makes the

effeminate male the source of ridicule, and discourages difference. *Beauty and the Beast*'s portrayal of LeFou reinforces the ideas that to be a man worthy of respect, one needs to be athletically capable, good looking, strong, powerful and sexually advanced. Anyone else might as well be the town fool.

LeFoe, the non-eligible bachelor, offers comedic relief to the film, his lack of "desirable" masculine traits the fuel for near every joke at his expense. LeFou is not the only character who serves this purpose in Disney films. *The Lion King*'s Timon and Pumba, *Aladdin*'s Genie, and *Snow White*'s Seven Dwarves are all examples of this phenomenon. Despite being lovable characters, their main purpose appears to be to relieve tension, which while being an important literary technique, has the potential to send a harmful message about non-hegemonic masculinities and their place in society. In doing this, Disney tells their young audience who should and who should not be in positions of power, and does not present the opportunity to challenge such notions.

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