Gender Performativity Through Song:

Analyzing the Voices of Seven Disney Princesses, 1989-2016

by

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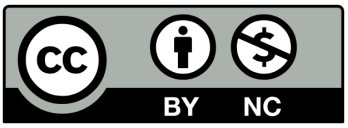
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Music Theory

Title: Gender Performativity Through Song:
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The human voice is a window into our identity, and voice and gender are performative elements of that identity. In this dissertation, I consider how different vocal timbres reveal different constructions of gender throughout Disney history. In particular, I look to Renaissance-Era (1989-1998) and Modern-Era (2009-2016) princesses to investigate how these icons of femininity have changed over time. From the original *Disney damsel* Snow White (1937) to the powerful wayfinder Moana (2016), the franchise and its female characters have made great strides towards "progressive" and even possibly "feminist" models of womanhood. However, I complicate this progress narrative by considering contemporary criticisms, such as accusations of whitewashing (*Pocahontas,* 1995) and intense heteronormativity (*Tangled,* 2010), even as I celebrate the exciting possibilities of gender-bending (*Mulan,* 1998) and queer euphoria (*Frozen,* 2013).

Musically, I find that stronger vocal timbres correlate with stronger female characters. Over this time period from 1989-2016, the princesses begin to sing with more chest voice, more belting, lower extensions, and a wider palette of vocal colors. They also perform longer songs, with more text and more variety of formal sections, allowing us to get to know them better. Lyrically, they sing of desires other than a prince, are more physically active, and they are depicted as part of a community. Harmonically, in the 21st century, these iconic songs take on pop forms with verses, prechoruses, and choruses; chord loops; and surprising modulations. I

show how all of these different parameters are used to characterize the developing "strong" princess model, focusing most on lyrics and vocal timbre as insights into these character's identities.

Finally, I coin the term *timbral crescendo,* which describes the trajectory of timbre over one or more songs. As music theorists, we typically think of crescendos as occurring through dynamics, texture, and orchestration. However, I posit that timbre is another variable that can crescendo (or decrescendo). Through many of these princess songs, the singers' vocal timbres become stronger over time, such as in "Let it Go" (*Frozen,* 2013). *Timbral trajectories,* then, can participate in storytelling just as much as lyrics, pitch, or form.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

From Personal to Professional

I grew up watching and listening to the Disney Princess movies of the Renaissance Era. Belle (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991) was my favorite because she had brown hair, like me, and she liked books, like me. It is hard to overstate the broader impact these fictional characters had on me as a little girl, as well as on countless other children before and after the '90s. Children's media shapes how we view the world at a particularly impressionable age, creating norms, expectations, and values surrounding everything from gender to relationships to the very concept of good and evil. Later, of course, we develop different relationships with said children's media as we age, just as their stories change with the times as well.

But old-fashioned traditions, archetypes, and values can insidiously persist even below the surface of supposedly new, strong, and independent women characters. For these reasons, I am interested in investigating—and critiquing—how Disney portrays their female characters through music over almost a century of animated film (1937-today). This is a personal project, one that has had me questioning the very assumptions I made when I was 4 or 5 or 10 years old; but it is also a professional one, as I am fascinated by how gender is constructed through music and specifically through vocal performance.

Voice, Gender, and Culture

In my dissertation, I trace two related histories: how Disney Princess voices have changed since 1937 (particularly since 1989), and how cultural conceptions of gender have changed across the same time period. Over this period, various waves of feminism shaped these pop culture icons. The second wave of feminism, of the '60s and '70s, focused on freeing women from the limitations of the domestic sphere: to be more than just wives and mothers, women demanded equal rights to men.[1] Ariel and Belle reveal similar cultural values in the early Renaissance Era (1989-91), as they have dreams and goals bigger than simply marrying a man. With Ariel and Belle, Disney began to move away from the earlier damsel-in-distress model found in the early 20th century princesses Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora (1937-1959).

Next, Pocahontas and Mulan (1995-98) respond to the third wave of feminism, which was concurrent to the Renaissance Era in the '90s. Relevant third-wave topics include Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality—and a drive for diversity and multiculturalism in media—as well as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*—and the idea that gender is a cultural construct.[2] In this light, Pocahontas and Mulan both diversify the Disney Princess brand, and Mulan dresses up as a soldier, genderbending for the first time in a Disney Princess film. In addition, Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan all exhibit "choice" feminism and girl power aesthetics, two common trends in pop-culture feminism at the time.

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[1] Kerri Lee Alexander, "Feminism: The Second Wave," *National Women's History Museum,* Jun. 18, 2020, https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-second-wave.

[2] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," 1989 University of Chicago Legal Forum 1: 139-67.
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2007 [1990]).

As I discuss in Chapter 4, Rapunzel (2010) is uniquely pulled in multiple directions by feminism and postfeminism, an early 2000s response to the third wave. She is very much a girl-power princess, who takes on adventure wearing a pink and purple dress, wielding a frying pan and her beautiful hair with its magical powers. Anita Harris, Angela McRobbie, and Rosalind Gill discuss the pressure on girls and women of the time to be both pretty and well-put-together as well as strong and independent.[3]

Lastly, Elsa and Moana (2013-16) react to our most recent, fourth-wave, of feminism, characterized by popular feminism, social media, and increasingly diverse representations of queer identities and stories.[4] In the 2010s, the internet also allowed queer interpretations of Disney to flourish in fanart, fanfiction, and headcanon spaces.[5] Although Disney has never outright declared a princess to be queer, in many moments, their self-affirming lyrics heavily imply coming-out or self-acceptance narratives.

Over the course of this project, I argue that American culture, including these waves of feminism and postfeminism, and trends within musical theater and popular song, have continually affected Disney voices. But the reverse is also true: Disney's representations of women teach children what girls should look like, sound like, and act like, out in the "real world." They consistently move with the center of American cultural politics, trying to appeal to the broadest possible audience, so they are never groundbreaking nor radical in any direction. Rather, Disney films are a product of their time: staying with the mainstream, even as that middle ground moves over the decades.

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[3] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty- First Century* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), 13-35.
Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004), 255.
Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility." European journal of cultural studies 10.2 (2007): 147-66.
[4] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Duke University Press, 2018).
[5] Katie Kapurch, "Rapunzel Loves Merida: Melodramatic Expressions of Lesbian Girlhood and Teen Romance in Tangled, Brave, and Femslash," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19.4 (2015): 436-53.

There has been plenty of criticism of Disney's princesses from feminist, film, and literary studies dating back to the beginning of their Renaissance era, 1989, and plenty of discussion of voice, gender, and identity within music theory more recently through the subfield of vocal timbre studies (See **Literature Review**.) However, these film and literary scholars do not speak much to the music's role in constructing gender, and these analyses of vocal timbre rarely touch on Disney, songs-in-films, or musical theater.

My research question, then, is inherently interdisciplinary. I bring together scholarship from feminist film/literature studies, timbre studies in popular music, text and music, and occasional other references as appropriate. For example, I bring in educational psychology theories (Bronfenbrenner) when discussing girls' development, and vocal pedagogy theories when discussing their vocal development (Gackle, Monks, Sweet).[6] From other corners of music theory, I cite transformational theory when discussing Hollywood harmony (Murphy), and form in popular/musical theater studies (Buchler, Covach, Nobile, Temperley) when discussing song forms.[7] I also refer to interviews and articles from composers and indigenous folks (Fjellheim, Foa'i, Ka'ili,

[6] U. Bronfenbrenner, "Environments in developmental perspective: Theoretical and operational models," in *Measuring environment across the life span: emerging methods and concepts,* ed. S. L. Friedman and T. D. Wachs (American Psychological Association, 1999): 3-28.
Lynne Gackle, "The Adolescent Female Voice: Characteristics of Change and Stages of Development," *The Choral Journal* 31.8 (1991): 17-19.
Susan Monks, "Adolescent Singers and Perceptions of Vocal Identity," *British Journal of Music Education* 20.3 (2003): 243-56.
Bridget Sweet, "Voice Change and Singing Experiences of Adolescent Females," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 66.2 (2018): 133-49.
[7] Scott Murphy, "Transformational Theory and the Analysis of Film Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. David Neumeyer (Oxford University Press, 2014), 471-99.
Michael Buchler, "Modulation as a Dramatic Agent in Frank Loesser's Broadway Songs," *Music Theory Spectrum* 30.1 (Spring 2008): 35-60.
John Covach, "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis,* ed. Deborah Stein (Oxford University Press, 2005), 65-76.
Drew Nobile, "Teleology in Verse–Prechorus–Chorus Form, 1965–2020," *Music Theory Online* 28.3 (2022).
David Temperley, "Form," in *The Musical Language of Rock* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 150-182.

Sonoda-Pale) in regards to the culturally appropriate—or inappropriate—making of *Frozen* and *Moana*.[8]

While these Disney Princess songs are the objects which I study, using music-theoretical tools, I am more interested in how they exist *in context* than just "the music itself." How do these songs create, reinforce, or challenge our preexisting notions of girlhood across multiple eras of Disney and American history? How does music, and particularly voice, communicate constructions of gender, whether traditional or subversive?

Gender is Performative

At the heart of this project is the idea that gender is a performative construct. In their seminal work, *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler teaches us that gender is formed through a series of repeatable behaviors, and that it's neither fixed nor natural.[9] Gender, then, is a cultural construct. It is something that can be put upon, or performed, through actions, gestures, and rituals, in what Butler calls a "stylized repetition of acts."[10] For example, in Snow White's, Cinderella's, and Aurora's stories, these weak, passive women are saved by the prince: a repeated behavior which reinforces the male:female and hero:damsel binaries. A bit later, Mulan participates in traditional, ritualistic behaviors when she is beautified for her matchmaking ceremony, even though she swiftly rejects them and

[8] Frode Fjellheim, "Composer Frode Fjellheim on Frozen 's native spirit," interview by Jérémie Noyer, *Animated Vïews,* Mar. 18, 2014, https://animatedviews.com/2014/composer-frode-fjellheim-on-frozens-native-spirit/.
Opetaia Foa'i, "Opetaia Foa'i Interview Moana Premiere," *Red Carpet News TV,* Nov. 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LQtA6pHx_k.
Tēvita O. Ka'ili, "Goddess Hina: The Missing Heroine from Disney's *Moana*," *Huffington Post* (Dec. 6, 2016).
Healani Sonoda-Pale, "Disney's Commodification of Hawaiians," *Civil Beat* (Oct. 7, 2016).
[9] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 185-91.
[10] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 191.

feels exceedingly uncomfortable performing them. Over the years, the Disney Princesses showcase different relationships with these gendered behaviors, but they often still have significant ties back to the original damsel archetype. In their songs and their actions, Disney Princesses perform femininity in a variety of ways. That performance is what I will be analyzing in this dissertation.

Disney's models of femininity began to change in the Renaissance Era, and so for the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus on the period from 1989-present, from Ariel (1989) to Moana (2016).

Disney, Its Social impact, and Feminism

I hardly need to argue that Disney has had a strong social impact, especially on children, for many years, as so many people have said it before me. George Rodosthenous, author of *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen,* puts it well: Disney has long-reachingly "influenced the way in which we grew up and shaped the creation of our collective memories of childhood." More than just entertainment, or art, we should consider these films as "a political tool for enhancing our understanding of race, sexuality and gender."[11] This is why I do research into Disney's princess songs. These films are so pervasive, and their princess characters so exceedingly feminized, that they offer a window into our cultural construction of gender itself. We are taught as children that women and girls should look a certain way, act a certain way, and sound a certain way. These princesses are the hegemonic ideal of femininity: beautiful, kind, and so impossibly perfect. But expectations of femininity have changed over time, even if Disney is not the most

[11] George Rodosthenous, "Introduction," *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from "Snow White" to "Frozen"* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 1-2.

progressive of companies: their media reflects the values and ideals of a wide swath of American people. In their efforts to be universally loved, and watched by the widest audience possible, Disney toes the line carefully in the center of cultural trends and values: not too radical, but not too conservative, either. They are mainstream, and therefore an interesting insight into how the mainstream of American cultural consciousness has shifted between 1937 and today.

Of course, such careful, family-friendly, politically-correct writing leaves Disney open to criticism from both ends. In particular, I'm interested in how feminist scholars—or more broadly, scholars from gender and sexuality studies—have reacted to Disney's female characters over time. The overall notion seems to be that, with each new character, Disney has improved upon their older models. However, as with most things, their progress is neither linear nor perfect, and so I'm interested in complicating the simplistic bad-to-good narrative, delving deeper into the characters and the voices of these iconic princesses.

Literature Review

In the interest of time and space, I will only briefly summarize current scholarship regarding Disney princesses and their songs, but at the beginning of each chapter, I will more deeply engage with each source as it relates to the topic of that chapter.

Gender, Sexuality, and Disney

In addition to working with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, I engage with women's and gender studies surrounding the development of the princess archetype in Disney films. For example, Maegan Davis,[12] Dawn England et al.,[13] Courtney Gazda,[14] and Jane Shawcroft et al.[15] track how these women have changed over time in quantitative (England and Shawcroft) and qualitative (Davis and Gazda) ways, considering things like how the princesses act, how they relate to other characters, how they are presented visually, their tone of voice, and their body language. Additionally, Jill Henke,[16] Karen Rowe,[17] and Bridget Whelan[18] trace Disney's gender norms back to their fairytale roots and discuss what changes Disney has made, typically for the better. Amy Davis also traces the development of these female characters over time, including Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan, in her book *Good Girls and Wicked Witches.*[19]

Building upon these authors' work, I coin the term *Disney damselhood* to describe the old-fashioned, conservative model of femininity stemming from Disney's original princesses Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. While social constructions of gender have changed since *Snow White* was released in 1937, there are several key traits that continue to form the *Disney damsel* archetype even today. As observed by Dawn England

[12] Maegan M. Davis, "From Snow to Ice: A Study of the Progression of Disney Princesses from 1937 to 2014," *Film Matters* (Fall 2014): 48-52.
[13] Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek, "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princess," *Sex Roles* 64 (2011): 555-67.
[14] Courtney Gazda, "The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess," *Dissenting Voices* 4.1 (Spring 2015): 29-46.
[15] Jane E. Shawcroft et al., "Depictions of Gender Across Eight Decades of Disney Animated Film: The Role of Film Producer, Director, and Writer Gender," *Sex Roles* 86 (2022): 346-65.
[16] Jill Birnie Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine," *Women's Studies in Communication* 19.2 (Summer 1996): 229-49.
[17] Karen Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," *Women's Studies* 6.3 (1979): 237-57.
[18] Bridget Whelan, "Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the 20th Century Princess Narrative," *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 29.1 (2012): 21-34.
[19] Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (John Libbey & Company, 2007).

et al., princesses often tend to their physical appearance; are physically weak, submissive, affectionate, nurturing, helpful, fearful, and physically attractive; and they accept help, collapse crying, and are victimized.[20] In addition, behaviors such as rescuing, being rescued, falling in love at first sight, passivity and activity, and domestic labor are also associated with traditional gender stereotypes.[21] Furthermore, as an icon of resolution in princess movies, marriage works as a heteronormative convention to perpetuate both the expectation that women must marry to be happy, and that an ideal marriage must be between a man and a woman.[22] That is to say, traditional princess characters are weak in some way, must be saved by a prince, and then they fall in love, get married, and live "Happily Ever After." They are more objects of the male gaze than agents in their own stories, and their ultimate goal in life is to marry a prince.

In a nutshell, my dissertation focuses on how, and to what degree, the later princesses from Ariel onwards conform to this *Disney damsel* archetype. Some of them are more domestic, submissive, and passive than others (like Ariel); and some of them break more norms than others (like Elsa).

In addition, fairy tales are historically very heteronormative, and many of the Disney films end with a wedding as the ultimate resolution. Their "Happily Ever After" sequences feature wedding bells, a kiss, and the prince and princess riding off into the sunset in a horse-drawn carriage. These heteronormative tropes come also from musical

[20] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559-60.
[21] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559; Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 241; Natasha Primera Anindita, "A Comparison Between Disney Earlier and Recent Princess of The Third Generation of Disney Animated Films as Seen in Rapunzel in Tangled and Moana in Moana," *Kata Kita* 10.1 (Mar. 2022): 51; Karen Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," *Women's Studies* 6.3 (1979): 248.
[22] Vanessa Matyas, "Tale as Old as Time: A Textual Analysis of Race and Gender in Disney Princess Films," *Graduate Major Research Papers and Multimedia Projects,* Paper 6 (2010): 5.

theater,[23] wherein marriage itself is a trope, as well as romance plotlines. Carrie Cokely and Ryan Bunch both discuss Disney's heterosexual iconography,[24] and through their work, I take note of particular Disney romance tropes such as love-at-first-sight, rescuing behaviors, and love songs.

Despite their surface-level straightness, however, many songs and plot points in Disney may be read as queer-coded. For example, I identify coming-out narratives in Rapunzel's tower descent and Elsa's "Let it Go." Mulan is another strong example, as she cross-dresses and passes as a man in the army. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I discuss the great potential for queerness in Rapunzel's, Mulan's, and Elsa's stories, citing Katie Kapurch[25], Lisa Duffy,[26] Molly Farris,[27] and Jess Kung,[28] for their insight. Anecdotally, too: even though I cannot imagine Disney writing canonically queer characters, I know many queer friends who have been able to see themselves in these Disney characters.[29]

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[23] Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 16–58. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of Personal Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 29.
[24] Carrie L. Cokely, "'Someday My Prince Will Come': Disney, the Heterosexual Imaginary and Animated Film," in Thinking Straight: The Power, Promise and Paradox of Heterosexuality, ed. Chrys Ingraham (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 167-82.
Ryan Bunch, "'Love is an Open Door': Revising And Repeating Disney's Musical Tropes In Frozen," *Contemporary Musical Film*, ed. K. J. Donnelly et al. (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 89-103.
[25] Kapurch, "Rapunzel Loves Merida," 436-53.
[26] Lisa Duffy, "From the Evil Queen to Elsa: Camp Witches in Disney Films," *Frames Cinema Journal* 16 (2019), http://framescinemajournal.com/article/from-the-evil-queen-to-elsa-camp-witches-in-disney-films/.
[27] Molly Farris, "Into the Unknown: A Queer Analysis of the Metaphors in Disney's *Frozen* Franchise," MA thesis, University of North Carolina, 2020.
[28] Jess Kung, "Disney's Mulan and Unlocking Queer Asian-American Masculinity," *sprinkle: an Undergraduate Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* 12 (2019): 40-49.
[29] Note: Disney's conservative approach (or lack thereof) to outwardly queer characters is likely due to their large Chinese audience base, where restrictions on content are tight.

Disney's Relationship with Indigeneity

Besides feminist and queer perspectives, I also engage with indigenous studies when I write about *Pocahontas*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*. *Pocahontas* is the story of a real historical Native American (Powhatan) girl, whose story Disney adapted (read: whitewashed) for public consumption in 1995. *Frozen* and *Moana* were both influenced by indigenous cultures, Sámi and Polynesian respectively, in the 2010s. Disney did consult with native peoples in both cases; however, scholars are still critical of their portrayal of, and profits from, indigenous folks.

I cite Michelle Anjirbag,[30] Robin Armstrong,[31] Tuija Huuki and Kata Kyrölä,[32] Trine Kvidal-Røvik and Ashley Cordes,[33] and Ida Yoshinaga[34] regarding indigeneity in these three films. Anjirbag, a folklore scholar, discusses criticisms of Disney's portrayals of indigenous people, the progress they *have* made, and power structures of capitalism and post-colonialism. Armstrong, a musicologist, writes about exoticism and appropriation in that same power dynamic between Disney and indigenous folks (in *Moana*). Huuki, Kyrölä, Kvidal-Røvik, and Cordes then discuss Disney's failures to responsibly work with indigenous groups in the original *Frozen* and *Moana* films, as well as their improved cultural responsibility in *Frozen II* and *Moana II.* Finally, Yoshinaga considers the extractive nature of Disney's taking of indigenous stories in these same movies.

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[30] Michelle Anya Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana: Embedded Coloniality and the Search for Authenticity in Disney Animated Film," *Social Sciences* 7.11 (2018): 230.
[31] Robin Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music: Musical Colonization and Appropriation in Disney's Moana," *Social Sciences* 7.7 (2018): 1-9.
[32] Tuija Huuki and Kata Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself': Indigenous Ethics, Sámi Cosmologies and Decolonial Queer Pedagogies of Frozen 2," *Gender & Education* 35.2 (2023): 171–85.
[33] Trine Kvidal-Røvik and Ashley Cordes, "Into the unknown [Amas Mu Vuordá]? Listening to Indigenous voices on the meanings of Disney's Frozen 2 [Jikŋon 2]," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communicatio*n 15.1 (2022): 17-35.
[34] Ida Yoshinaga, "Disney's Moana, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films," *Narrative Culture* 6.2 (2019): 188-215.

In general, through working with this material, I argue that Disney ultimately profits off of the cultural materials of indigenous peoples, so they can never have a fully healthy relationship with them. However, they do make steps to improve their portrayal of indigenous characters through their work with the Oceanic Trust (*Moana*), the Verddet (*Frozen)*, and composers Opetaia Foa'i and Frode Fjellheim.

Musical Theater, Disney, and Voice

In my research, I place these Disney Princess films in the context of musical theater history. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, Graham Wood, and Stacey Wolf all provide useful discussion of Tin Pan Alley song formulas,[35] the narrative placement of princess songs,[36] and feminism on Broadway, especially *Wicked*.[37] In the Renaissance era in particular, these princess songs are built upon expanded Tin Pan Alley forms. In the 21st century, these princess songs are built upon more pop-like forms, using verse, chorus, prechorus, and postchorus sections. (See also John Covach's, Drew Nobile's, David Temperley's, and Michael Buchler's work on song forms and Buchler's work on modulations.)[38]

There is a gap within music theory scholarship on the topic of musical theater, with the exception of one book, *Here for the Hearing*.[39] Yet *Here for the Hearing* does not

[35] Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, "Tin Pan Alley Songs on Stage and Screen Before World War II," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 81-96.
[36] Graham Wood, "Examining the film musical," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical,* ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 305-24.
[37] Stacy E. Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
[38] John Covach, "Form in Rock Music," 65-76.
Drew Nobile, "Verse—Prechorus—Chorus," in *Form as Harmony in Rock Music* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 199-234.
Temperley, "Form," 150-182.
Buchler, "Modulation as a Dramatic Agent," 35-60.
[39] Michael Buchler and Gregory Decker, eds., *Here for the Hearing: Analyzing the Music in Musical Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

deal with vocal timbre or singing styles, the primary focus of my research. This gap may well be for good reason, as musical theater is tricky to analyze due to its ever-changing, ephemeral qualities: keys may be changed on a whim, verses or entire songs cut and pasted, and no single recording is necessarily canon. (The closest we get is often "Original Broadway Cast Recordings" of things like *Wicked,* with Kristen Chenoweth and Idina Menzel, or *Hamilton,* with Lin-Manuel Miranda and Leslie Odom Jr.) The performance you hear on one day in one theater may be completely different from one the next day, or half a country away, or ten years later. For a field so interested in "the music itself," the nebulous, ever-changing music in musical theater is a challenge.

In contrast, by analyzing movie musicals, I am able to work with official, canonical recordings by way of the original animated films. Jodi Benson, for example, will always be viewed as the authoritative voice of Ariel, and Idina Menzel as the voice of Elsa. These voice actors, then, become inscribed in Disney memory—so-called "Disney Legends"[40]—and are forever associated with their characters on screen. Where musical theater studies have analyzed lyrics, song forms, and song styles, I will expand into vocal performance and vocal timbre. Where music-theoretical studies have analyzed vocal timbre in popular music genres, I will expand into musical theater. This is where I situate my research: in the middle of several, interdisciplinary fields, bringing together tools and perspectives from both to best tackle my questions of gender and vocal performance in this particular point in musical history.

Outside of musical theater historians or analysts, we can also learn a lot about the voice from practitioners themselves. Although music theorists have not engaged much

[40] "Disney Legends," *Walt Disney Archives,* accessed Feb. 9, 2026, https://d23.com/disney-legends/.

with musical theater vocality,[41] there is a large body of work on musical theater singing by vocal pedagogues, many of whom engage with Disney and/or Broadway musicals since 1989. Kevin Michael Jones, for example, discusses the use of "legit," speech-like, chest-, and head-voice singing in five Disney Princesses: Aurora, Ariel, Mulan, Tiana, and Elsa.[42] Christianne Roll investigates the expansion of belt singing into higher registers in the 2000s and 2010s, which she connects to the "rapid increase of the rock/pop musical."[43] Alex Bádue and Rebecca Schorsch identify a consistent vocal aesthetic created by Disney over the years, especially "bright and youthful vocal timbre," stemming from the soubrette voice type in opera.[44]

Additionally, two musicologists, Liske and Zelda Potgieter, identify a few different types of princess voices: the "Perfect Princess," the "Renaissance Princess," and the "Deconstructed Diva," which develop from that operatic soubrette to the light mix-belt of the Renaissance era and later to the strong mezzo-belt of Tiana and Elsa.[45] I build upon this existing work by adding nuance to these descriptions of the princesses' vocal timbres, crafting a music-theoretical methodology, and considering how vocal timbre interacts with their expressions of femininity.

Finally, I came upon Jennifer Fleeger's chapter on Disney Princess voices relatively late in this process, but her work mirrors mine in many ways.[46] Approaching

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[41] One important source that provides analysis of musical theater songs is Buchler and Decker's edited collection *Here for the Hearing*. However, it focuses more on harmony, form, structure, and rhythm—not the voice itself or vocal timbre.
[42] Kevin Michael Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses," *Musical Theatre Resources* (2015), https://musicaltheatreresources.com/2015/11/24/analyzing-the-singing-of-five-disney-princesses/.
[43] Christianne Roll, "The Evolution of the Female Broadway Belt Voice: Implications for Teachers and Singers," *J Voice* 30.5 (Sep 2016): e639.1–e639.9.
[44] Alex Bádue and Rebecca S. Schorsch, "Animated Broadway: Disney and Musical Theater in the 1990s and Early 2000s," *American Music* 39.2 (2021): 212-25.
[45] Liske and Zelda Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas: a critique of the singing princess as filmic trope," *Acta Academia* 48.2 (2016): 48-75.
[46] Jennifer Fleeger, "The Disney Princess: Animation and Real Girls," in *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song through the Machine"* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 108-36.

this music from more of a film studies angle, she connects three periods of the princesses' vocal styles (opera, Broadway, and pop) with three periods of animation technology (hand-drawn, computer-aided animated, and 3D CGI), from Snow White to Rapunzel, 1937-2010. Like my analyses, she writes about the use of head voice in the operatic era and the shifts from breathy to belty timbres in the Renaissance era. She also considers some princesses I spend less time on, like Jasmine, Merida, and Tiana. Although her musical observations are astute and particularly interesting when paired with animation technologies, she does not delve deeper into musical analysis of specific songs. Once again, I find myself excited by the contributions from scholarship outside of music theory, but wishing for more specifics on what is happening musically in each of the princesses' films.

Vocal Timbre: Methodology

In essence, what I bring to the field of Disney studies is an exploration of these topics through recent music-theoretical studies of vocal timbre. Studying voice, and particularly vocal timbre, gives us greater insight into the identity of the singer… or at least the character they are meaning to portray, in the case of film characters. As previously mentioned, gender is performative, and so too is the voice. I cannot entirely know how much of these vocal characteristics are "innate" or "authentic" to the voice actors themselves, or how much they have been manufactured to sound a certain way, through either technology or coaching. However, I'm interested in analyzing the sound product that we hear instead, and in particular, my perception of that vocal timbre.

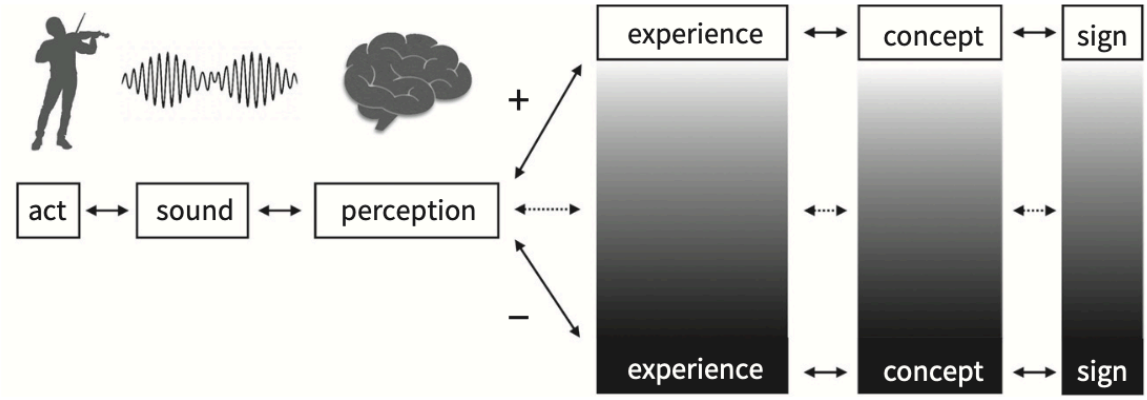


Figure 1.1, ASPECS Model from Wallmark (2020)[47]

Musicologist Zachary Wallmark splits timbre into three parts: the act of making sound, the sound itself, and our perception of that sound (**Fig. 1.1**). I am not especially interested in the *act* of making sound. I will refer to vocal production occasionally as appropriate, but I cannot possibly know what went on in the Disney studios from 1937 to today, and can only make my best educated guesses on how these singers were making these sounds. Similarly, I am not analyzing the sound from a scientific or technological standpoint. I choose not to use spectrograms in my analysis because I find them to be extremely difficult to understand for laypeople, and I wish for this dissertation to eventually become a book accessible to non-musicians and non-theorist musicians alike. More importantly, though, I am interested in the cultural, social, and emotive potential of sound, so I am focused on *my perception* of sound and the significance it holds within its target audience: the American public circa 1989-present.

Cornelia Fales and Nina Sun Eidsheim are both heavily involved in analyzing our perception of a sound and the cultural capital that it holds. As Fales writes, "sound

[47] Zachary Wallmark, *Nothing But Noise: Timbre and Musical Meaning at the Edge* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 18.

analysis can reveal only the *physical* characteristics of a sound," not how it is received, perceived, or understood by a listener.[48] She argues that our experience of timbre is phenomenal, sensory, and emotive; not reflective; and focused significantly on source identification. That is, "we say—I hear a *cricket*; not—I hear a *sound* that may indicate the presence of a cricket."[49] In my analyses, I try to pull apart *why* I interpret a sound to be cricket, through its timbral characteristics. I'm interested in how the sounds we hear represent girlhood, and how different changes in those sounds represent emotional or maturity changes as these girls grow into women.

Eidsheim's book, *The Race of Sound,* is all about what we think we hear when we listen to a voice, assigning it gender and race, as well as age, socio-economic status, and plenty of other characteristics, too. She begins with the idea that all listening is focused on the acousmatic question—*Who is this?*—and argues that vocal timbre is located in the listener, not the singer.[50] Doing this type of timbral analysis tells us more about the people and the culture who are listening to a sound and making assumptions about that sound, rather than the singer herself. Again, like with Fales's framework for vocal timbre, I am interested in how we as a society construct gender expectations, and therefore am focusing my analyses on the performance of girlhood through the Disney Princess voice. I believe the voice actresses are putting on a certain voice in order to sound like Disney Princesses, and as a result, our culture has come to associate these sound qualities with princesshood from Snow White to Elsa.

Musical theater scholars Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Kevin Michael Jones split these sounds into two types of singing: "legit" or "quality" singing, by which

[48] Cornelia Fales, "The Paradox of Timbre," *Ethnomusicology* 46.1 (Winter 2002): 58.
[49] Fales, "The Paradox of Timbre," 63.
[50] Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Introduction," in *The Race of Sound* (Duke University Press, 2020), 1-37.

they mean more classical or operatic singing; and "Broadway," or more "speechlike" singing.[51] I do not love the adjective "legit," as it suggests that more contemporary singing styles are not legitimate. However, as it seems to be the terminology of the practitioners, I do keep this adjective in my methodology. Classically, these "legit" singers use a consistent vibrato over the entirety of a phrase. They have "tall and round" vowels that allow for more space in the back of the throat, a lowered jaw and tongue, and a more circular mouth.[52] "Legit" singers lift their soft palate, balancing their vocal timbre to be "equally bright and dark (aka 'chiaroscuro')," [53] and they use more head voice than anything else.[54] Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora sing with a "legit" vocal style, while the later princesses access this vocal technique at times, but not always.

In contrast, beginning in 1989, the princesses took on a more contemporary Broadway sound. They sing with a "light, speech-driven 'mix,'"[55] using brighter vowels, switching effortlessly between speech and singing, and controlling their vibrato differently. They begin to belt, bringing their chest voices up to higher and higher heights, which takes significant physical effort, in the '90s.

In describing these vocal qualities, I use Drew Nobile's methodology from his 2022 Alanis Morissette article, wherein he uses color-coded lyrics charts to show changes in vocal color over time.[56] In **Figure 1.2**, for example, I show several vocal

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[51] Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, "Singing," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 320-34.
Kevin Michael Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses," *Musical Theatre Resources* (2015), https://musicaltheatreresources.com/2015/11/24/analyzing-the-singing-of-five-disney-princesses/.
[52] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[53] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[54] Jennifer Fleeger, "The Disney Princess: Animation and Real Girls," 123.
[55] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[56] Drew Nobile, "Alanis Morissette's Voices," *Music Theory Online* 28.4 (2022).

qualities, tracking the same parameters as Nobile: registration (chest vs. head voice), phonation (breathy, neutral, or tense), twang, and pitch range.

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 1.2, Vocal Timbre Color Chart

In princess voices across all eras, a breathy, constricted, mixed voice in a middling range is most common and therefore unmarked. This *is* the Little-Girl Voice of the '90s, which had adapted from a higher head voice of the original princesses (1937-1959), and later developed towards a heavier chest voice by the later princesses (2009-). Mutter is marked by the use of 100% chest voice in the low/mid register, almost like a whisper, usually below C4. Soft Voice, which I hear from late Renaissance princesses Mulan and Pocahontas, is much like Little-Girl Voice, but placed lower, with less twang, and more chest-resonance. As we'll see in the case studies, I hear a gradually increasing amount of chest voice in the '90s from Belle onwards.

Finally, Modal Voice and Belt are marked by their lack of breathiness; in both of these types, the singers' vocal folds are fully phonating. Outside of the Disney Princess universe, Modal voice is typically the default voice we might use to sing Happy Birthday, or the like: it is chest voice in a comfortable range, with some light amount of twang as we are not trained like opera singers are to open their resonating spaces. Belt, then, is the most important voice to my dissertation, as it requires great physical anchoring in order for these singers to bring their chest voice up to a high range, what I define as around B ♭ 4 or C5.

The line between Modal Voice and Belting is difficult to pinpoint, a bit subjective, and dependent on each individual singer's voice type. For these reasons, I use a few methods for defining Belting amongst other sounds. First, belting must be at a high pitch, which I define as around a B ♭ 4 or higher. Second, I listen for a full phonation of chest voice, in which the singer has a consistent sound quality from the bottom up. This is also a sort of definition in the negative: I listen for the *lack of* a flip or switch to head voice, which usually happens somewhere in this B ♭ 4-D5 range. Sometimes, I try singing it for myself, seeing what I do physically to match the sound quality of the princess singer. (As a treble voice, my "break" is in a similar place, though I am not a trained opera or Broadway singer.) I don't go as far as Kate Heidemann's mimesis-first methodology, but I do track the physical maneuvering I imagine the singers are doing, through mimetic engagement, at times.[57] Finally, especially with the later princesses, I listen for what I call aural "artifacts" of effort: breaks, cracks, strained timbres, and

[57] Kate Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," *Music Theory Online* 22.1 (Mar. 2016).

intonation issues, all signs of the physical engagement—even tension—required to belt higher and higher and stronger and stronger.

When a singer does engage their head voice, I define two types of vocal colors. The first, "legit," comes from that earlier tradition of musical theater that had roots in classical training, although later princesses still access this type of sound, if infrequently. "Legit," is therefore defined by a head voice in the upper register or a light mixed voice in the middle register, twang through a constricted vocal tract, and a neutral (not breathy!) phonation. Although the weight of the voice often sounds lighter because they use more head resonance, the singers' vocal folds are fully phonating, as they were likely taught in classical voice lessons, like me. Whisper is my term for an exaggeratedly breathy head voice, which the princesses often use to sound wistful, sad, or uncertain. This is most common at the beginnings and ends of songs, for a quiet introduction or an introspective coda. In general, these two voices—"legit" and whisper—are found most often in the original three princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, and less so after 1989.

Lastly, I would like to mention four more authors who I am indebted to in my vocal timbre research. Kate Heidemann,[58] Megan Lavengood,[59] Kristal Spreadborough,[60] and Victoria Malawey[61] have all provided seminal work on the quality of voices in song. From Kate Heidemann, I was inspired to do some vocal-mimetic work, and to focus on twang as a parameter for hyperfemininity. She describes "baby" voice, which is quite

[58] Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre."
[59] Megan Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative," *Music Theory Online* 26.3 (2020).
[60] Kristal Spreadborough, "Emotional Tones and Emotional Texts: A New Approach to Analyzing the Voice in Popular Vocal Song," *Music Theory Online* 28.2 (2022).
[61] Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word: Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

similar to my "Little-Girl Voice," through raising the larynx, constricting the throat, and tensing the tongue. Though I am unsure of what physical adaptations the princesses use to create a "Little-Girl Voice," I know it is through the constriction of the vocal tract in some or all of these ways, and therefore falls under "oral twang."[62]

After Heidemann, Lavengood and Spreadborough both discuss the *affective* nature of vocal timbre. Like Eidsheim, Lavengood is interested in the cultural significance of timbre, as per her title. She writes about marked and unmarked timbres, which I use with the princesses' vocal qualities (Little-Girl Voice is unmarked). She also writes about how synthesized versions of non-Western instruments were used in the '80s to present a surface-level engagement with multiculturalism while still marking non-Western sounds as Other. I lean upon her work particularly in my chapter on Mulan and Pocahontas, when the exact same phenomenon was occurring for "Chinese" and "Native American" synthesized instrument sounds.

Spreadborough, on the other hand, is interested in the emotional content communicated through vocal timbre. Although I do not use her methodology, I would be remiss not to mention her findings here. She has shown that vocal timbre can add nuance to the emotional weight of a set of lyrics, just as I argue that timbre adds to our understanding of a princess character through song. She also finds that vocal timbres often change in relation to the form of a song, namely from verse to chorus, like Nobile does in his Alanis Morissette article, and like my analyses of many, though not all, of these princess songs.

[62] Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre," [3.16].

Finally, Victoria Malawey's book, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word*, is perhaps the second-most important source for my methodology after Nobile's article.[63] In her chapter on "Quality," she discusses several of the different vocal-timbral characteristics I am interested in, and she gives examples for their affective meanings. This is not to say that breathiness equates to femininity in every situation. However, it is helpful to see her review of several different existing analyses to see how breathiness (and other qualities) are typically viewed. In particular, I use her discussion of breathiness, brightness, and twang, to better understand how we perceive these princess voices as hyperfeminine.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation comes to you in four main parts. Each central chapter is structured around case studies of princess songs between 1989-present, focusing on the Renaissance Era (1989-1998) and the Modern Princesses (2009-2016). See **Figure 1.3 for** a list of titles, princesses, and films. First, I pair Ariel and Belle together as the first Renaissance princesses and the start of many musical and extra-musical changes. Second, I pair Mulan and Pocahontas together as the last two Renaissance princesses and two characters who faced issues of stereotyping, "political correctness," and exoticism as Women of Color. Third, I dedicate a chapter solely to Rapunzel, drawn from an article I am working on for publication, where I consider her relationship with postfeminism in the early 21st century. Lastly, I consider the powerhouses Elsa, Anna, and Moana, as models of the most independent princesses yet, but also examples of Disney's ever-evolving relationship with indigenous cultures.

[63] Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word*, 94-125.

Chapter	Princesses	Films
1. Introduction		
Renaissance Era		
2. "I Want More:" Musical Theater, Ariel, and Belle	Ariel Belle	*The Little Mermaid* (1989) *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)
3. "You Think I'm An Ignorant Savage:" Stereotypes and Contradictions in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*	Pocahontas Mulan	*Pocahontas* (1995) *Mulan* (1998)
Modern Era		
4. "Running and Racing and Dancing and Chasing:" Rapunzel as a Postfeminist Princess in *Tangled*	Rapunzel	*Tangled* (2010)
5. "How Far I'll Go:" Elsa, Anna, and Moana in the Modern Era	Elsa and Anna Moana	*Frozen* (2013) *Moana* (2016)
6. Conclusion		

Figure 1.3, Princesses and Films in Each Chapter

My first analytical chapter, "'I Want More': Musical Theater, Ariel, and Belle (1989-91)," focuses on new musical theater vocal styles in Disney movie musicals, starting with *The Little Mermaid* (1989). All of the princesses' voice actors from this time period, including Jodi Benson, Paige O'Hara, Lea Salonga, and Judy Kuhn, were also Broadway stars, unlike their predecessors, and they sang with a more speech-like rather than "legit" musical theater voice. (For context, Adriana Caselotti and Mary Costa were opera singers, and Ilene Woods sang for the radio before working for Disney.) As a result, the Renaissance princess singing is more speech-inflected, and they begin to belt gradually more and more throughout the '90s. At the same time, these Renaissance-era

characters are more complex and allowed to have bigger dreams than just marrying a prince, like Ariel who dreams of becoming human, and Belle who dreams of adventure greater than her little village. In this chapter, I argue that stronger vocal timbres and stronger characters developed at the same time, reinforcing each other, in response to second- and third-wave feminism in the late 20th century.

My second analytical chapter, "Pocahontas and Mulan: Stereotypes and Contradictions (1995-98)," focuses on the exotic ways Disney presents the "Other" in *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). In an attempt to diversify their princesses, they looked to Native American and Chinese legends; however, they also whitewashed and romanticized Pocahontas's story and Westernized Mulan's. Additionally, Disney has continually conflated different Asian countries and cultures, such as casting Lea Salonga, a Philipina actress, to voice both Jasmine and Mulan, and using stereotypically pentatonic musical materials in both Pocahontas and Mulan. In this chapter, I argue that Pocahontas and Mulan's voices are stronger than their predecessors, but still largely in line with the cute-Disney-Princess voice of the '90s, lacking in individuality and cultural specificity. Although their instrumental musical materials are grossly stereotypical, Pocahontas's and Mulan's voices are not participating in this "Othering." On one hand, they are stronger, yes, but they also are assimilated into the white-coded Disney Princess sound by keeping much the same vocal styles as their predecessors Snow White through Belle.

My third analytical chapter comes from my article, "Musical Myths of Gender: Rapunzel as Postfeminist Princess," which analyzes Rapunzel's singing as a representation of postfeminist gender contradictions, and her timbre as a representation

of her coming-of-age story (*Tangled*, 2010). In this chapter, I argue that Rapunzel's use of Little-Girl Voice hyper-feminizes her, making her sound weak and childish, while her use of Belting makes her sound and appear strong. Rapunzel, in these ways, exemplifies the uncertain and sometimes contradictory attitude of postfeminism towards women and power, and she does not make a great leap forward even after a decade since *Mulan*.

Finally, my fourth analytical chapter, "'How Far I'll Go': Elsa, Anna, and Moana (2013-16)," considers two of the newest princesses, Elsa and Moana, as supposedly the most feminist or progressive princesses yet. In this chapter, I discuss song forms from popular music, range and register along with vocal timbre, and teleology in terms of their musical characterizations. I discuss Elsa and Anna as foils, Elsa as a queer icon, and Anna as satire, and intertextuality with *Wicked,* because Idina Menzel sings in both. With Moana, I also discuss how she was voiced by an actual 16-year-old Pacific Islander girl, an important step forward for representation within Disney. On the other hand, I also share some more critical takes from indigenous scholars regarding Disney's relationship with—and treatment of—indigenous storytelling. Spoiler alert: a big, American corporation was still profiting off of Sámi and Polynesian cultural materials.

These case studies as a whole show how vocal timbre can be used as a tool not just for characterization but also for storytelling, by tracking changes over the course of a song or an entire movie. Most importantly, princesses began to belt in the '90s at the same time that they started (gradually) taking ownership of their futures. In the 2010s, the more modern princesses begin to reject the assumption of heteronormative relationships, and exert even more power over their environment, sometimes literally casting magic. At the same time, I show how these princesses' voices still engage with

the hyperfeminine damsel archetype, as well as other stereotypical traits such as nurturing and making themselves seem small, young, and cute in response to the male gaze. Overall, the progress Disney makes in vocal and character strength is non-linear, imperfect, and variable within any given film or even song, but they do make progress from 1989 to today.

Chapter 2
"I Want More:" Musical Theater, Ariel, and Belle (1989-91)

Introduction

Before Ariel, the first three "original" Disney Princesses were voiced by two opera singers and one radio star: Adriana Caselotti, Mary Costa, and Ilene Woods.[64] In the "Renaissance" era (1989-98), however, new musical theater vocal styles began to take root in the Disney Princess songs we still know and love today. Beginning with Ariel (*The Little Mermaid,* 1989), and going all the way through to Mulan (*Mulan,* 1998), every single one of these voice actors was also on Broadway.[65] In this chapter, I focus on the first two Renaissance princesses, Ariel and Belle, in order to better understand how this vocal change first appeared in Disney musical history.

Around the year 1990, third-wave feminism was also influencing Disney's character development: for example, Ariel and Belle expressed goals, hopes, and dreams greater than just being rescued by and married to a prince. Ariel, for example, wishes for two legs to walk on and days spent up in the sun. Belle wants more than her provincial town, and is bookish, smart, and free-spirited. Ariel and Belle both demonstrate Gilligan's feminist "ethics of care" in their decision-making: they prioritize others' well-being before acting, thinking not just of themselves and their lovers, but their communities, too.[66] And they are both allowed the *choice* of marriage—even though they conform to this heteronormative convention, they verbally express their desire for Princes Eric and Adam (unlike the sleeping princesses Snow White and Aurora, for

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[64] Jennifer Fleeger, "The Disney Princess: Animation and Real Girls," 108-17.
[65] Jodi Benson - *Smile,* 1983 | Paige O'Hara - *Showboat,* 1989 | Lea Salonga - *Miss Saigon,* 1991 | Judy Kuhn, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* 1985. See also Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 120.
[66] Edwardo Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana: Understanding Disney's Feminist Transformation," in *Disney and Philosophy,* ed. Richard Davis (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 76.

example).[67] Importantly, too, the *process* of falling in love is portrayed on screen for the first time in *Beauty and the Beast*'s song, "Something There," rather than continuing to glorify the love-at-first-sight trope.[68]

This is not to say that the Renaissance-era princesses completely break away from the mold. They are still light skinned, thin and able-bodied, cis and straight, and dependent on men in many ways. But they become more complex characters, express more independence, and sing very differently than their predecessors. In this chapter, I argue that the musical and cultural shifts occurring around 1990 result in stronger and more complex female characters in the Renaissance era. Vocal timbre, lyrical content, and formal structures, as well as the visual portrayal of these princesses, all are changing at the same time. For example, Belle is the first princess to belt; Ariel is the first princess to dream of something other than a love interest; and both of their songs are longer and more complicated than those who came before them, giving both of them more voice. Because a character's voice gives us insight into their identity, these princess songs reveal a great deal about how Disney portrayed womanhood in the era of third-wave feminism.

In this chapter, I introduce three main shifts: the advent of musical theater vocal styles, new types of lyrical content that give us insight into new types of princess characters, and bigger and more complex musical forms. All three components contribute to the development of newer, more modern, and more complex female characters in the '90s. Through two case studies of Ariel (*The Little Mermaid,* 1989) and

[67] Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana," 76.
Carrie L. Cokely, "Disney, the Heterosexual Imaginary and Animated Film," 167-82.
[68] Lynda Haas and Shaina Trapedo, "Disney Corporation," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, ed. Pauline Greenhill et al. (Routledge, 2018), 183.

Belle (*Beauty and the Beast,* 1991), I analyze five songs, compare and contrast the two princesses, and consider how they fit in with these changing ideas of femininity. I argue that, by using more chest voice and even by belting, Ariel and Belle are vocally stronger than their predecessors. I also argue that longer and more complex songs allow Disney to build fuller and more faceted characters; ones who have wants and needs of their own, not just wishing for romance. They are hardly perfect, but they represent major changes in the Disney Princess franchise, and therefore in shifting contemporary attitudes towards women around the year 1990.

Musical Theater Vocal Styles

Part of why this change is so significant is the gap between Aurora (1959) and Ariel (1989). As musicologist Ryan Bunch writes, "Disney animated features have always included songs, but since the [Renaissance era], Disney's animated features have both modelled their songs and forms on the contemporary Broadway musical and influenced it in turn."[69] And in the thirty years between 1959-89, musical theater shifted towards a different set of vocal styles, and took on a great deal of influence from pop and rock music. For example, earlier, more traditional singing styles still stuck around, as we hear in Frederica von Stade's voice in *The Sound of Music,* 1988.[70] Frederica von Stade, like Adriana Casellotti and Mary Costa, was an opera singer first and foremost; and so she sings with what we would today call a "legit" style. Voice teacher Kevin Michael Jones defines "legit" singing as "consistent vibrato, tall and round vowels, a balanced tone

[69] Ryan Bunch, "Disney's Musical Tropes In *Frozen*," 89-106.
[70] Frederica Von Stade, "The Sound of Music," *Spotify* (Telarc Int. Corp., distributed by Concord, 1988) https://open.spotify.com/album/2RytaEeXN85B2yQMs2l7Z5?si=c6umIIicSrawtMt-QmOtvg.

quality that is equally bright and dark (aka 'chiaroscuro'), and crisp/proper diction."[71] Though perhaps overly simplifying the issue, Jennifer Fleeger also notes the frequent use of "head voice typical of opera singing," and I too hear more head voice in these original princesses and more chest voice in the latter ones.[72] Von Stade's vocal style was much more similar to the earlier princesses from Snow White (1937) to Aurora (1959), exemplifying the still-present influence of classical vocal training and "legit" singing even in 1988.

However, Paige O'Hara (*Sitting Pretty,* 1990) and Jodi Benson ("Disneyland," 1994) both sound quite different, even outside of their Disney Princess personas, just a few years later. O'Hara and Benson sing in a "light, speech-driven 'mix,'"[73] and they "move from an introspective, breathy sound to a Broadway belt in a manner of minutes,"[74] as I will further explore in this chapter's analyses. They both sang and acted on Broadway *before* their Disney Princess movies came out, and we hear this new style in their brighter vowels, close relationship between speech and singing, and new vocal timbres.

Finally, continuing this trend in the late nineties, Daphne Rubin-Vega sings with a rock-influenced vocal style in RENT (1996): darker, throatier, raspier, more pressed, and more belted. Though RENT is not quite the same genre as Disney's '90s musicals, it gives us a better idea of the context of '80s and '90s Broadway, as rock, hip-hop, and pop began to wield more influence in musical theater in the latter half of the 20th century. In general, I hear more frequent use of chest voice and belting the later we get into the Disney Princesses of the '90s.

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[71] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[72] Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 123.
[73] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[74] Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 123.

Belting in particular begins to show up gradually throughout the Renaissance era princess songs, usually at climatic moments, when they are most emotionally invested in what they are singing. Benson, O'Hara, Salonga, and Kuhn will bring their chest voices up to about C5 for a few notes, but they'll also sometimes flip into head voice, or stay in mixed voice the whole time, so it is a vocal color they choose for effect once in a while, not often. Anika Noni Rose (Tiana, 2009) and Idina Menzel (Elsa, 2013), in contrast, are "belters," singing primarily in what Jones calls "chest-dominant registration," belting for longer, and higher (up to E♭5), than their predecessors.

Additionally, in contrast to belting, another new vocal style began to take Disney by storm in the '80s and '90s: something I call "Little-Girl Voice." I define this phenomenon as a combination of mixed voice, breathy quality, twang, and mid-treble range, all of which work together to characterize this era of princesses as small, feminine, and cute. Where Snow White and Aurora sang almost entirely in head voice and soprano range, Ariel and Belle sing in mixed voice and a more middling range from approximately C4 to C5.

In summary, vocal styles—vibrato use, vowel placement, registration, and vocal timbre—changed significantly during the Renaissance Era of the Disney Princesses. In 1989 and 1991, we hear Little-Girl Voice and Belting for the first time, immediately marking these princesses as different from their predecessors. In my following two case studies, I will show in more detail how Ariel and Belle utilize these vocal qualities for expressive effect.

Lyrical Content

Traditionally, a Disney Princess song before 1989 would focus on love, dreams, and sometimes even a prince in particular.[75] These early princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, were flat, one-dimensional characters—we never learn their likes, dislikes, skills, or smarts. These original damsels act more like objects of a prince's affection than protagonists in their own stories. But in the Renaissance era, Ariel and Belle both defy the trope of romance-obsessed "I Want" songs with "Part of Your World" and "Belle." Ariel, for example, dreams about becoming human and exploring the world above water, while Belle dreams of adventure and exploring the world outside of her little town. They both start the movie with driving desires of their own, desires that characterize them as bold, ambitious, and intelligent. As Fleeger writes, "the specific men are not actually all that important. Instead, it is vital that each woman find some new place to live."[76] They want to be free of the pressures of their stifling little hometowns.

Additionally, in the song "Something There," we get to see how Belle and the Beast gradually fall in love over a period of time. As the leaves turn, and the snow falls, it turns from fall to winter. By showing that love takes time, and the activities Belle and the Beast enjoy together—like playing in the snow together—Disney adds depth to the old love-at-first-sight trope.[77] Instead, Belle and the Beast form a relationship based on shared activities and mutual trust, rather than shallow physical attraction.

Lyrics in these Disney songs, then, do more than just tell us how characters are feeling in one given moment. By analyzing how lyrics change between multiple songs in

[75] See Appendix A for complete lyrics charts for Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora.
[76] Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 121.
[77] Haas and Trapedo, "Disney Corporation," 183.

the same film, or across the gamut of Disney films, we can learn more about how these princesses are *changing*, in their own character arcs and in the arc of feminist history.

Form (in Relation to Voice)

As musical theater scholar Graham Wood writes, "full-blown songs arise as a means of providing narrative climax" in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast,* both composed by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman.[78] These songs are certainly "full-blown" with their bigger, more varied, and more complex forms, in addition to their employment of a wider palette of vocal timbres. For example, Snow White and Aurora each sing for exactly 30 and 60 seconds respectively, while Ariel's song is 3'15" and Belle's is a whopping 5'09" in comparison. "Part of Your World" includes six unique musical sections, arranged in an expanded Tin-Pan-Alley AABA form, which interact with Jodi Benson's vocal timbres in new and interesting ways (more on that later). "Belle," meanwhile, includes five unique sections, trading singing time between Belle, Gaston, and the townsfolk. Paige O'Hara's vocal quality is pretty clearly delineated by these formal boundaries, as we might expect, but her eponymous song is also the first time we hear a breathy-to-belty trajectory from start to finish (more on that later, too). Unlike the earliest princess songs, which were short and relatively simple in scope, Menken provides ambitious songs for Ariel and Belle in the early Renaissance Era.

As we'll see in the analyses to follow, these three aspects: vocal timbre, lyrics, and form, are all developing at the same time and interacting with each other. Instead of opera singers, these princess voices are musical-theater-trained, using Little-Girl Voice, Modal Voice, and Belt much much more than "Legit" or Whisper singing. Instead of

[78] Wood, "Examining the film musical," 319.

short, simple songs about love, Ariel and Belle both dream of escaping social and physical bounds: they want *more*. And Ariel and Belle both play a role in saving their princes, turning the script around: Ariel rescues Eric from a shipwreck, and Belle's love turns the Beast human again. Through voice and song, Disney's Renaissance Princesses reveal increasingly independent, complex, and bold expressions of femininity in a new modern era.

CASE STUDY: Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

Coming after a decades-long absence of princess movies, Ariel brought in the Disney Renaissance with her movie, *The Little Mermaid,* in 1989. As film music expert Robynn Stilwell writes, "the modern rebirth of the Disney musical with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) [...] prefigures a broader 1990s wave of film stories of girls finding their voices (both literal and metaphorical).[79] Not only is a woman's voice a sonic embodiment of her feelings, hopes, and dreams; it also has power and agency, moving these films' narratives along. I am interested in how these princesses sing because, as Stilwell quotes from Carol Gilligan, "the voice is pivotal as both an agent and symbol of maturation in girls."[80]

Feminist literary scholars offer varying takes on Ariel's character, but they all agree that much had changed since the original damsel-princesses. For example, Lynda Haas and Shaina Trapedo claim that Ariel's "only motivation is to find her prince,"[81] which is partially true—*after* "Part of Your World (Reprise), she *is* obsessed with Prince

[79] Robynn J. Stilwell, "Girls' Voices, Boys' Stories, and Self-Determination in Animated Films since 2012," in *Voicing the Cinema: Film Music and the Integrated Soundtrack,* ed. James Buhler and Hannah Lewis (University of Illinois Press, 2020), 148.
[80] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982), cited in Stilwell, "Girls' Voices," 150-51.
[81] Haas and Trapedo, "Disney Corporation," 182.

Eric. However, in my analysis, I emphasize that the first "Part of Your World" is all about why Ariel wants to live above water: her initial dream, at least, is not tied to a man. And as Megan Lloyd writes, Ariel "saves her own Prince Charming [...] not only does Ariel save Eric, but throughout the film she is the hero."[82] But when she saves him from a shipwreck, she falls in love with him, and "falls prey to love at first sight [and] the stereotypical romantic notions of a traditional patriarchal storyline."[83] Ariel is "fiery and headstrong," "nuanced and flawed,"[84] "inquisitive and curious about everything," and ultimately "unruly"[85] because she does not require a man to save her... or at least, not entirely. She *does* require Eric to kiss her, and act of "true love," to get her voice back, and then we get the typical, cliché happily-ever-after wedding bells to conclude the story.

In this case study, I consider the ways in which Ariel exhibits agency and inquisitiveness in the first "Part of Your World," followed by infatuation and self-sacrifice in the "Reprise." She also *sounds* quite different from the early princesses, using a wider range of vocal qualities, including the new Little-Girl Voice and Modal Voice. And, to top it off, her songs are longer and much more complicated than her predecessors', allowing her the space to exhibit character development and vocal trajectories. In *The Little Mermaid,* Ariel's vocal palette includes Mutter, Modal Voice, Little-Girl Voice, and Whisper. See in **Figure 2.1** for a chart of these vocal styles and their properties:

[82] Megan Lloyd, "Unruly Ariel," in *Disney and Philosophy,* ed. Richard B. Davis (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 4.
[83] Lloyd, "Unruly Ariel," 8.
[84] Melinda Parks, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism Is Changing Disney's Princesses," *Highbrow Magazine* (Oct. 23, 2014).
[85] Lloyd, "Unruly Ariel," 8.

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 2.1, Ariel's Vocal Palette

Lyrics in "Part of Your World"

Crucially, in "Part of Your World" we learn that Ariel's hopes and dreams are not focused on a prince. Given that, what *does* she want? She wants to be free of her father's domineering control, and she sees the world above water as representative of that freedom. Her lyrics (see **Fig 2.2**) outline the initial dramatic problem: Ariel wants freedom and independence. In fact, throughout her entire "I Want" song, Ariel speaks in first person, about her own situation and dreams, instead of referencing a person she loves.[86] The only other pronoun involved in "Part of Your World" is a "he," presumably her father, in the first [spoken] line. Even though the title is "Part of Your World," the repeating lyric actually in the song is "part of *that* world," because she has not yet met the prince, nor does she desire his love. Taken together, Ariel's new drive for

[86] Show White, for example, wishes "for the one I love to find me," and Aurora sings directly to a "you" who will "love me at once."

independence and lack of a love interest (yet) immediately set her apart from traditional *Disney damselhood.* Her predecessors Snow White and Aurora were already in love before they even met their princes!

"Part of Your World"

[Maybe he's right.
Maybe there is something
the matter with me.
I just don't see how a world
that makes such wonderful
things could be bad.] [spoken]

Look at this stuff
Isn't it neat?
Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?
Wouldn't you think I'm the girl
The girl who has everything?

Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you think
[Sure] [spoken], she's got everything

I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty
I've got whozits and whatzits galore
You want thingamabobs?
I've got twenty!
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more

I wanna be where the people are
I wanna see, wanna see them dancin'
Walking around on those - what do you call 'em?
Oh - feet!

Flippin' your fins, you don't get too far
Legs are required for jumping, dancing
Strolling along down a - what's that word again?
Street

Up where they walk, up where they run
Up where they stay all day in the sun
Wanderin' free - wish I could be
Part of that world

What would I give if I could live out of these waters?
What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand?
Bet'cha on land they understand
Bet they don't reprimand their daughters
Bright young women sick of swimmin'
Ready to stand

And ready to know what the people know
Ask 'em my questions and get some answers
What's a fire and why does it - what's the word?
Burn?

When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?
Out of the sea - wish I could be
Part of that world

Figure 2.2, "Part of Your World" Lyrics

In “Part of Your World,” Ariel goes through an interesting sequence of phrasing, from “I’ve got” (gadgets and gizmos) to “I want” (to be where the people are) to “what would I give?” (to live above water) to “I wish” (to be part of that world). She moves from listing all of the materialistic things she *has* to describing all of the things she will be able to *do* above water. Additionally, the distinction between “wanting”—to have a desire for—and “wishing”—to have a desire for (something, such as something unattainable)—intensifies Ariel’s feelings as she gets more and more specific about her wants and wishes, and reminds us at the very end of the song that her wish is unattainable. How will she ever become human if her father, the god of the sea, refuses to change her? We also learn that she would sacrifice something for her humanity, thanks to the lines beginning with “what would I give?”

Vocal Timbre in “Part of Your World”

In terms of timbre, the first thing I notice when I listen to “Part of Your World” is Ariel’s speech-like Little-Girl Voice, marked in purple. For most of the first half of the song (“Look at this stuff…” to “I want more…”), she sings in mixed voice, neither too chest- nor too head-dominant, in a comfortable middle range from C4 to A4. She also sounds breathy and airy at the beginning here, as if she’s not phonating with her full voice, and twangy, as if she’s singing through a small vocal tract. See in **Figure 2.3** how she progresses through Whispering, Little-Girl Voice, and Modal Voice in “Part of Your World.”

“Part of Your World”

[Maybe he's right.
Maybe there is something
the matter with me.
I just don't see how a world
that makes such wonderful
things could be bad.] [spoken]

Look at this stuff
Isn't it neat?
Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?
Wouldn't you think I'm the girl
The girl who has everything?

Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you think
[Sure] [spoken], she's got everything

I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty
I've got whozits and whatzits galore
You want thingamabobs?
I've got twenty!
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more

I wanna be where the people are
I wanna see, wanna see them dancin'
Walking around on those - what do you call 'em?
Oh - feet!

Flippin' your fins, you don't get too far
Legs are required for jumping, dancing
Strolling along down a - what's that word again?
Street

Up where they walk, up where they run
Up where they stay all day in the sun
Wanderin' free - wish I could be
Part of that world

What would I give if I could live out of these waters?
What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand?
Bet'cha on land they understand
Bet they don't reprimand their daughters
Bright young women sick of swimmin'
Ready to stand

And ready to know what the people know
Ask 'em my questions and get some answers
What's a fire and why does it - what's the word?
Burn?

When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?
Out of the sea - wish I could be
Part of that world

Ariel’s Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high),
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 2.3, “Part of Your World” Lyrics, Color-Coded for Timbre

In addition to her small, constricted vocal resonance, Ariel’s vowels are relatively small, wide, and bright, forming a characteristically musical-theater sound. For example,

listen to Ariel sing the [i] ("ee") vowel in "neat" and "complete."[87] A classical [i] would be formed by raising the back of the tongue, not the front, and keeping a round, tall mouth shape, while a musical-theater [i] raises the front of the tongue and widens the mouth shape laterally, something I hear in Ariel's sound in "Part of Your World."[88] By adopting a more contemporary method of producing vowels through mouth shape and forward placement, Benson's vowels reinforce her brighter timbre. When taken altogether, these vocal characteristics—mixed voice, comfortable range, breathiness, (oral) twang, and brightness—characterize Ariel as small, feminine, and cute.

In particular, during "Part of Your World," this Little-Girl Voice shows up most in the first half, when Ariel is singing about her current life and wanting something more than that. Here, she is wistful, reflecting on what she has and what she does not; wishing for an unidentified "more." In the second half, she also uses Little-Girl Voice and an even quieter whisper (in light pink) when she asks silly questions like "what's that word again?" Ariel's use of Little-Girl Voice is connected to her naïveté and her wishing for more than just her childhood whimsies.

During the second half of the song, however, she uses Modal voice much more frequently, with more chest voice in the mix and less breathiness, when she sings about the things she wants and what she imagines life on land to be like. She even borders on belting—close but not quite, in my personal opinion—at the climax of the song, going up to C5 for "When's it my turn? Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?" Here, she is strong and confident, singing with her full voice, not breathy at all, but I don't hear

[87] Steve Rodgers teaches us that a good song composer is aware of phonemes when they write a song. For this reason, I believe the tightly paired rhymes that highlight the bright [i] vowels were intentional from songwriters Menken and Ashman. Stephen Rodgers, "The Fourth Dimension of a Song," *Spectrum* 37.1 (Spring 2015): 144-53.
[88] Davids and LaTour, "Vowels," 93-122.

the weight or the strain of belting quite yet. By moving from a breathier girly voice to a more neutral, full voice, I hear Ariel as becoming more and more confident in her wants and dreams over the course of this song. In its function as an "I Want" Song, Ariel declares her intent to find a way above water during "Part of Your World," and in doing so, shows personal growth from childish naïveté to confident commitment.

That all being said, Ariel's voice in "Part of Your World" is hardly a binary between Little-Girl Voice and Modal Voice. Instead, she shifts noticeably between her head, chest, and various shades of mixed voice, and varies the amount of breathiness and twanginess in her sound throughout the song. Additionally, some of these shifts are more gradual than others, such as her gradual timbral crescendo from "I wanna be where the people are" to "up where they stay all day in the sun" over the course of ten lines. By timbral crescendo, I mean that not only does her voice get higher in pitch, and louder, but also that the quality of her voice is stronger, with more chest resonance and more solid phonation (i.e., no/less breathiness). She crescendoes in multiple vocal domains, including pitch, dynamics, and timbre.

Ariel's variety within her vocal color palette is another element that sets her far apart from her predecessor princesses, who typically sang in one or two shades of the same color for an entire song, especially whisper and "legit" singing. For example, Aurora maintains a much more consistent vocal timbre, with a lifted soft palate, rounded vowels, and a light, breathy head or head/mixed voice in "Once Upon a Dream" (**see Fig. 2.4**). Snow White and Cinderella similarly use only one or two closely related tone colors: Snow White sings entirely in "legit," much like Aurora, and Cinderella's voice is breathy,

more open, and more chest-dominant than her contemporaries, in what I call "soft voice."

Mary Costa as Aurora, "Once Upon a Dream," *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)

I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream
I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam
Yet I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem
But if I know you, I know what you'll do
You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream

[humming]
But if I know you, I know what you do
You love me at once
The way you did once upon a dream [prince takes over]

Aurora's Voices:
"Legit" (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high) and Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)

Figure 2.4, "Once Upon a Dream" Lyrics

Their smaller palette of vocal colors is much more typical of a classically trained singer, as seamlessness throughout registers is highly valued in the *bel canto* tradition.[89] Additionally, the variety (or lack thereof) of vocal timbres is another feature that builds a character out to be more complex, including a wider variety of emotions, expressions *of* those emotions, and the possibility of change even within a song. Aurora stays flat throughout "Once Upon A Dream," as she begins and ends the song dreaming of a prince, prettily wishing for his love. In contrast, Ariel finds her footing and becomes more confident than naïve over the course of her song, "Part of Your World."

[89] Miller, "Registers Defined Through Visual Feedback," 134.

Form in "Part of Your World"

Early princess songs previously used simple forms, like the classic Tin Pan Alley AABA structure,[90] as well as classical sentences and periods.[91] They typically proceed only once through the form, allowing the princess only a minute or two of singing. While Ariel's "Part of Your World" is built in dialogue with Tin Pan Alley norms, it features more variety and is extended to three minutes and fifteen seconds in contrast to her predecessors. Previous princess songs might be three to four minutes, but they include long drawn-out introductions, spoken middle sections, and/or princes taking over halfway through. Ariel, however, sings her own 3-minute song all on her own with only brief orchestral pauses (as shown in **Fig. 2.5**):

"I'm Wishing / One Song" total length: 3:07	Snow White's singing time: 0:17-1:29 **1 minute 12 seconds**	prince takes over at 1:30
"A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes" total length: 4:34	Cinderella's singing time: 1:23-2:30 2:56-3:06 4:10-4:34 **1 minute 37 seconds**	long orchestral intro, spoken middle section, humming 3:06-4:10
"An Unusual Prince / Once Upon a Dream" total length: 3:30	Aurora's singing time: 1:05-2:03 **58 seconds**	long orchestral intro, prince takes over at 2:03
"Part of Your World" total length: 3:15	Ariel's singing time: 0:11-2:55 **2 minutes 44 seconds**	short intro/outro

Figure 2.5, Singing Time in the First Four Princess Songs

[90] For a discussion of Tin Pan Alley form in musical theater, see: Knapp and Morris, "Tin Pan Alley Songs," 81-96.
[91] See Appendix A for basic formal labels for Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora's iconic songs.

Ariel's "Part of Your World" is composed of a sectional verse and a sectional chorus, with several unique internal sections—see **Figure 2.6**.[92] A larger and more complex song form gives Ariel the space to become a more complex character. Not only does she get 250 words (compared to Aurora's 80) to introduce herself to us, but she also gets the chance to grow as a character from the verse to the chorus. Aurora's "Once Upon a Dream" is singly focused on her prince, while Ariel talks about what she has, what she wants, and what she would do to get there. In addition, more variations in form and vocal timbre expand the possibilities of who Ariel is. She is more than a damsel, just a flat object of a prince's attention. She has, she wants, and she wishes, and she will *do* something about it.

Zooming in, one moment of colorful formal and timbral interaction occurs at the end of the verse in "Part of Your World." Ariel gradually crescendoes within a Whisper and Little-Girl Voice throughout the verse, but at the very end, she grows into her full, Modal voice when she sings "I want more." This is less breathy, with more vibrato at the end of the note, as is typical of musical theater, and I hear a more chest-dominance in the mix. At the same time, the orchestra lands on a significant, drawn-out V^7 chord, setting up our expectation of a climactic arrival in the chorus. Instead, the orchestration thins to just a few winds and strings, Ariel returns to a breathy, whispery voice, and the music quiets to a lower dynamic level at the top of the chorus. This subverts our expectations of a strong resolution to start the chorus. Within the chorus's multiple sections, as well, Ariel grows from a quiet "I wanna be where the people are" to a confident "Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?"

[92] John Covach, "Form in Rock Music,", 70.

“Part of Your World”

[Maybe he's right.
Maybe there is something
the matter with me.
I just don't see how a world
that makes such wonderful
things could be bad.] [spoken]

Sectional Verse (X)
Look at this stuff
Isn't it neat?
Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?
Wouldn't you think I'm the girl
The girl who has everything?

(X)
Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you think
[Sure] [spoken], she's got everything

(Y)
I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty
I've got whozits and whatzits galore
You want thingamabobs?
I've got twenty!
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more (**V**^{7})

Sectional Chorus (A)*
I wanna be where the people are
I wanna see, wanna see them dancin'
Walking around on those - what do you call 'em?
Oh - feet!

(A)
Flippin' your fins, you don't get too far
Legs are required for jumping, dancing
Strolling along down a - what's that word again?
Street

Up where they walk, up where they run
Up where they stay all day in the sun
Wanderin' free - wish I could be
Part of that world

(B)
What would I give if I could live out of these waters?
What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand?
Bet'cha on land they understand
Bet they don't reprimand their daughters
Bright young women sick of swimmin'
Ready to stand (**V**)

(A)
And ready to know what the people know
Ask 'em my questions and get some answers
What's a fire and why does it - what's the word?
Burn?

When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?
Out of the sea - wish I could be
Part of that world

Ariel’s Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high),
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid

Figure 2.6, “Part of Your World″ Lyrics, Timbre, and Form

Still, I would hesitate to claim that in all music, or even in all Disney music, more complex forms equate to more complex characters. However, in this specific instance, increased complexity in multiple domains—lyrics, timbre, and form—allows us to get to

know Ariel better, and also for Ariel to express herself in a wider variety of emotions. Many things were changing in the late '80s and early '90s for these Disney Renaissance Princesses. Longer forms, stronger lyrics, and more powerful vocal timbres coincide with multi-faceted female characters who are more independent than ever before.

"Part of Your World (Reprise)"

Earlier, I said that Ariel was not prince-obsessed yet. However, soon after she sings "Part of Your World," she gazes upon Prince Eric, becomes infatuated with him, and saves him from a shipwreck. After she delivers him safely to shore, while he is still waking up, Ariel sings this Reprise to him, looking down at his motionless body, haloed in golden light like an angel. Ironically, even though she saves him (instead of *being* saved), she falls in love with him at that moment, and her earlier independent wish of walking above water as a human becomes tangled up in her romantic feelings for Prince Eric. She sees him as a way of getting her wish, so despite *her* saving him, she still plays into the old-fashioned view of women's romantic attraction being tied to the man's ability to save, protect, and take care of them.

Ariel's shifting priorities are shown through the change of pronouns from the initial "Part of Your World" to its "Reprise." Even though the title is about *your* world, in her first iconic song, Ariel never actually uses a pronoun to refer to anyone—not Prince Eric, not a he, not a him.[93] She wants to be part of *that* world instead. However, in the "Reprise," she switches to singing about how she wants to be part of *your* world, and gradually moves towards a direct second-person address: *you* and me, *watch* and *you*'ll see, et cetera. (See **Fig. 2.7.**) By using second person pronouns, Ariel reveals her new

[93] Caveat: she does mention her father, a *he*, in the spoken introduction, but never in the sung stanzas.

priorities: she wants to be with Eric, and her dreams are transferred onto him, since she wants to be part of *his* world. More than that, however, by delaying her use of second-person pronouns, Ariel shifts gradually to a more and more intimate delivery. Initially, she sings freely about herself to no-one in particular, but in the Reprise, she specifically sings to Eric and Eric alone.[94]

"Part of Your World (Reprise)"

Chorus (A)
What would I give to live where you are?
What would I pay to stay here beside you?
What would I do to see you smiling at me?

Where would we walk? Where would we run?
If we could stay all day in the sun?
Just you and me, and I could be part of your world

[orchestral interlude]

(B)
I don't know when, I don't know how
But I know something's starting right now
Watch and you'll see, someday I'll be part of your world

Ariel's Voices:
Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 2.7, "Part of Your World" (Reprise), Lyrics, Timbre, and Form

[94] For more on this topic, see Matt BaileyShea, "Address," in *Lines and Lyrics: An Introduction to Poetry and Song* (Yale University Press, 2021). Also: Matt BaileyShea, "From Me To You: Dynamic Discourse in Popular Music," *Music Theory Online* 20.4 (Dec. 2014).

Using similar iconography to Rapunzel's saving-a-prince moment from *Tangled* (see Chapter 4), Ariel holds him in her arms, and sings sweetly to him, in a scene where he might be dying. (Luckily, he soon coughs up water and regains consciousness.) Ariel, like Rapunzel, also uses a sweet whispered head voice when first singing to her unconscious prince. Her vocal timbre is lighter, gentler, and more hesitant, and she takes on a self-sacrificing tone in her lyrics: "what would I give," "what would I pay," "what would I do." In fact, like Rapunzel, she *must* sacrifice something of herself (Rapunzel's hair : Ariel's voice) to be with the prince.

Unlike Rapunzel, however, Ariel grows stronger and uses her modal voice at the end of the reprise when she stops asking what she would do and starts declaring what *will* happen. She switches into the future tense rather than the conditional tense of those woulds, coulds, and shoulds. Similar to her growing confidence in the original "Part of Your World," in the "Reprise," Ariel once again gains assertion and drive—her dream is no longer just a dream, but a goal.

Also in the "Reprise," the musical materials—melodies, harmonies, and some of the lyrics—harken back to the original song, taking us through a shortened version of the AABA chorus (just AB, this time). Musically, Ariel puts her dream onto Eric. Even before Ursula steals her voice, these two songs set up a story in which Ariel has to earn Eric's love in order to become truly human.

Conclusion

Ariel's songs highlight big changes that were happening to Disney musical styles, vocal styles, and character development in the early Renaissance era. Her lyrics describe a "round" (i.e., not flat) character, a multi-faceted human with likes and dislikes and desires of her own. Her vocal timbres become more speech-like, more musical-theater-like, and more varied than her predecessors', allowing her to express a wider emotional palette. More complex musical forms allow for us to get to know her better, and to see how she grows and changes, unlike Aurora, who focuses solely on dreaming of her prince, and remains vocally and musically stagnant throughout her 1-minute song "Once Upon a Dream." It is really staggering to see and hear how different Ariel is when she dreams of walking on land, and goes through a variety of emotions and vocal qualities in "Part of Your World."

Given the history of Aurora, who attracts a prince to her in the woods with her singing in "Once Upon a Dream," and Snow White, who also attracts a prince to her with "I'm Wishing," it is unsurprising that scholars might interpret a princess voice as simply the object of a prince's affection.[95] Like her beauty, her kindness, or her graceful dancing (see also: Cinderella at the ball), so too can one's voice function as a means to attract a man. Ariel's voice even spellbinds Prince Eric so much so that he *must* find the girl with the beautiful voice in order to marry.

On the other hand, Ariel's voice is also her own power. First, as I've shown here, she controls more of the narrative by singing longer and more independent songs. Musical theater songs, after becoming integrated into the musical, often advance the plot, and so Ariel gets to be the storyteller during her songs. Additionally, her voice acts

[95] Haas and Trapedo, "Disney Corporation," 182.

as a magical power, attracting men like the sirens of legend. It is so powerful, in fact, that Ursula steals it from her and uses it to make Eric fall in love with her (Ursula), disguised as "Vanessa." On the other end of this deal, Ariel loses her voice, and is power*less* to attract Eric except with her beauty and expressive eyes. In order to be the perfectly pretty **object** of Eric's affection, her voice has been taken away from her. In fact, Ursula, the witch, tells us "it's she who holds her tongue who gets a man," playing into the patriarchal idea that women should be seen and not heard.[96] Historically speaking, women who use their voices too much in fairy tales will often lose their voices, like Ariel.[97]

At the same time, I recognize that using her voice to attract Prince Eric does not really challenge the patriarchal norm of girl is pretty → guy falls in love with her, so it should be noted that while Ariel has some power, she still falls trap to the same heteronormative love story trope that we've seen so many times with storybook princesses.[98] She may have more power, complexity, and agency than Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, but she still leaves much to be desired in the way she relates to other characters in her story, especially Prince Eric.

[96] A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 179.
[97] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas," abstract and 60-61.
[98] Lloyd, "Unruly Ariel," 8.

CASE STUDY: Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)

The second princess of the Disney Renaissance era is Belle of *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is notable for her book smarts—she loves reading and stands out from the rest of her town with her lofty goals. She doesn't want to settle down with the popular man in town (Gaston) just because he's handsome. She wants adventure and values kindness and a thirst for learning in a partner, not just appearance. Already for these reasons, Belle stands out from the traditional Disney damsel archetype, because she is more than just a pretty face, and she doesn't fall for the first man who is interested in her. Later in the movie, too, we see her and the Beast experience the process of falling in love over time, rather than repeating the love-at-first-sight trope even Ariel fell into. Overall, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* sends the message that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and that women can be smart, too.

As Marina Warner puts it, Disney was "vividly aware of contemporary sexual politics" and the emergence of third-wave feminism in the early 1990s.[99] As such, they created a princess who was just progressive enough to appeal to the masses: what Allison Craven calls "consumer feminism."[100] Belle bravely sets out to save her father from the Beast, engaging in the coded-masculine act of rescuing. She also recognizes that Gaston may be handsome, but he is a "macho fluffhead," to quote Elizabeth Dodson Gray, and she refuses to comply with the expectations of her village's patriarchal values in marrying him.[101]

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[99] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Chatto and Winus, 1994), in Allison Craven, "Beauty and the Bells: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 9.2 (2002): 124.
[100] Craven, "Beauty and the Bells," 125-27.
[101] Elizabeth Dodson Gray, "Beauty and the Beast: A Parable for Our Time," in *Women Respond to the Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection,* ed. Kay Leigh Hagan (Pandora, 1992), 159.

Of course, she still had her own problems, like her constant self-sacrificial nature, her attraction to a violent man (the Beast is not just beastly-ugly, he is also beastly in his temper), and that's not even mentioning the bestiality or Stockholm Syndrome aspect of it all. Feminists had plenty to criticize about Disney's Belle,[102] but at least her surface-level improvement satisfied a mass audience.[103] It is true that she and Ariel were quite novel for their time, especially compared to the old-fashioned damsels of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora.

As we will see in the ensuing analysis, Belle has much in common with her direct predecessor Ariel, but they are not entirely the same. Her lyrics reveal similar non-romantic desires, and she still eventually falls in love with the prince. Unlike Ariel, however, we see a montage that reveals how and why she falls for him, by reading together, dining together, and playing outside together. Her vocal timbres are varied, and her song forms are complex, like Ariel, but she typically keeps the same vocal style for an entire formal section, and she belts just a tiny bit in her eponymous "Belle" song. She and Ariel both use a good amount of Little-Girl Voice and Modal Voice, but Belle is the first to Belt and the first to sing above a crowd. She also avoids whispering like her many predecessors (Ariel, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora), acting not quite so cute, submissive, or naïve, as they had been. See **Figure 2.8** for Belle's vocal colors.

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[102] Haas and Trapedo, "Disney Corporation," 183.
Chyng Feng Sun et al., *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Media Education Foundation, 2002), Transcript, 8.
June Cummins, "Romancing the Plot: The Real Beast of Disney's Beauty and the Beast," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 20.1 (1995): 22-27.
Craven, "Beauty and the Bells," 130.
[103] Craven, "Beauty and the Bells," 127.
Sue Short, *Fairy Tale and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 28, 54-55.
Tomasz Z. Majkowski and Agata Zarzycka, "Romance [The Transmedial Romance of 'Beauty and the Beast'], in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures,* ed. Greenhill et. al (Routledge 2018), 600.

Finally, Belle gets to sing three songs, unlike Ariel's two. Following through with the idea that a woman's voice is also her power over the narrative, Belle has a little more agency, and a little more control, over her own tale. Belle even gets to choose between two male suitors, rather than one. Even though her choice is between a Beast and a narcissist, her ability to choose is itself important.

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 2.8, Belle's Vocal Palette

Lyrics in "Belle" and her "Reprise"

Belle, like Ariel, expresses her initial desire in her opening "I Want" song "Belle" and her "Reprise." See **Figure 2.9** for the lyrics to both songs. What she wants is, again, not a man, but rather "more than this provincial life." While vague, Belle echoes what Ariel wanted—freedom from their socially oppressive surroundings, and independence from what that society expects of them. Importantly: Belle does *not* dream of a man, or to be a "little wife." In their interpretation of these songs, musicologists Potgieter and Potgieter

say that Belle and Ariel are calling for "liberation and equality", in the same category as the other Renaissance princesses.[104] While "liberation and equality" might be a bit strong in my opinion, the gist is the same: Belle and Ariel want something more out of their lives than the same old boy-meets-girl, boy-saves-girl, boy-marries-girl storyline.

In the "Reprise," Belle becomes even stronger and declares she does *not* want to marry Gaston, the "macho fluffhead." Feminist scholar Elizabeth Dodson Gray considers Gaston to be a turning point in media and culture—the "men's movement"—in which men were turning away from toxically masculine traits like aggression and egocentrism.[105] Not only does Gaston visibly represent such hyper-masculinity, but he also verbally does, too: his idea of their "wedded bliss" features Gaston going out hunting and returning to his "little wife," who massages his feet and takes care of "*her* little ones [...] six or seven of them."[106] [*Italics mine.*] Of course, the children are *hers*, not *theirs*. In this context, then, Belle's explicit rejection of Gaston tells us that she doesn't want to be a simple little wife, and sends a broader message that his machismo is unattractive and undesirable. Men like Gaston may be popular, but they do not make good husbands.

[104] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's Divas," 63-64.
[105] Gray, "A Parable for Our Time," 159-68.
[106] Quoting his proposal to Belle, which takes place after "Belle" and before the "Reprise":
Susan Jeffords, "The Curse of Masculinity: Disney's Beauty and the Beast," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture,* ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Indiana University Press, 1995), 170.

“Belle”

Little town, it's a quiet village
Every day like the one before
Little town, full of little people
Waking up to say…
Bonjour! [x5] [spoken, townsfolk]

There goes the baker with his tray, like always
The same old bread and rolls to sell
Every morning just the same
Since the morning that we came
To this poor provincial town
Good Morning, Belle!

Good morning, Monsieur???
And where are you off to?
The bookshop. I just finished the most wonderful story. About a beanstalk and an ogre and a—[spoken]
That's nice. Marie! The baguettes! Hurry up!

[townsfolk sing]
There must be more than this provincial life!

Ah! Belle!
Good morning, I've come to return the book I borrowed Finished already?
Oh, I couldn't put it down! Have you got anything new? Not since yesterday
That's alright. I'll borrow... this one
That one? But you've read it twice!
It's my favorite. Far-off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise…
If you like it all that much, it's yours
But sir… I insist!
Well, thank you! Thank you very much! [spoken]

[townsfolk sing]

Oh, isn't this amazing?
It's my favorite part because you'll see
Here's where she meets Prince Charming
But she won't discover that it's him till chapter three

[townsfolk sing]
There must be more than this provincial life!
Just watch, I’m goin' to make Belle my wife!
[Gaston]
[townsfolk sing]

“Belle Reprise”

Is he gone? Can you imagine?
He asked me to marry him! Me!
The wife of that boorish, brainless…
[spoken]

Madame Gaston, can't you just see it?
Madame Gaston, his little wife!
No sir, not me, I guarantee it
I want much more than this provincial life

I want adventure in the great wide somewhere
I want it more than I can tell
And for once it might be grand
To have someone understand
I want so much more than they've got planned

Figure 2.9, “Belle” and “Belle Reprise″ Lyrics

Vocal Timbre in "Belle" and her "Reprise"

Belle is the first Disney Princess to belt, bringing her chest voice up to B ♭ 4 at the end of "Belle" (on the lyric "there must be more than this provincial life!") In fact, she sang the same notes (G4-B ♭ 4) in head voice earlier in the song, but here at the end, she belts at the same pitch level, repeating and emphasizing the same line of text. Though she does not sound as heavy nor as strained as, say, Idina Menzel's Elsa (2013), Belle audibly changes her vocal mechanism here, so as to project above the crowd and complete the crescendo of this climactic moment. Importantly, this belting technique highlights her repeated lyric: "there must be more than this provincial life!" Not only is she using a stronger vocal mechanism for practical reasons, such as being heard above the Ensemble, but her voice as well as that grand crescendo emphasize this lyric for a narrative reason. The banalities of the town's day-to-day life fade to the background, and Belle declares forcefully that she wants more. Like Ariel, she wants to escape the confines of her current situation, and she becomes most confident at the end of her song, but unlike Ariel, she'll sing this loudly in front of anyone who would like to hear it in the town square!

In **Figure 2.10**, see how Belle showcases a timbral crescendo to a Belt in her first song, "Belle."

“Belle”

Little town, it's a quiet village
Every day like the one before
Little town, full of little people
Waking up to say…
Bonjour! [x5] [spoken, townsfolk]

There goes the baker with his tray, like always
The same old bread and rolls to sell
Every morning just the same
Since the morning that we came
To this poor provincial town
Good Morning, Belle!

Good morning, Monsieur???
And where are you off to?
The bookshop. I just finished the most wonderful story. About a beanstalk and an ogre and a—[spoken]
That's nice. Marie! The baguettes! Hurry up!

[townsfolk sing]
There must be more than this provincial life!

Ah! Belle!
Good morning, I've come to return the book I borrowed Finished already?
Oh, I couldn't put it down! Have you got anything new? Not since yesterday
That's alright. I'll borrow... this one
That one? But you've read it twice!
It's my favorite. Far-off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise…
If you like it all that much, it's yours
But sir… I insist!
Well, thank you! Thank you very much!
[spoken]

[townsfolk sing]

Oh, isn't this amazing?
It's my favorite part because you'll see
Here's where she meets Prince Charming
But she won't discover that it's him till chapter three

[townsfolk sing]
There must be more than this provincial life!
Just watch, I’m goin' to make Belle my wife!
[Gaston]

[townsfolk sing]

Belle’s Voices: Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), “Legit” (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 2.10, “Belle″ Lyrics, Color-Coded for Vocal Timbre

Although Belle is the first to belt, one thing to remember is that her belting voice is not particularly extreme. Musical theater specialists Alex Bádue and Rebecca Schorsch note that these ’90s princesses take “a lighter approach to belt voice,” something they call a “mix-belt,” which “gives the singer access to both head voice and chest voice,

allowing for a smooth transition between delicacy and power."[107] That is, by prioritizing her ability to transition between head voice and chest voice, which come across as "delicacy and power," Belle cannot go to either extreme, living instead in a lighter middle ground. If vocal timbre—or rather, vocal *registration*—is a spectrum from more head voice to more chest voice dominance—then Belle is closer to Ariel than Elsa, but she still took a big step forward in beginning to belt (see **Fig. 2.11**):

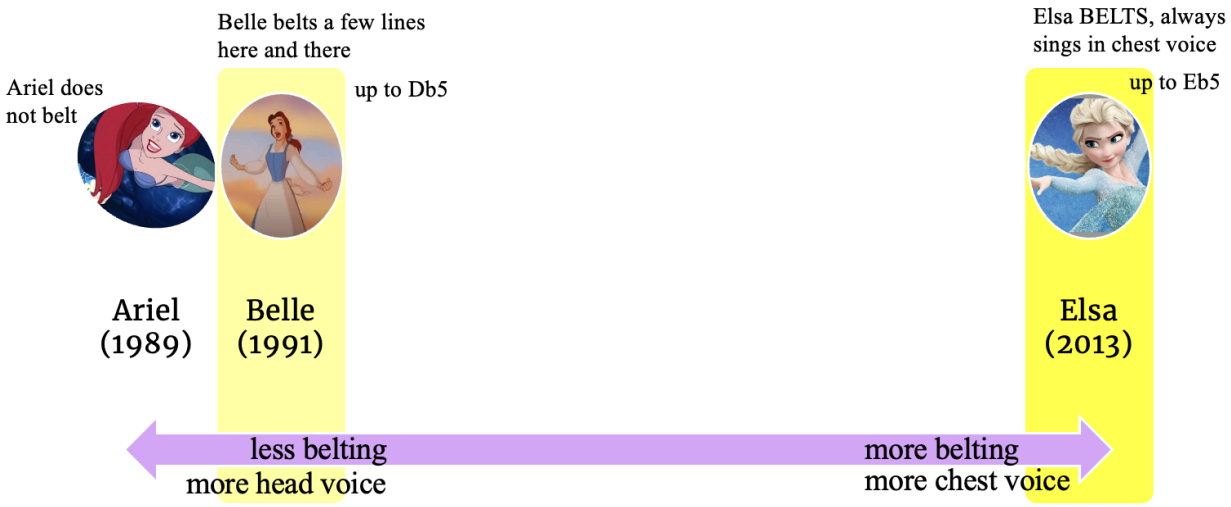


Figure 2.11, Placing Belle on the Belting Spectrum from Ariel to Elsa

On the other hand, Belle does flip into head voice at times, especially in the song "Something There," so she explores a good variety of timbres, like Ariel. She and Ariel share Little-Girl Voice and Modal Voice, as well as head-voice styles Whisper and "Legit." But Belle also has the option of using her chest voice more, expressed as Soft Voice (basically a breathy Little-Girl Voice brought down into a slightly chesty lower range) and Belt. Additionally, like Ariel, Belle performs a timbral crescendo from very soft Soft Voice

[107] Bádue and Schorsch, "Animated Broadway," 221.

andLittle-Girl Voice through Modal Voice to Belting in her first song, “Belle.” This adds to the rising action of the song, emphasizing its climax at “there must be more than this provincial life!”

Unlike Ariel’s “Reprise,” which also crescendoes in dynamics and timbre, Belle’s “Reprise” does the opposite: her voice moves from strong to soft (see **Fig. 2.12**). She begins her second song assertively rejecting Gaston, but ends it quietly wishing for something more. The first section serves to further emphasize Belle’s resistance to what society expects of her—falling in love with Gaston—because it is the strongest thing she sings.

“Belle Reprise”

Is he gone? Can you imagine?
He asked me to marry him! Me!
The wife of that boorish, brainless…
[spoken]

Madame Gaston, can't you just see it?
Madame Gaston, his little wife!
No sir, not me, I guarantee it
I want much more than this provincial life

I want adventure in the great wide somewhere
I want it more than I can tell
And for once it might be grand
To have someone understand
I want so much more than they've got planned

Belle’s Voices: Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 2.12, “Belle Reprise″ Lyrics, Color-Coded for Vocal Timbre

So too, does her body language express resistance: just look at her downturned eyebrows and tight fists when she sings “No sir, not me, I guarantee it” (**Fig. 2.13,** left). In contrast, at the end of the song, she looks upwards dreamily, wishing on a dandelion, and diminuendoes to a sweet, breathy Soft Voice (**Fig. 2.13,** right).



Figure 2.13, Belle’s Body Language in her “Reprise”

Interestingly, Belle’s vocal quality stays very consistent *within* a stanza, remaining primarily in one “voice” for several lines before switching to another, slightly stronger one at formal boundaries. Such consistency, in combination with a slightly wider vocal range[108], and slightly more use of chest voice, reads as maturity to me. Where Ariel was a bit flighty with quickly changing emotions (revealed through more quickly changing vocal timbres), Belle is steady and self-assured.

Next, I have added formal section markings to her lyrics charts in **Figures 2.14 and 2.15**, after which I will provide score excerpts for each formal section:

[108] In her two songs, “Part Of Your World” and its “Reprise,” Ariel only sings from C4 to C5, a comfortable octave span. Belle, on the other hand, sings from G3 in “Belle” to E ♭ 5 in “Something There.”

“Belle”

Introduction
Little town, it's a quiet village
Every day like the one before
Little town, full of little people
Waking up to say…
Bonjour! [x5] [spoken, townsfolk]

A1
There goes the baker with his tray, like always
The same old bread and rolls to sell
Every morning just the same
Since the morning that we came
To this poor provincial town
Good Morning, Belle!

A2 [vamp]
Good morning, Monsieur???
And where are you off to?
The bookshop. I just finished the most wonderful story. About a beanstalk and an ogre and a—[spoken]
That's nice. Marie! The baguettes! Hurry up!

[A1: townsfolk]
[A3: townsfolk]
There must be more than this provincial life!

A2 [vamp]
Ah! Belle!
Good morning, I've come to return the book I borrowed Finished already?
Oh, I couldn't put it down! Have you got anything new? Not since yesterday
That's alright. I'll borrow... this one
That one? But you've read it twice!
It's my favorite. Far-off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise…
If you like it all that much, it's yours
But sir… I insist!
Well, thank you! Thank you very much!
[spoken]

[A1: townsfolk] [no speaking vamp]

B
Oh, isn't this amazing?
It's my favorite part because you'll see
Here's where she meets Prince Charming
But she won't discover that it's him till chapter three

[A1: townsfolk]
[A2 [vamp]: spoken, Gaston and LeFou]

[A1: Gaston, then townfolk]
[A3: townsfolk]
There must be more than this provincial life!
Just watch, I’m goin' to make Belle my wife!
[Gaston]

[A1’: townsfolk]

Belle’s Voices: Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), “Legit” (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 2.14, “Belle” Lyrics, Timbre, and Form

“Belle Reprise”

[spoken]
Is he gone? Can you imagine?
He asked me to marry him! Me!
The wife of that boorish, brainless…

A3 [sung]
Madame Gaston, can't you just see it?
Madame Gaston, his little wife!
No sir, not me, I guarantee it
I want much more than this provincial life

A1 [out of time]
I want adventure in the great wide somewhere
I want it more than I can tell
And for once it might be grand
To have someone understand
I want so much more than they've got planned

Belle’s Voices: Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 2.15, “Belle Reprise″ Lyrics, Timbre, and Form

Form and The Ensemble in “Belle” and her “Reprise”

“Belle” is an I Want Song that is highly ambitious. Not only does it have several different sections, but “Belle” expands upon the Tin-Pan Alley 32-bar AABA form significantly. In the first half of the song, we hear a variety of different A sections, what I analyze as A1-A2-A1-A3-A2-A1, switching voices between Belle, individual villagers, and the townsfolk Ensemble. Initial melodic fragments that characterize each subsection are reprinted below in **Figure 2.16.** This alternation between different, but closely-related materials, actually sounds more like a medley than anything else. No longer is Belle constrained to the short, economical songs of the past, but she gets a long, complicated, many layered song in which she interacts with her community and with Gaston.

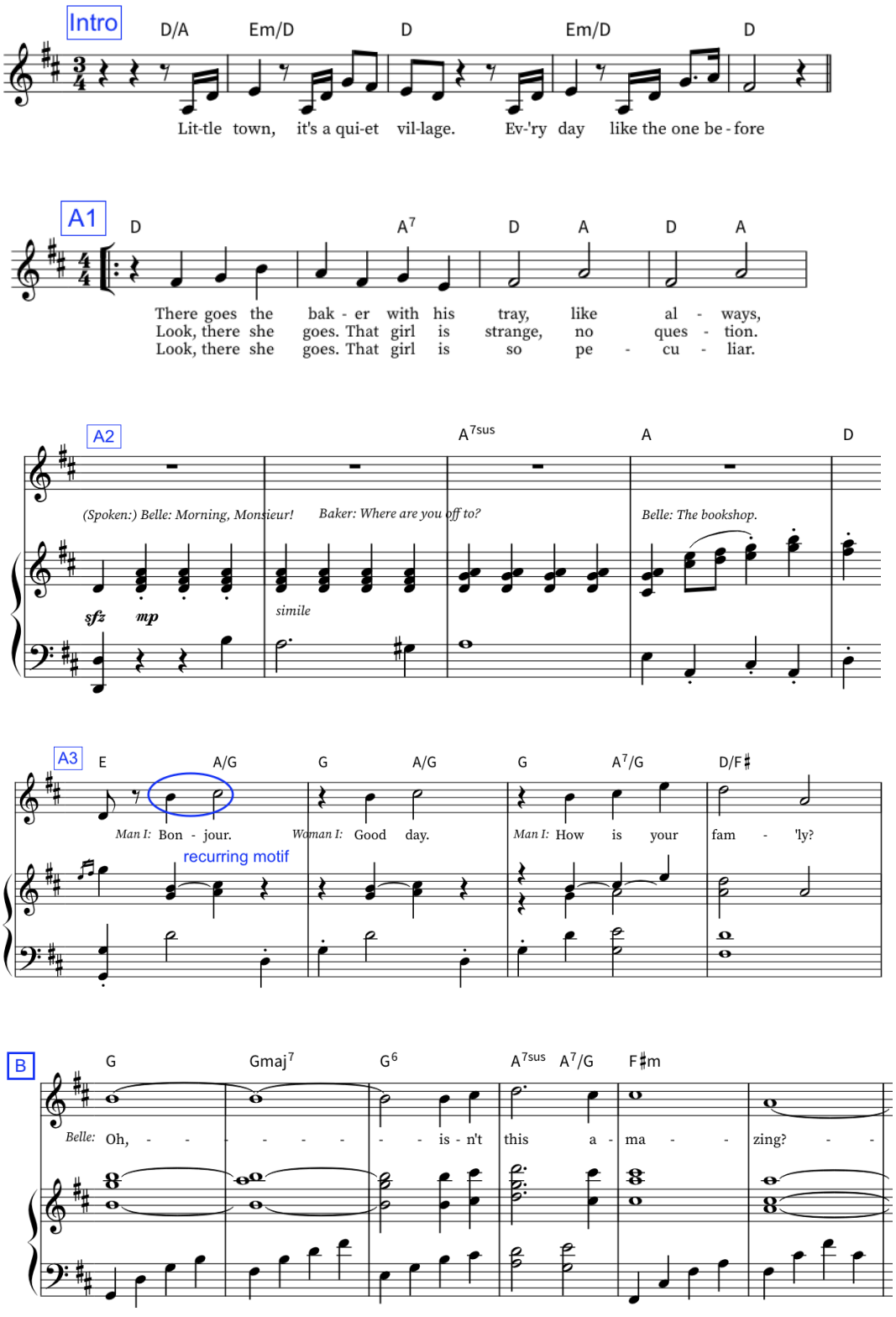


Figure 2.16, "Belle" Excerpts from Each Section

That being said, the A1, A2, and A3 sections still have much in common with each other, including similar melodic and harmonic material, sparse string-and-winds textures, and short, staccato phrases. Beginning with "Oh, isn't this amazing," Belle's bridge is the first completely contrasting section, with long, legato lines, new accompanimental material, and a sparkly orchestration with harp and high strings. In addition, her lyrical rhymes tighten up, ending each line with "amazing," "see," "Charming," and "three," emphasizing the assonance of the repeated [i] ("ee") vowel in all of them.

Finally, of course, "Belle" returns to the A material, just in time for a key change when LeFou and Gaston come in. This form does bear some similarity to a Rondo form, in which the A1 material keeps returning or refraining, as you can see in **Figure 2.17:**
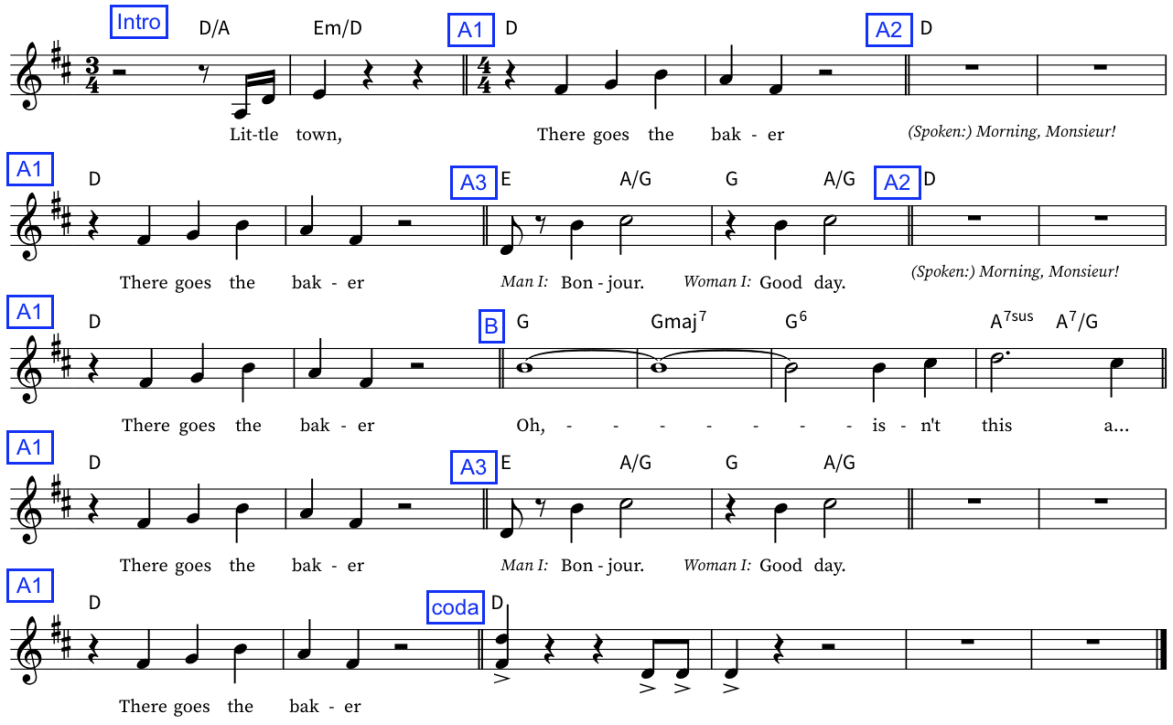


Figure 2.17, "Belle" Formal Sections

Although Ariel was surrounded by her fishy friends in "Part of Your World", Belle's introduction is uniquely placed in her community. (Aurora, Cinderella, and Snow White also interact with their small animal friends, but are otherwise lacking in human connection. No wonder they jump at the first chance to fall in love with and marry a prince.) Belle interacts with multiple townsfolk, from the baker to the bookstore owner and all of the unnamed folks who greet her with "Bonjour!" Additionally, the Ensemble gets multiple stanzas of lyrics, filling us in with information about how Belle doesn't fit into this town, how beautiful and too-smart she is, and how beautiful Gaston is, too. The constant presence of the Ensemble in Belle's first song contextualizes her as being loved, but misunderstood, by her community, and sets up the whole rigamarole with Gaston. Once again, I'll circle back to the idea that "she is the only one of the town's single women not to swoon over Gaston,"[109] because she wants a human connection built on something more than looks and Gaston's chauvinist picture of marriage.

Returning to this idea that Belle is embedded within her community, whereas her predecessors were not, this is another way Belle shows greater independence. Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and even Ariel are isolated, lonely, and crave human contact. When a Prince comes along and fills that void, of course they're going to say yes to marriage right away. Cinderella, for example, needs saving from her abusive stepfamily, and Ariel needs Prince Eric to kiss her so she can have her voice AND be human. In contrast, having friends, family, or a community in general gives a woman independence, or at least a safety network so that she doesn't actually need a prince in the first place. This is another element that makes it seem like Belle has a choice in the

[109] Jeffords, "The Curse of Masculinity," 169.

matter, as well: her original circumstances are not dire, and she rejected Gaston, so she clearly doesn't need to marry just for the sake of having a husband.

In this ambitious take on an I Want Song, the creators tell us everything we need to know about the situation: Belle is smart, she has a community, Gaston is a narcissist, and she does not want to marry him. Not only is it longer and more formally complicated than earlier I Want Songs, but it also highlights the fact that Belle is surrounded by kind townsfolk, like the baker and the bookstore owner. She belts, if only a little, and goes off on an adventure not to search for a prince, but to save her father, who is missing.

A "Sound of Music" Moment

In the second stanza of Belle's "Reprise," she sings, "I want adventure in the great wide somewhere," running out to an open field in the midst of beautiful, green, rolling hills. Musical and visual elements here dually allude to the opening scene of *The Sound of Music*, when Julie Andrews runs to the hills and joyfully spins in a circle before starting to sing *her* introductory song, "Sound of Music." For a visual comparison, see **Figure 2.18.** Both Belle's "Reprise" and Maria's "Sound of Music" stand on a strong dominant pedal just before they come in, the melodic material sweeps upwards, and a big cymbal crash signals the start of the song proper. Additionally, the texture itself combines magical high strings, harp, and bells (a sparkly high register) with exuberant brass (cutting through in the middle register), grounded by the previously mentioned strong bass pedal (in the low register). Visually, too, Belle not only runs to the beautiful green hills and spins in circles, but she also holds herself in a similar posture, arms wide open and looking upward and outward while she sings. Additionally, the sudden change from a

wide, zoomed-out shot of the landscape to a close-up of Belle's face mirrors the camera angles of *The Sound of Music*. With so many elements in common, I get an overwhelming feeling of joy-in-nature and joy-in-being-yourself from both Belle's "Reprise" and Maria's "Sound of Music."



Figure 2.18, Belle's Body Language in her "Reprise" and Maria's in "Sound of Music"

Although it's impossible to say whether this was an intentional musical allusion or not, the "Sound of Music" is iconic enough, and the similarities are strong enough, that I hear echoes of Maria Von Trapp when I watch this scene, and I imagine many other viewers do as well. In many ways, Belle is quite similar to Maria. They both do not fully fit in with their communities, they both love singing and taking in the beauty of nature, and they both are smart, resourceful, and brave. (For example, Maria goes against Captain Von Trapp's orders in making clothes for the children with old curtains, and taking the children out to play in the mountains; Belle goes against what society would expect of her by not marrying Gaston, and going out in the wilderness to find her missing father.) Furthermore, both Belle and Maria have some teaching and nurturing to do before they formalize a relationship with their men: where the Beast is violent and angry, the Captain is militant and gruff, and they both need to be softened, to learn the

true meaning of love, first. By using similar musical materials, this passage characterizes Belle as (1) dreaming of something more (which we already knew), (2) brave in doing what she feels is right, even if nobody else agrees, and (3) a nurturer.

Falling in Love: "Something There"

In "Something There," the motif of Belle as nurturer continues. She is shown teaching the Beast how to gently feed the birds, so they don't scare away, and reading literature to him, so they can have a cozy evening by the fireplace. See **Figure 2.19** for stills from these gentle scenes. He is presumably softened by her attentions, *becoming* a man whom Belle could love. The Beast, despite his fur and his name, is now exactly what Gaston was not: curious, nonviolent, and caring about others. He is exactly the New Man of the contemporary men's movement: he transforms from "the hardened, muscle-bound, domineering man of the '80s into the considerate, loving, and self-sacrificing man of the '90s."[110] Through "Something There," especially in juxtaposing the Beast and Gaston, Disney sends the message that care and softness are desirable traits in a man and especially in a husband.



Figure 2.19, Belle as Nurturer

[110] Jeffords, "The Curse of Masculinity," 170.
Gray, "A Parable for Our Time," 160-61.

Alongside the montage of images, Belle's lyrics (**Fig. 2.20**) reveal the Beast's character development, naming him as "sweet," "almost kind," "dear," and "unsure." The use of contrasting present and past tense here ("he *was* mean and he *was* coarse and unrefined / and *now he's* dear and so unsure") also reveal time passing, in which the Beast has time to change and Belle has time to fall in love with him. Even the environment changes, from fall scenes with pumpkins and orange leaves on the trees, to winter ones with sparkling white snow and warm, furry outfits for Belle. (See **Figure 2.21**.) As he matures, and as they get to know one another over the span of months, they gradually fall in love, all encapsulated in "Something There." Finally, we have a princess who does not fall in love at first sight! Belle has standards! And we have a prince who is capable of change.

"Something There"

There's something sweet and almost kind
But he was mean and he was coarse and unrefined
And now he's dear and so unsure
I wonder why I didn't see it there before

New and a bit alarming
Who'd have ever thought that this could be
True, that he's no Prince Charming
But there's something in him that I simply didn't see

Figure 2.20, "Something There" Lyrics



Figure 2.21, Seasons Pass (left: "Belle") (right: "Something There")

As a *falling*-in-love song, rather than an *already*-in-love song, "Something There" changes the narrative for Disney Princesses. Where Snow White fell in love with Prince Charming the moment he serenaded her with "One Song," and Cinderella and Aurora both fell in love with their Princes during a first dance, Belle rejects Gaston immediately —multiple times—and takes time to build her relationship with the Beast. As media scholars Majkowski and Zarzycka put it, "the tale of the vain, self-absorbed prince gradually changing to meet high standards set by a female intellectual can be perceived as more in line with modern sensibilities and gender policies."[111] Certainly such a relationship gives the woman more power in setting standards for the man she loves. Belle will not fall for, or even give the time of day to, the first handsome man she meets.

However, the flip side of this song is that it falls on Belle to put emotional labor into the Beast—to teach him how to act human and how to care about others. As feminist scholar Jeffords elegantly writes, "the Beast does not have to take responsibility for his behavior. It is the work of other people, especially women, to turn this childish Beast into a loving man."[112] (See also: Mrs. Potts, sung by Angela Lansbury, or even the Enchantress, who cast the spell requiring the Beast to love and be loved in the first place.) In fact, this relationship type is so common in film, TV, and literature that it has become a trope: "I Can Change My Beloved,"[113] or, more succinctly, "I Can Fix Him." Even today, some 30 years later, women are congratulated for nurturing their men into respectable partners (for example, the saying "I/you trained him well"), reinforcing the gendered division of mental and emotional labor in relationships. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle must take care of her father, the old absent-minded inventor, and later, the Beast, always putting others'

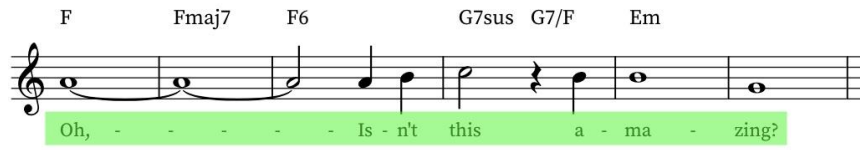
[111] Short, *Fairy Tale and Film,* 28, 54-55, in Majkowski and Zarzycka, "Romance," 600.
[112] Jeffords, "The Curse of Masculinity," 169.
[113] "I Can Change My Beloved," https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ICanChangeMyBeloved.

needs first.[114] Without even going into the bestiality[115] and Stockholm Syndrome[116] of it all (yikes!), it seems that, for all her commendable accomplishments, Belle still remains subject to the patriarchy, just in different, more subtle ways than her predecessors.

Vocally, Belle sings the A section of "Something There" mostly in Little-Girl Voice, but when she goes to the contrasting B section, she uses much more chest voice and neutral, not breathy, timbres. She flips into head voice—a more "Legit" style—a few times, but overall she stays primarily in Modal voice and Belt in this passage. See **Figure 2.23** for a color-coded lyrics chart. Additionally, although this song's section B uses much the same musical materials as "Belle"'s section B, it is transposed up a half step, putting it in a different place in Paige O'Hara's voice. She sings these B♭s, Cs, and D♭s in "Something There" with a fuller voice, a stronger and beltier tone, than she sang the As, Bs, and Cs in "Belle." And, since it's a tiny bit higher, it sounds even a little more difficult to maneuver her voice around such a disjunct melody, going as low as D♭4 and as high as E♭5. (See **Fig. 2.22.**) I hear these large leaps in the vocal melody as evidence of Belle navigating new and challenging emotions as she falls in love with the Beast. Is he really kind? Is he not so bad after all?

[114] A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 192-93.
[115] For more information, see Craven, "Beauty and the Bells," 134.
[116] Constance Grady, "Is Beauty and the Beast 'A Tale as Old as Stockholm Syndrome'? Depends How You Read It," *Vox* (Mar. 23, 2017), https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/23/15000768/beauty-and-the-beast-feminist-stockholm-syndrome.

“Belle”



“Something There”

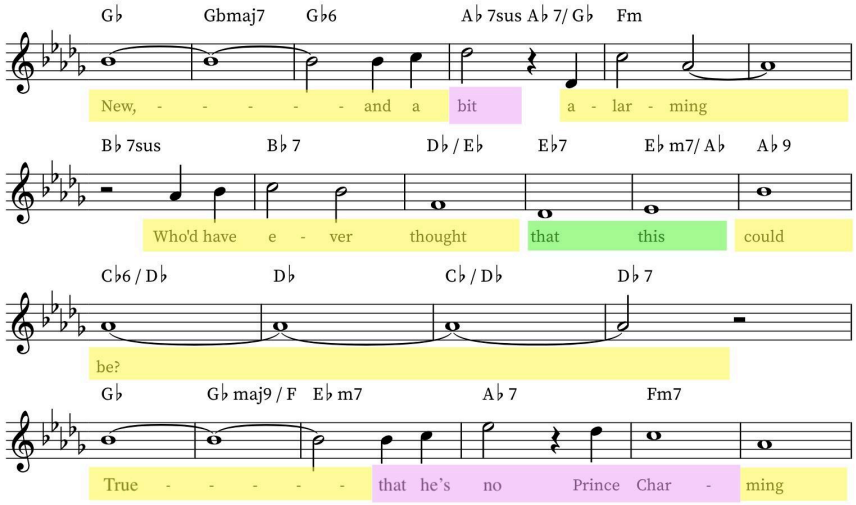


Figure 2.22, Comparing the Pitch and Vocality of the Same Melody across Two Songs

“Something There”

A
There's something sweet and almost kind
But he was mean and he was coarse and unrefined
And now he's dear and so unsure
I wonder why I didn't see it there before

[A: the Beast]

B [this is the same section B from “Belle”]
New and a bit alarming
Who'd have ever thought that this could be
True, that he's no Prince Charming
But there's something in him that I simply didn't see

[A: the castle folk]

Belle’s Voices: Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid),
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), “Legit” (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high),
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 2.23, “Something There″ Lyrics, Timbre, and Form

In realizing the full potential of Belle's belting, which we originally heard in just one moment of her "I Want Song" ("Belle"), "Something There" is a pivotal scene for the Disney Princess line as a whole. As I said before, she is the first princess to belt, and this stanza is where she does so with the greatest force and the greatest vocal dexterity. It is no coincidence that she is both the strongest belter and the strongest character yet in the Disney Princess lineup: as Paige O'Hara said in an interview in 2019, "She [Belle] was so far ahead of her time. Consequently, after *Beauty and the Beast* came out, Disney started writing their heroines as strong women. And I think that Belle really made the whole change—it started with Ariel and really went there with Belle."[117]

Conclusion

Belle is no weak, passive damsel. She is bold enough to be herself in a town that doesn't quite understand her book smarts, and brave enough to turn down Gaston's proposal even though he is popular and powerful. She gets to know the Beast before she loves him, eschewing the love-at-first-sight trope. And yet, she also falls into many of the familiar traps of the Disney-style romance story. She is self-sacrificing, for her father, and she is nurturing, for her lover, rehabilitating the Beast until he is sweet and loving enough to break the curse. In fact, the central question of *Beauty and the Beast's* plot is whether the Beast will find love and break the curse. Belle may save the Beast, but only by being the perfect woman for him to fall in love with, and by teaching him, like a child, to treat other beings with respect and care.

[117] Paige O'Hara, "On Finding Her Belle Voice for Beauty and the Beast," *Playbill,* posted Apr. 11, 2019, Youtube Video, 3:24, https://youtu.be/b2OkibpLaXQ?si=b_dpIkrXSkna4EqP.

Musically speaking, Belle's voice is quite similar to Ariel's in her tendency to sing in Little-Girl Voice, with some passages building into Modal Voice and even Belt. Most importantly, she is the first princess to belt, using a stronger sound with more physical engagement for a more powerful declaration. ("I want more than this provincial life!") Her lyrics declare what she wants—*not* Gaston, and certainly not a little life as a little wife in this little town—and they also exhibit her relationship with her community. As in **Figure 2.24,** she interacts with her neighbors verbally and visually throughout. Although Belle does not quite fit in, she is surrounded by (mostly) kind townsfolk who know her name and greet her with smiles and joy in the opener "Belle." Belle's "Sound of Music" moment also emphasizes her love for the outdoors and nature, and characterizes her as a dreamer and a nurturer. And in "Something There," we see the process of Belle falling in love with the Beast, albeit through motherly nurturing and taking on his troubles.



Figure 2.24, Belle Interacting with her Community

Ariel and Belle: Opening a Whole New World for Disney Princesses

Many things changed when Ariel and Belle arrived on the scene. With the beginning of the Renaissance Era came a new influence of musical theater vocal styles, which I've termed Little-Girl Voice, Modal Voice, and Belting. Belle is the *first* Disney Princess to belt, as do her successors Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas, suggesting a simultaneous increase in vocal power at the same time as an increase in the "girl power" of these female characters. Furthermore, both Ariel and Belle are the first to use vocal timbre to create formal teleologies in their songs, not just crescendoing to a climax, but moving from breathy whispers to fully-phonating chest voice. That's not to say that they sing exactly in the same ways, however, as Ariel is more flighty with her timbre and also her emotions, while Belle is more steady, more mature.

In addition, Alan Menken and Howard Ashman write longer and more complicated songs for these princesses than we had seen before. Both Ariel and Belle's songs flirt with Tin Pan Alley's 32-bar AABA form, but with more variety, more contrasts, more sections, and simply more music. I have argued here that longer and more complex songs allow us to understand the singers—Belle and Ariel—as fuller and more complex characters, giving them more of a *voice* (literally and figuratively) in the story. Where traditional Disney damsels Snow White and Aurora were singing of love and princes they had yet to meet, Belle and Ariel sing of freedom and independence and choosing their own path.

These iconic songs' lyrics reveal ways that these characters are moving on from the flat damsels of the past: for example, Ariel's lack of pronouns in "Part of [That] World" and Belle's interactions with townspeople in "Belle." We also might contrast Ariel

and Belle in the way that they fall in love with their men: as soon as Ariel meets Prince Eric and saves him from a shipwreck, she starts using second-person pronouns and a lighter, sweeter vocal quality in "Part of *Your* World (Reprise)." Belle, on the other hand, rejects Gaston with an assertive, clear "No sir! Not me!" and, of course, requires the Beast to be "sweet and almost kind" before she loves him. Even in the span of only two years between 1989 and 1991, Disney's models for women and relationships continually evolve.

In the next chapter, we will see how these characters, tropes, and relationships continue to change through *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). These two new princesses continue to belt more, and stronger, than Ariel and Belle, and they become stronger, more independent women at the same time. Pocahontas is particularly interesting in her commentary on colonialism, taking care of the earth, and fostering respect across cultures. And Mulan is unique in her questioning of the gender binary itself, cross-dressing, excelling at traditionally masculine tasks, and taking on a Masculine Voice later in the movie. However, as Disney tried to diversify their princess lineup, new problems of stereotyping, conflating, and cultural commodification arose. As was typical for the '90s, it seems, Disney was both celebrated and criticized for their portrayal of women as they progressed in some aspects but not in others.

Chapter 3
"You Think I'm An Ignorant Savage": Stereotypes and Contradictions in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* (1995-98)



Figure 3.1, Pocahontas (left) and Mulan (right)

Introduction

As we've seen with Ariel and Belle, Disney's "Renaissance Era" princesses were quite different from the damsels in distress who came before them. Pocahontas and Mulan carry on this trend, later in the '90s, and along with Jasmine (from *Aladdin,* 1992), they represent the franchise's first attempt at representing non-white princesses in the interest of multiculturalism. Both today and in their own time, critics have pointed out how Disney mistreated these women's stories. *Pocahontas,* for example, is based on the Indigenous historical figure of the same name, a 10-12 year old girl (!), who was taken to be a white man's wife and bear his child.[118] Disney glossed over the multiple layers of violence associated with her story, and made her out to be not only an adult, but a "babe," in the words of Mel Gibson, the voice of her love interest John Smith.[119] *Mulan,* on the other hand, is based on an ancient Chinese legend, *The Ballad of Mulan,* but Disney also misappropriated her story. The U.S.-American company emphasized Western, not

[118] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" *Cinéaste* 21.4 (1995): 36.
[119] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" 37.

Chinese, values of individuality; added a romantic subplot between Mulan and Shang, her army general; depicted China with several historical inaccuracies; and exoticized the Oriental Other.[120]

These two movies come at a time when Disney was interested in diversifying their princess brand through multiculturalism. In search of "political correctness,"[121] they sanitized and whitewashed Pocahontas and Mulan's stories. To be fair, this time period must be viewed in context: these films were certainly less overtly racist than *Peter Pan* (1953) or *The Jungle Book* (1967), but they still stand today as noticeably more problematic than recent films *Moana* (2016) or *Encanto* (2021). As I'll explain throughout this chapter, Disney reinforces racial stereotypes in the instrumental music surrounding Pocahontas and Mulan, contributing to a long history of musical exoticism.

On the other hand, Mulan and Pocahontas are still stronger female characters than those that came before them, and Mulan even breaks gender binaries by donning men's clothing and joining the army. They both are physically strong and athletic. As previously noted with Ariel and Belle, Mulan and Pocahontas also dream of something bigger than just a love story. Mulan explicitly rejects the practice of matchmaking to find a husband. Pocahontas also plays a significant role in her community, negotiating peace between her people and the English colonists. She is not just the chief's daughter, but she acts as a leader and a cultural ambassador. Both Pocahontas and Mulan have more agency as well as more "tomboy" qualities, expanding the possibilities of what a princess could look and act like in the '90s. As we'll hear in this chapter, these "tomboy" qualities and newfound strengths are expressed through their songs and their voices. Continuing

[120] Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana," 230.
[121] Janet Patricia Palmer, "Animating cultural politics: Disney, race, and social movements in the 1990s," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan (2000).

the trend from Ariel and Belle, Pocahontas and Mulan belt more frequently and more strongly, they use more and more chest voice, and their lyrics engage with questions bigger than just "who will I marry?"

Disney's Attempt at Diversifying in the '90s

More so than Ariel and Belle, critics tend to agree that Pocahontas and Mulan are stronger female characters, more responsive to the third-wave feminism of the 1990s. For example, Edward Pérez (English), Amy Davis (film studies), and Melinda Parks (journalism) emphasize Pocahontas's decision not to marry either Kocoum, who her father prefers, or John Smith, who returns to England without her.[122] Like Belle, Pocahontas rejects the man she feels pressured to marry, but unlike Belle, she rejects the man she falls in love with, too. Pocahontas's priorities are more focused on peace than romantic fulfillment. She is self-sacrificing, like Belle, but not just a nurturer: as Amy Davis explains, she is "as a skilled diplomat and a careful decision-maker," forging new paths of communication between her people and the colonists.[123]

However, as Disney attempted to portray Women of Color through Pocahontas and Mulan, they still fell into stereotypes, whitewashing and decontextualizing these women's stories. Pocahontas was a real-life historical figure, a Native American girl of about 11 years who was raped and taken away from her family by colonizer John Rolfe.[124]

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[122] Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana," 75.
A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 182-85.
Parks, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism Is Changing Disney's Princesses."
[123] A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches,* 183.
[124] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" 37.

Fa Mulan was a woman of an ancient Chinese legend, *The Ballad of Mulan*, dating back to around 568 A.D.[125]

Although Pérez and Parks argue that Pocahontas and Mulan fit well with what Parks calls the "third wave's emphasis on the empowerment of racially- and culturally-diverse women," they and others also recognize Disney's pitfalls in the portrayal of those diverse women.[126] Pocahontas was whitewashed and assimilated, her story erased, historically inaccurate, and mischaracterized.[127] Mulan's story was also taken out of context and, as communications expert Jing Yin says, "reframed deliberately to make it 'universal,' where universality means appealing to a Western audience" and Western values, like individualism over family honor.[128]

Mulan does present an interesting case study in how Disney opens up questions of gender, when she cuts her hair, takes on a soldier's garb, and lives as a man for a time. As per literary scholar Lisa Brocklebank, she "exposes gender behavior as a socially scripted role," and contests "the very notion of a stable identity."[129] And fairy tale scholar Pauline Greenhill classifies Mulan's cross-dressing as broadly trans, though she mentions that later "American mediations [of the Chinese story] are problematic, [...]

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[125] Jing Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stories of Mulan," in *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader,* ed. Molefi Kete Asante, Yoshitaka Miike, and Jing Yin (Routledge, 2013): 295.
[126] Parks, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism is Changing Disney's Princesses."
[127] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" 36-37.
L.H. Edwards, "'The united colors of 'pocahontas': synthetic miscegenation and Disney's multiculturalism," *Narrative* 7.2 (1999): 162.
Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana," 230.
Prajna, Parasher, "Mapping the Imaginary: The Neverland of Disney Indians," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (McFarland & Company, 2013), 43.
[128] Yin, "Disney vs. Chinese Stories of Mulan," 286.
Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana," 230.
[129] Lisa Brocklebank, "Disney's 'Mulan' – the 'true' deconstructed heroine?" *Marvels and Tales* 14.2 (2000): 275-76. See also A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches,* 195.

conflating transgender (gender) with lesbian/bisexual (sexuality.)"[130] While problematic, I interpret these different queer expressions as different ways of interpreting the same base material: in any world, Mulan brings into question the male/female gender *and* sexuality binary. (Her love interest, Li Shang, similarly questions the heterosexual binary as he appeared to be attracted to Mulan as a man *and* as a woman.)

By writing princesses who are racially diverse and one who is potentially queer, Disney does engage to some degree with the intersectionality of third-wave feminism—Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" had been published a bit earlier, in 1989.[131] However, it is clear that these attempts at diverse portrayals were in their infancy stages, as they stereotyped these Women of Color and made sure to have Mulan return to her home as a woman, in a relationship with a man (Li Shang), so everything is all right (and straight) in the end.

In the first part of this analysis, I will discuss how Mulan and Pocahontas's songs carry with them cultural signifiers of "Other." One musicologist, Lisa Scoggin, has analyzed four songs in *Mulan*, situating them in the masculine/feminine and East/West binaries that Disney sets up so strongly in the film.[132] East Asian Studies scholar Karen Vuong similarly argues that Disney does not successfully engage with traditional Chinese culture, emphasizing Western individuality, the Broadway "I Want" song formula, and only surface-level Chinese elements instead of respectfully balancing Chinese and Western cultures in the film.[133] However, neither Scoggin nor Vuong

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[130] Pauline Greenhill, "Sexualities/Queer and Trans Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures* (Routledge, 2018), 291.
[131] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 139-67.
[132] Lisa Scoggin, "The Foreign and the Other in the Music of *Mulan* (1998)," *American Music* 39.2 (Summer 2021): 196-203.
[133] Karen Vuong, "Intercultural Music in Media: Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan*," *Spectrum* 6 (Nov. 2020): 1-10.

consider the role of voice in music and cultural signification, so I will primarily focus on Pocahontas's and Mulan's voices after a brief discussion of instrumental timbre.

Musical Stereotyping in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*

As previously mentioned, in the late 1990s, Disney was attempting to diversify their image while toeing the "politically correct" line. While nice in theory, their moviemakers and music-makers had a tendency to conflate, whitewash, and look through rose-colored glasses at a pretty nasty history of colonialism and exoticism. At the same time, synthesizers entered the film music studio, expanding the instrumental timbres available to those composers and songwriters. As music theorist Megan Lavengood writes, these synthesizers were used as early as the 1980s to create "world instrument" sounds in popular music, marked them as "Other."[134] Similarly, in the '90s film scores, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*, instrumental timbre—particularly synthesized ones—carries with it cultural stereotypes surrounding race and gender.

For example, in "Colors of the Wind" (*Pocahontas*), we hear synthetic flutes from the beginning. They have a very hollow sound, without much vibrato, quite different from the sound of a standard Boehm (Western classical) flute. A slide-whistle adds to the texture at [0:08], perhaps imitating an owl, or a wolf cry [1:20]. Percussive shakers [0:02], chirps, and squeaks [1:50-2:00] also place us in a forest setting, surrounded by nature, as is often associated with Indigenous characters. The "noble savage"[135] stereotype has long influenced white people's view of Indigenous people; that is, they are associated with nature in general, portrayed as primitive, and yet paradoxically also "noble" and

[134] Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis."
[135] Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2001).

something to be admired. With Pocahontas, she is closely in touch with the flora and fauna which surrounds her, and we hear those elements in her music. The flutes and drums are also primitivist, and the flute timbres are synthetic and marked as "Other," immediately identifying Pocahontas as exotic in comparison to the white settler boys.

Meanwhile, in *Mulan*, instrumental timbres and orchestration contribute to the strong emphasis on contrasting gender roles at the beginning of the film. In "Honor to Us All," high, reedy, and metallic sounds all signal femininity and the chaos of these women preparing the girls for matchmaking. In particular, a tinny flute sound recurs at [0:13], [0:31], [1:14], [1:43], and [2:12]. This instrument sounds heavily synthesized, with fast and wide vibrato, and a sparse lack of overtones, almost like a sine wave. (See Megan Lavengood's article for more on rich vs. sparse tones. In summary, rich sounds have many partials present, while sparse sounds have few. A sine wave, purely computer generated and abstracted from acoustic instruments, has only the fundamental pitch with no overtones.[136]) Additionally, the high-pitched percussive elements recall Chinese (Peking) opera cymbals, perhaps making a connection to the heavy, hyperfeminine makeup and costuming that women (or men) would put on in Peking opera.[137]

Later on, in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," electric guitar, snare drums, and brass all signal masculinity while the soldiers are preparing for war. Electric guitar in particular has been associated with masculinity in rock music from around this time.[138] Though ever present, the guitar rises to the top of the texture in the prechorus, heavily distorted

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[136] Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbral Analysis," [1.12].
[137] For more information on Chinese opera cymbals, see "Jingbo," *Grinnell College Musical Instrument Collection,* https://omeka-s.grinnell.edu/s/MusicalInstruments/item/2106, accessed Dec. 12, 2025.
For more information on the *dan* role, or the female roles sometimes played by men, see Wu Zuguang, *Peking opera and Mei Lanfang: A guide to China's traditional theatre and the art of its great master* (New World Press, 1981), 66-70.
[138] Christine Boone, "Gendered Power Relationships in Mashups," *Music Theory Online* 24.1 (Mar. 2018), [2.2].

[1:24], and representing the grit these men are taking on in their training. And, even from classical music, we know that snares and brass instruments are historically associated with military and war. During this scene, physical discipline, strength, and agility are visibly and lyrically praised as ideal masculine traits. And yet Mulan, the woman masquerading as a man, conquers every one of these skills, even outpacing her compatriots and fighting at the same level as her superior (Shang) by the end.

In both films, pentatonicism is used heavily in both vocal and instrumental materials. For example, Pocahontas's melody at the very beginning of "Just Around the Riverbend" is entirely built upon the C major pentatonic collection. Later on, short passing and neighbor tones fill out more of the C major scale, but the pentatonic pitches—C, D, E, G, and A—are always emphasized as more structural than the others—F and B. So too, is the synthesized flute solo in "Honor To Us All" built on this same collection, transcribed below at [0:12]. dThese same flute sounds appear within C-major-pentatonic every time they are heard, at [0:30], [0:40], [0:48], [1:13], [1:28], [1:38], [1:43], and [2:12]. See both heavily pentatonic melodies below in **Figure 3.2a** and **3.2b.** As musicologist Lisa Scoggin notes, these musical signifiers are hardly authentic, but rather representative of "what an American audience would recognize as sounding stereotypically Chinese."[139]
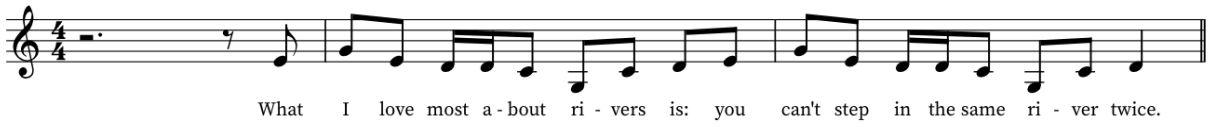


Figure 3.2a, Pocahontas, "Just Around the Riverbend"

[139] Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan,*" 198.
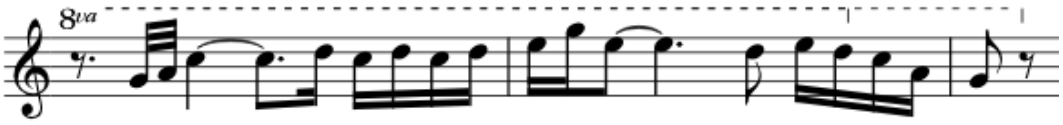


Figure 3.2b, Flute Solo, "Honor To Us All," [0:12] (*Mulan*) (below)

In *Pocahontas* and *Mulan,* Disney uses synthetic instrumental timbres and pentatonicism to signify "Other" cultures, in this case Native American and Chinese. They also emphasize gender binaries through instrumentation in "Honor to Us All" and "I'll Make a Man Out Of You," in *Mulan*, creating what Scoggins calls "two sets of opposing forces: male versus female, and Western versus Chinese."[140] In their attempts to create multicultural stories in this Renaissance period, Disney failed to engage beyond the surface-level, stereotypical sounds their Western audience expects non-Western cultures. These musical landscapes reinforce binaries, exoticism, and Orientalism, even to the point of mapping Western values onto Mulan's story.[141]

CASE STUDY: *Pocahontas* (1995)

Despite the musical stereotypes associated with their characters, Pocahontas and Mulan do participate in Disney's changing approach towards women in the 1990s. Their portrayals reveal the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the Renaissance Era's "cultural ethos," wherein Disney responded to third-wave feminism's interest in stronger and more diverse female characters.[142] For their time, Pocahontas and Mulan *are*

[140] Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan*," 198.
[141] For more on this, see Dunn, Vuong, and Scoggin: George A. Dunn, "'True to Your Heart': Honor and Authenticity in *Mulan,*" in *Disney and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Davis, (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 14-17.
Vuong, "Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan*," 3.
Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan."*
[142] Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana," 75.

more empowered than Ariel and Belle. Nevertheless, today, we can look back and see how they lack the cultural specificity and sensitivity of successors Tiana and Moana.

For example, film and literary scholars point to Pocahontas's peacemaking efforts and her relationship with John Smith as signs of new independence. Amy Davis writes that Pocahontas "helps not only to stop a war [...] but even helps to establish communication and respect between the two groups by the film's end."[143] She chooses to stay with her people rather than follow Smith back to England, rejecting romantic love in favor of family and community. She first rejects the man her father prefers (Kocoum) and later lets Smith go, choosing not to marry.[144] In her actions, Pocahontas deviates from the marriage-as-resolution schema for the first time. Remember that Ariel and Belle, for all their strengths, still ended up with the guy in question. In this way, Pocahontas teaches us that "a girl can choose not to marry and still be a princess," in Edwardo Pérez's words.[145] In terms of character traits, Melinda Parks describes Pocahontas as "wise and strong,"[146] and Amy Davis describes her as a leader—more than simply a "nurturer and moral guide," Pocahontas is a "skilled diplomat and a careful decision-maker."[147]

Furthermore, we can sense Pocahontas's power in the way she sings, with more maturity, strength, and awareness outside of herself. In this section, I build upon the existing feminist scholarship by offering a music-theoretical analysis of Pocahontas's voice and character. I analyze her vocal timbre, lyrics, form, and discuss how they relate to her stronger characterization.Like Ariel and Belle, her vocal qualities are very much

[143] A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 176-77.
[144] Parks, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism is Changing Disney's Princesses."
[145] Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana," 75.
[146] Parks, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism is Changing Disney's Princesses."
[147] A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches,* 182-85.

delineated by form, but she belts more, and more strongly, than her predecessors. Pocahontas also does not focus on love as her primary motivator, but rather than dreaming of going on a personal adventure outside of a sheltered childhood, she wishes for peace and understanding. She is interested in the outside world, but her lyrics speak more of nature, empathy, and creating paths of cross-cultural communication. Between her stronger vocal timbre and her more expansive lyrics, Pocahontas is portrayed as more mature than her predecessors, not just part of a community, like Belle, but a true leader, more than just a pretty face.

"Just Around the Riverbend"

In her first song, "Just Around the Riverbend," Pocahontas yearns for adventure, not a man, quite like Ariel and Belle do in "Part of Your World" and "Belle." Furthermore, she is portrayed as stronger and less childish than her predecessors, and we can hear this development in her voice. She moves from breathier to beltier timbres, like Ariel and Belle, but she sings with more chest voice, lower, and with less constriction. She also sings with a stronger Belt than her predecessors. As a result, she sounds feminine (breathy), but more like an adult, due to these characteristics. Her vocal palette includes more mutter, soft voice, modal, and belt—all versions of chest voice, and a small amount of "legit" voice (**Fig. 3.3**):

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 3.3, Pocahontas's Vocal Palette

In "Just Around the Riverbend" (**Fig. 3.5**), Pocahontas does move from breathier to beltier timbres, like Ariel and Belle. However, her vocal color palette is quite different from her predecessors; she primarily uses Soft Voice, Modal Voice, and Belt, rather than Little-Girl Voice, "Legit," or Whisper. In particular, her Soft Voice is lower, and resonates more in chest voice than the others' Little-Girl Voice. Part of this difference might simply be a feature of Judy Kuhn's voice type (more an alto than a soprano) and the tessitura of the verse (G3-G4). See, for example, her first line (**Fig. 3.4**):
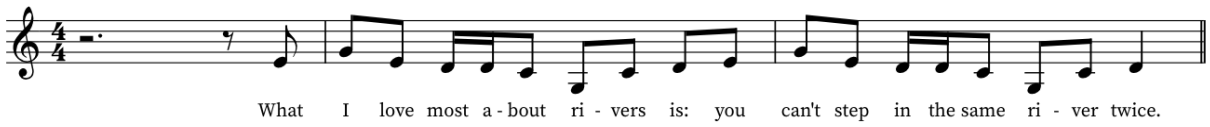


Figure 3.4, Initial Melodic Line of "Just Around The Riverbend"

“Just Around the Riverbend”

Verse
What I love most about rivers is
You can't step in the same river twice
The water's always changing, always flowing
But people, I guess, can't live like that
We all must pay a price
To be safe, we lose our chance of ever knowing
(Refrain)
What's around the riverbend
Waiting just around the riverbend

Chorus
I look once more, just around the riverbend
Beyond the shore, where the gulls fly free
Don't know what for
What I dream the day might send
Just around the riverbend
For me…coming for me

Verse
I feel it there beyond those trees
And right behind these waterfalls
Can I ignore that sound of distant drumming
For a handsome, sturdy husband
Who builds handsome sturdy walls
And never dream that something might be coming
(Refrain)
Just around the riverbend?
Just around the riverbend

Chorus
I look once more, just around the riverbend
Beyond the shore, somewhere past the sea
Don't know what for
Why do all my dreams extend
Just around the riverbend?
Just around the riverbend

Coda
Should I choose the smoothest course
Steady as the beating drum?
Should I marry Kocoum?
Is all my dreaming at an end
Or do you still wait for me, Dream Giver
Just around the riverbend?

Pocahontas’s Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, less twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), “Legit” (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high)

Figure 3.5, “Just Around the Riverbend,” Color-Coded Lyrics Chart

However, I also hear less constriction—twang—in her vocal production compared to the others’ Little-Girl Voices. Breathiness and twang together have connoted cute, feminine girlishness in my perception of these Renaissance-era princesses. Although Pocahontas matches her counterparts in breathiness, especially in her lower register, her less exaggerated use of twang suggests a less exaggerated naïveté. I still perceive her to

be feminine—and she was certainly hyper-feminized by the animators' "adjustments" to her figure, that classic hourglass shape—but she *sounds* and acts more like an adult.[148]

In addition, Pocahontas's songs feature more and stronger belting from Judy Kuhn than we've heard from earlier princesses. For example, in "Just Around the Riverbend," she sings her choruses mostly in Belt, and also belts in the second refrain. She still works up to a stronger timbre across her verse-chorus cycles, through a timbral crescendo like Belle and Ariel, but she sustains a stronger sound for longer. Looking back to Chapter 2, Belle belted for only a line or a few words at once, and she often elegantly flipped into head voice for a note or two. Ariel, as the earliest and weakest Renaissance princess voice, did not belt.

In "Just Around the Riverbend," the strongest moments happen at the beginning of the choruses: "I look once more, just around the riverbend/beyond the shore." Here, the accompaniment increases from light woodwinds and strings to a full orchestral sound, including brass reinforcements, timpani hits, and cymbal crashes. Like Belle, Pocahontas sings more strongly, and engages her full body, in order to be heard above a greater force: moving into a more public proxemic zone, if you will.[149] However, Pocahontas does so for multiple lines, making the climax broader and longer, filling out the entire chorus rather than the singular "I want much more than this provincial life!" (from "Belle"). She also brings a little more weight up to the top of the melody, C5, but

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[148] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" 37.
There is also a history of sexualizing and adultifying BIPOC girls and teens to make them seem like they are older than they are. For more information on the sexualization of girls and Pocahontas, see:
Jamie Wagman et. al, "Constructing Sexuality and Fetishizing Women in American History: Debunking Myths in Popular Culture from Pocahontas to the Cold War," *The Seneca Falls Dialogues* 2.8 (2017).

[149] In this case, I use "public proxemic zone" to refer to the balance of accompaniment and voice, and the change in Kuhn's vocal quality. Even without fancy soundbox editing, the "high degree of musical intervening material" requires her to belt over the full orchestra, almost like a shout. See Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Ashgate, 2017), 187.

never deviates from a beautiful, effortless vibrato. If placing the princesses on a spectrum of lighter to heavier belters, she would sing heavier than Belle, but much less so than Elsa. **Figure 3.6** charts this spectrum.

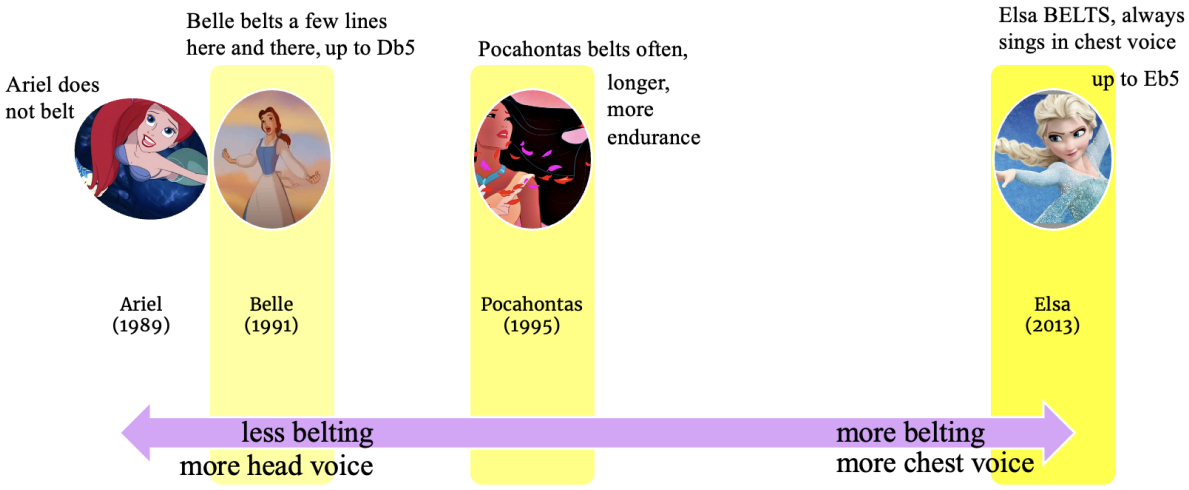


Figure 3.6, Spectrum of Belting from Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas, to Elsa

This vocal and instrumental shift at the chorus emphasizes her yearning for adventure. In the verses, Pocahontas reflects on nature themes, wise adages like "you can't step in the same river twice," and wonders "what's around the riverbend?" But in the choruses, when she gives it her all, she speaks of her dreams, and her longing for whatever *is* around the riverbend. In this sense, Pocahontas's "I Want" song fits well with Ariel's "Part of Your World" and Belle's "Belle." She will eventually have a love interest, but her initial wish is to explore and learn and have a life outside of what she currently knows. She is constantly running off on her own, seeking independence, like Ariel, and she is part of a community, like Belle. As someone who thinks for herself and dreams of

"something more," Pocahontas is less of a damsel and more of a leader, better fitting what Pérez called the "cultural ethos" of the 1990s' strong female characters.[150]

"Just Around the Riverbend"

Coda
Should I choose the smoothest course
Steady as the beating drum?
Should I marry Kocoum?
Is all my dreaming at an end?
Or do you still wait for me, Dream Giver
Just around the riverbend?

Pocahontas's Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), "Legit" (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high)

Figure 3.7, "Just Around the Riverbend," Coda

That all being said, in the coda (**Fig. 3.7**), Pocahontas's vocal delivery completely changes. The music stops, hesitating on a single unison note (sol) in the flute and oboe, before she moves into a *recitativo accompagnato* style. She sings freely, almost like speaking in the way that her rhythms are unhurried and flexible, and the string accompaniment follows her rather than a set pulse. At the beginning of the coda, too, she moves into a Mutter vocal quality, where she does not fully phonate (especially compared to her strong belting in the chorus immediately prior). She sounds breathy, low in her register, and intimate, as if she's speaking to herself.

Finally, for her last two lines, she shifts into head voice for the first and only time. This stark contrast is seen in the pink-colored "legit" vocal quality, matching more to Aurora's voice or a few lighter moments of Belle's songs rather than the rest of

[150] Pérez, "From Snow White to Moana," 75.

Pocahontas's contemporaries. In the big picture, I sometimes see similar shifts into head voice for only a moment, or a few lines of a song, when a princess starts to get dreamy or swoony about a love interest. For example, for Belle (1991), this happens during "Something There" (**Fig. 3.8**, left) when she falls in love with the Beast and describes "Prince Charming" in a "legit," more classical-influenced head voice. In the next chapter, we'll also hear this vocal shift in Rapunzel's "I See the Light" (2009) (**Fig. 3.8**, right) when she falls in love with Flynn during a romantic boat ride, flipping into a light Little-Girl Voice. Though Rapunzel is not fully in head voice, the switch to a much breathier, lighter timbre is associated with romance and falling in love once again.

"Something There"

New and a bit alarming
Who'd have ever thought that this could be
True, that he's no Prince Charming
But there's something in him
that I simply didn't see

"I See the Light"

And it's warm and real and bright
And the world has somehow shifted
All at once everything is different
Now that I see you
Now that I see you

Figure 3.8, Vocal Shifts in "Something There" (Belle) and "I See the Light" (Rapunzel)

In general, in "Just Around the Riverbend," Pocahontas sings with more chest voice and a stronger timbre than her predecessors, and she dreams of something other than a man. She is portrayed as more mature, and more of a leader. However, right at the very end, she considers marrying Kocoum, and flips into this very different, very sweet head voice ("Legit") when thinking about romance. Although she does not ultimately end up with Kocoum, Pocahontas fits in with princesses both before and after her—Belle and Rapunzel—when moving up into a lighter head voice for this moment. There is something about heterosexual romance that makes these girls use lighter, higher, and

more *Disney-damsel*-like voices: even if they are strong and independent overall, they still go soft in the light of the male gaze.

"Colors of the Wind"

In her second song, "Colors of the Wind," (**Fig. 3.9**) Pocahontas again belts for multiple lines, sings in chest voice often, and low in her range. By this point, she's met John Smith, but this is not just a love song (unlike Ariel's shift to infatuation with her Prince Eric between her first and second song). Instead, Pocahontas uses double-address to speak to both her love interest and the audience about nature, empathy, and community. She shows greater maturity and bigger-picture priorities through these two songs.

As in "Just Around the Riverbend," Pocahontas also moves from Soft Voice to Modal Voice to Belting across formal cycles in "Colors of the Wind." Once again, she belts for multiple lines in the choruses (or "B" sections), sustaining a stronger sound for longer than her predecessors. In this case, she also has a muttered, low, speech-like introduction, staying in a tessitura around G♯3 to E4. (See **Fig. 3.10.)** Although she belts up to C♯5, not unlike Belle or Rapunzel, the extended amount of time she spends near or below middle C4 is unusual.

One could argue that Disney might have cast their first non-white princesses to also be their first non-soprano princesses, associating voice type with race (spoiler alert, Mulan's song "Reflection" also begins in a low tessitura near/below middle C).

"Colors of the Wind"

Introduction
You think I'm an ignorant savage
And you've been so many places
I guess it must be so
But still I cannot see
If the savage one is me
How can there be so much that you don't know
You don't know

A (verse)
You think you own whatever land you land on
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim
But I know every rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name

A (verse)
You think the only people who are people
Are the people who look and think like you
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
You'll learn things you never knew,
you never knew

B (chorus)
Have you ever heard the wolf cry
to the blue corn moon
Or asked the grinning bobcat
why he grinned
Can you sing with all the voices of the mountain
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind

A (verse)
Come run the hidden pine trails of the forest
Come taste the sun sweet berries of the Earth
Come roll in all the riches all around you
And for once, never wonder what they're worth

A (verse)
The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
The heron and the otter are my friends
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends

(addition)
How high does the sycamore grow?
If you cut it down, then you'll never know

B' (chorus)
And you'll never hear the wolf cry
to the blue corn moon
For whether we are white or copper skinned
We need to sing with
all the voices of the mountain
We need to paint with all the colors of the wind
You can own the Earth and still
All you'll own is Earth until
You can paint with all the colors of the wind

Pocahontas's Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 3.9, "Colors of the Wind" Lyrics Chart

Singers of color have often been described as having "darker," "husky," or even "Black" voices, despite a lack of sonic evidence.[151] Perhaps this was a factor in their casting process. An interesting further study might compare a broader set of Disney

[151] See, for example, Eidsheim's chapter on African-American opera singers: Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Phantom Genealogy: Sonic Blackness and the American Operatic Timbre," in *The Race of Sound* (Duke University Press, 2018), 61-90.

voice types with their race and ethnicities, investigating how such associations might have come out of operatic or musical theater traditions.

However, after 2000, *all* princesses showcase greater extensions in their lower ranges. Tiana (who is Black) has a range of G3-C5 in her song, “Almost There,” while Rapunzel, Anna, and Elsa (who are white) sing between F3-E5, A3-E5, and F3-E♭5 respectively. Even as they belt higher and higher, they also sing lower, too. I could certainly see an argument being made for the casting of these women, in the ’90s, as darker-skinned and “darker”-voiced princesses revealing cultural assumptions around race and voice. That is, their voices might suggest a cultural trend towards casting Women of Color as mezzos more than sopranos, and as having “darker” timbres. However, given the wider and wider vocal ranges after Pocahontas and Mulan, it would seem as though their tessituras expand lower at least partly due to changing vocal norms. After Ariel, all princesses sing more in chest voice, lower, belt higher, and for longer.
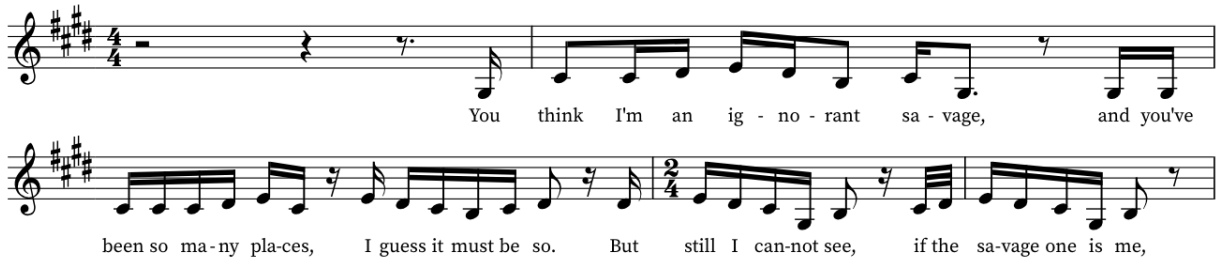


Figure 3.10, Pocahontas’s Low Range in “Colors of the Wind”

This speech-like opening section functions as an introductory verse, placing “Colors of the Wind” in conversation with the classic Tin Pan Alley AABA form. However, after the introduction, it follows an AAB-AAB pattern instead. Each A, A, and B then has

its own teleology, building in energy to the B section, like verses and choruses; the second cycle even has an addition that is a bit like a prechorus. (See the section labelled "addition" in **Fig. 3.9.**) It is quite short, but otherwise matches prechorus expectations: it moves away from tonic, and many factors increase in anticipation of the chorus. The surface rhythm increases during this section, as does the instrumental texture, and big sweeping lines move upwards throughout the orchestra to the upper woodwinds and strings, along with cymbal crashes, all leading towards the beginning of the final chorus at [2:35].

Pocahontas's voice also moves upwards in her range, bringing up her chest voice in order to Belt as we may have come to expect at this point in a princess song. Her high C5 in particular, on "how high do the sycamores grow," stands out to me as beautifully dissonant (she is in D♭ major now) and vocally intense. Not only is it an appoggiatura on scale degree 7, but it is projected over a G♭ in the bass, creating a tritone and a crunchy chord, G♭-A♭-C-D♭. See my transcription, and the sycamore, in **Figure 3.11**:

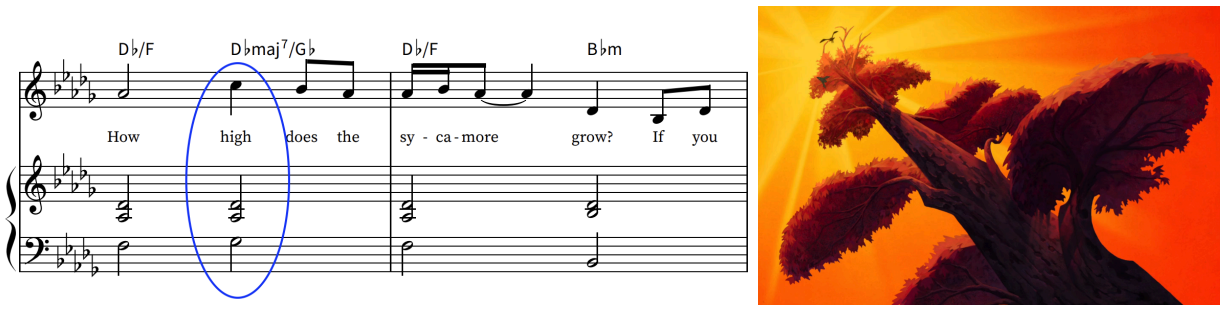


Figure 3.11, "How High Does The Sycamore Grow," Piano/Vocal Transcription and the Sycamore Image

It is also a moment of strong text painting, as Pocahontas and John Smith look up to see this looming sycamore tree and her voice moves up at the same moment. Furthermore, this strong belted C5 provides a stepping stone for the next high-note arrival: a moment later, at the beginning of the chorus, she sings "and you'll never hear the wolf cry" up to a high D♭5. Just when we thought she gave it her all on that powerful C5, the actual climax happens a step higher, on D♭5, and that dissonance resolves upwards from *ti* to *do*. On many levels, her chorus feels like a release. She lands on the high tonic, she puts her full chest into it, and she sings overlooking a vast forest as she shows John Smith the wonders of her world (**Fig. 3.12**).



Figure 3.12, Pocahontas Sings the Final Chorus of "Colors of the Wind"

Although on the surface this might seem like a love song between Pocahontas and John Smith, broader themes about nature, empathy, and community are more important in this song than love or romance. She sings of rocks and trees and creatures, and treating the Earth with respect. Her lyrics play into the historical "noble savage" trope associating Indigenous people with nature, and romanticizing their connection with the earth while capitalizing on it. However, they also play into cultural shifts that

were happening in the 1990s surrounding climate change: suddenly, our relationship with the Earth was called into question, and climate change policy became an important hot-button issue both nationally and globally.[152] Given this context, it seems that Disney makes something of a political statement here: they paint the English colonizer, Governor Ratcliffe, as a villain obsessed with extracting wealth out of the new land. Pocahontas, then, is the voice of reason warning us to pay attention to the environment and live *with* it rather than against it.

She also sings with a double-layered mode of address. Although John Smith is physically there with her while she is singing in the second person, talking to "you," we could also interpret this song as more public and more communal. She gestures to the other colonizers when she sings "the earth is just a dead thing you can claim." (See **Fig. 3.13.**) If we consider her second-person "you" to be referring to Smith *and* all of his compatriots, or even *us* as modern-day settler descendents, then suddenly Pocahontas is teaching us all about empathy and living in harmony with our environment. This might not be a love song at all! She never mentions love or wishing or wanting, but rather walking "the footsteps of a stranger" and bridging the cross-cultural divide. She advocates for imagining ourselves in another's shoes, paying attention to our surroundings, and—for an environmentalist example—choosing not to cut down the sycamore tree.

[152] Peter Jackson, "From Stockholm to Kyoto: A Brief History of Climate Change," *UN Chronicle* (Jun. 1 2007), https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/stockholm-kyoto-brief-history-climate-change.
Eugene Linden, "Climate Change Became Politicized in the 1990s. It Didn't Have To Be That Way," *Time (*Apr. 22, 2022), https://time.com/6169294/climate-change-politicized-in-1990s/.



Figure 3.13, Pocahontas Singing "to" John Smith in "Colors of the Wind"

If she is indeed addressing a broader, plural "you," then Pocahontas uses what music theorist Lori Burns calls a "Public Voice," or a public form of address.[153] Other than Belle interacting with villagers in her introductory song "Belle," the princess songs tend to be private, not really considering an audience outside of themselves and their romantic interests. Aurora, for example, sings to her dream-lover, "I know you," and Ariel sings to Prince Eric that she wants to be "part of your world." However, with Pocahontas, for the first time, we can hear multiple layers to her lyrics. In addition to public voice, she uses what Matt BaileyShea calls "double-address,"[154] in which Pocahontas simultaneously addresses two narratees, or even three, at once (Smith, the colonizers, and modern-day moviegoers). She wants Smith to understand her better, she wants the colonizers to take better care of the Earth, and she wants modern, real-world audiences to have more empathy and environmental awareness.

In doing so, Pocahontas showcases a greater awareness of community—the world outside herself and her immediate relationships. She speaks with authority for her

[153] See Lori Burns, "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement," in *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music,* ed. Mark Spicer and John Covach (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 164.
[154] BaileyShea, "From Me to You," [21]-[28].

people, and she speaks to a broader audience than simply the man in front of her. Via her songs, Pocahontas shows the leadership and diplomatic skills that she will utilize later in the movie to try to forge peace agreements between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous folk.

In addition, her double address shows greater maturity because Pocahontas is thinking of people outside of her immediate social circle. In childhood and educational psychology, it is widely understood that children become more aware of and more engaged in broader and broader social circles as they age.[155] See, for example, Bronfenbrenner's model in **Figure 3.14,** which shows how these circles connect children with increasingly large groups. They begin with parents, siblings, begin to venture out into classmates and teachers, and later expand into social groups like clubs, music ensembles, sports teams, etc. In later (teenage) years, they might even become aware of and involved in greater communities, such as through work, volunteering, church groups, or even political activism. Where previous princesses were focused entirely on their relationships with individuals—their parents, love interests, or perhaps a singular villain—Pocahontas engages with cross-cultural communication between two wildly disparate groups. She also speaks to us, the audience, about how to put ourselves in other people's shoes, and how to respect the Earth.

[155] Olivia Guy-Evans, "Bronfenbrenner's Mesosystem Theory," *SimplyPsychology* (Aug. 29, 2024), https://www.simplypsychology.org/bronfenbrenner-mesosystem.html. From Bronfenbrenner, "Environments in developmental perspective," 3-28.

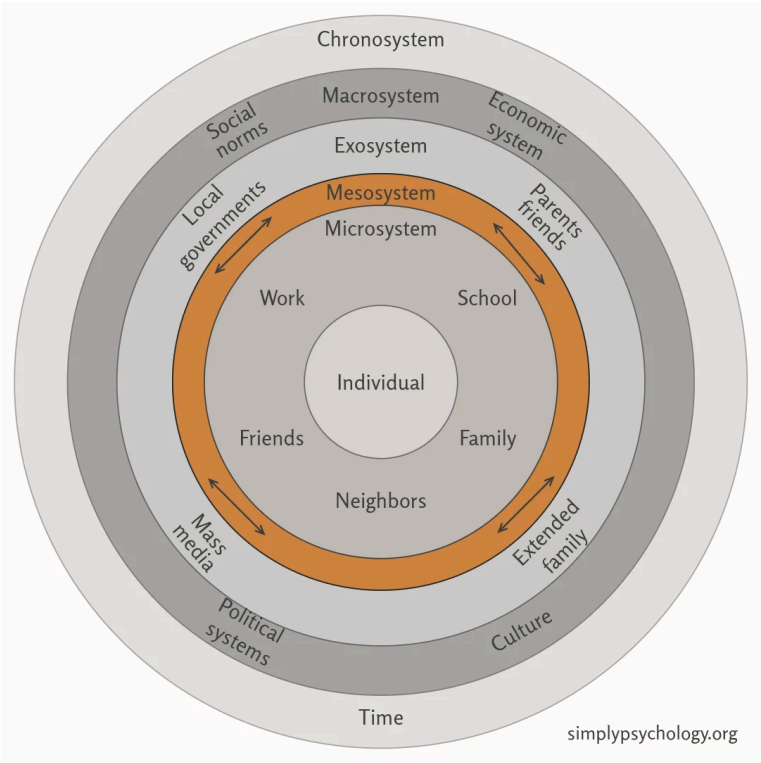


Figure 3.14, Bronfenbrenner's Mesosystem Theory[156]

Conclusion

As we've seen, Pocahontas is a strong character in many ways. She refuses to marry Kocoum and chooses to stay with her people rather than marry John Smith back in England. Her priorities are clearly bigger than romance. Moreover, she also acts as a peacemaker between two antagonistic groups of people, and she shows maturity in her lyrics. Her songs aren't really about love, or even just personal desires, but she also speaks to larger communities through double address. She wishes for people to better understand others, to keep the peace, and to take care of the land we live on.

[156] Guy-Evans, "Bronfenbrenner's Mesosystem Theory," from Bronfenbrenner, "Environments in developmental perspective," 3-28.

In "Just Around the Riverbend" and "Colors of the Wind," Pocahontas also sings in a lower tessitura, with more chest voice, and longer-sustained belting than her direct predecessors Ariel and Belle. Her voice is breathy but not quite as twang-y as theirs, characterizing her as feminine but not so childsish or naïve. In general, her vocal power showcases her character's strength and maturity through belting and a distinct lack of Little-Girl Voice.

To be fair, there are still some problems with characterizing her as a mature, wise, diplomatic woman. By constantly emphasizing Pocahontas's connection with nature through sound effects and lyrics, and playing on the "primitive" trope with drums and synthesized flutes, Disney paints her as a "noble savage." She is given wisdom and leadership qualities, but at the same time this puts the responsibility of peacemaking and Earth-saving on the Indigenous woman's shoulders. Ariel, Belle, and even Rapunzel do not feel obligated to speak to broader cultural or political issues. As a Woman of Color, Pocahontas has to do the work, putting in more emotional and inter-personal labor than her white counterparts.

Furthermore, the sexualization of Indigenous women and girls is revealed in the way Pocahontas has been crudely treated by Disney, Mel Gibson, and American capitalism since the movie came out in 1995. Disney drew Pocahontas to emphasize her "wasp waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts that are *truly* impressive" [italics original]—as Kilpatrick quotes Mel Gibson in saying, Pocahontas is a "babe."[157] They also erase her history as a young girl who was raped by the pedophile John Wolfe.[158] Sure,

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[157] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'politically correct' 'Pocahontas,'" 37.
[158] Neegahnii Madeline Chakasim, "Sexualization of Indigenous women through cultural appropriation and media," *The Indigenous Foundation* (accessed Nov. 20, 2025), https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/sexualization-of-indigenous-women.
See also Kilpatrick, 36.

Disney probably *should* remove such violence from their family-friendly, G-rated movie. However, by changing her story, on such a huge platform as theirs, Disney plays a role in all of us forgetting the multitude of harms done upon Indigenous women in the past and in the current day. Pocahontas remains a sex symbol, a Halloween costume white women can put on, while real-life Indigenous girls and women still experience high rates of sexual violence, abuse, and murder.[159]

It is difficult to feel excited about Pocahontas's positive characteristics given the history of erasure, exoticism, and sexualization that Indigenous women have faced for hundreds of years. From a first- or second-wave feminist point of view, Pocahontas does achieve many great things: she can choose what she wants to do with her life, not limited to just being a wife or mother, and she does not have to be so submissive to the men around her (her father, Kocoum, or John Smith). However, by the 1990s, third-wave feminism sought to bring intersectionality into the picture, acknowledging more factors that impact marginalized women: race, class, sexuality, etc. Disney certainly responded to intersectional feminism in the '90s by writing Women of Color characters, such as Pocahontas and Mulan, but they ignored the violence of Pocahontas's original story and depicted her as an overly sexualized object of the male gaze. They also relied on musical (and non-musical) stereotypes to offer only surface-level engagement with non-Western cultures in both films.

Finally, I would like to mention that Disney cast Judy Kuhn, a white actress, to sing for Pocahontas, before they cast Irene Bedard, an Alaskan Native (Inupiaq/Yu′pik/Cree)

[159] Chakasim, "Sexualization of Indigenous women."

actress for her speaking voice.[160] In the movie, we hear Bedard for the spoken lines and Kuhn for the songs, but their voices are similar enough to sound like the same person. To her credit, Kuhn said in an interview in 2021 that "I'm sure today people would have objections about the fact that I sang those songs, but they actually tried to cast a Native American to sing them, [...] and they didn't find someone that they liked. So I got to do it."[161] In 1995, I'm sure it was a big step for Disney to cast an actually-Indigenous actress for an Indigenous role. However, the fact that Kuhn was cast first, and Disney "didn't find someone that they liked" who *was* an Indigenous singer, suggests that they had Judy Kuhn more in mind than Irene Bedard when originally formulating Pocahontas's role. Looking back, I imagine *Pocahontas* would have been very different if Disney had had more Indigenous folks involved from the very beginning.

CASE STUDY: *Mulan* (1998)

Like *Pocahontas*, *Mulan* is another non-white princess joining the Disney Princess brand in the era of third-wave feminism. She is also a victim of musical stereotyping, and there has been plenty of criticism of Disney's portrayal of ancient Chinese culture.[162] Unlike *Pocahontas*, however, Mulan's character opens up a variety of interesting questions around gender identity and fluidity, because Mulan cross-dresses and tries to pass as a man for the majority of the movie. In this section, I will consider how Disney sets up

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[160] Jan Stuart, "Thankless toil no longer – Stars line up to provide voices in animated films," *Chicago Tribune* (Jul. 10, 2001), archived from the original May 24, 2015, accessed Dec. 12, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20150524095542/http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-07-10/features/0107100021_1_toy-story-films-snow-white-baldwin-returns/2.

[161] Judy Kuhn, interview by William Foxton, "In Conversation with Judy Kuhn," *Cherwell* (Jan. 23, 2021), https://www.cherwell.org/2021/01/23/in-conversation-with-judy-kuhn/.

[162] Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana."
Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan*."
Vuong, "Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan*."

gender binaries through music; how Mulan breaks those binaries, including with her voice; and how her lyrics may be interpreted in two ways: one trans and one cis reading. In any reading of Mulan's story, she reveals how artificial and performative gender is, as explored in Judith Butler's seminal gender studies work *Gender Trouble*.[163]

The music in *Mulan* has already been analyzed by East Asian Studies scholar Karen Vuong and musicologist Lisa Scoggin, who both consider how its songs fit (or do not fit) with traditional Chinese culture. Vuong, for instance, argues that "Reflection" is based on the Western "I Want" song tradition and emphasizes individuality, with no consideration for traditional Chinese aesthetics or values. "Although ['Reflection'] contains Chinese instruments like the pipa," she says, "it is still a very superficial representation of Chinese music. [...] The instruments do not take a leading role in the song, nor does their performance draw on each instrument's respective history and playing traditions."[164] From a broader perspective, folklore scholar Michelle Anjirbag also argues that Disney took Mulan's story out of its context, highlighting Western Hollywood values, and thus "perpetuat[ing] a pattern of 'the West' constructing an Orientalized image of the other" through *Mulan.*[165]

Musicologist Lisa Scoggin agrees that "Reflection" is composed with Western aesthetics, but she also considers other songs in Mulan that show more engagement with Chinese music and culture. She analyzes the cultural signification of four *Mulan* songs and situates them in two binaries: masculine/feminine and Chinese/Western (**Fig. 3.15**). "Reflection" is far on the Western side, yes, but it and the electric-guitar heavy "I'll

[163] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
[164] Vuong, "Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan*," 1-10.
Vuong also works closely with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism in music:
Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978).
[165] Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana," 230.

Make a Man Out of You" are balanced by two songs that emphasize traditional Chinese values: "Honor to Us All" and "A Girl Worth Fighting For."[166] Notably, however, these songs set up deep contrasts, creating distance between the Western and the Chinese, the "familiar" and the "Other," and the feminine and the masculine.

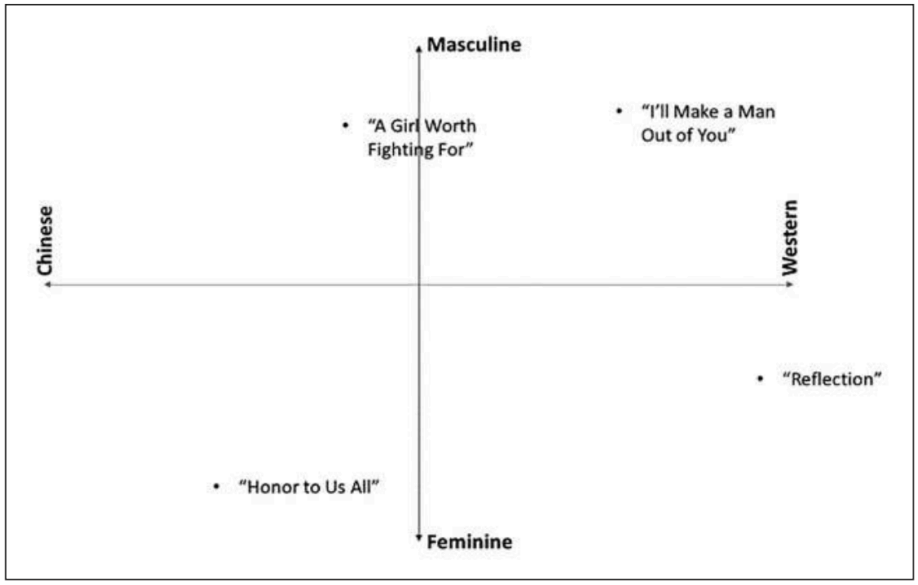


Figure 3.15, Scoggin's Placement of Four Songs from Mulan on a Graph of Two Binaries: Masculine/Feminine and Chinese/Western[167]

Like Vuong and Scoggin, I consider how these songs highlight Western, Chinese, masculine, and feminine cultural norms. More specifically, however, I look at how Mulan uses her voice in these songs to perform gender. In "Reflection," she looks in the mirror and does not recognize her heavily made-up and dressed-up reflection—to Mulan, this model of femininity feels wrong. Challenging the status quo even more strongly, she then cuts her hair, puts on a man's clothing, joins the military, and speaks and sings in a deeper voice.

[166] Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan*," 196-203.
[167] Scoggin, "The Music of *Mulan,*" 200.

For this reason, I ascribe her a "masc" voice, which is a uniquely dark, open, and non-breathy version of her chest voice (see **Fig. 3.16**):

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Masc Voice	Chest	Neutral	Open - Dark	Low/Mid
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 3.16, Mulan's Vocal Palette

Lisa Brocklebank (literature) and Amy Davis (film studies) both point out how Mulan's actions expose the artificial nature of gender behavior and gender expression.[168] By simply changing her appearance on the outside, she can pass as male, and by excelling at the physical and strategic skills of war, she passes as an extremely successful one. Although not canonically trans, since she sheds the soldier's garb at the end of the film and goes back to her old life with her family, Mulan fluidly moves between male and female identities. She, and her story, are queer, in bringing the gender binary itself into question.[169]

[168] Brocklebank, "Disney's 'Mulan,'" 275.
A. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches,* 195.
[169] For more on queer readings of Mulan, Greenhill, "Sexualities/Queer and Trans Studies," 291.

"Reflection"

"Reflection" heavily emphasizes individuality over family and honor, so much so that scholars from various disciplines—Vuong, Scoggin, and philosopher George Dunn[170]—point to this song as strong evidence for Disney's Western values supplanting traditional Chinese ones. Certainly, the orchestration is very much in line with the Hollywood movie-musical tradition: lush strings, woodwind solos, arpeggiated piano accompaniments, and cymbal crashes for climactic moments. And the song's function is similarly Western: as Vuong writes, it comes from the musical-theater genre's "'I want' song, which outlines the key desires and motivations of a character."[171] In particular, Mulan sings, "if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart." Although duty to family and community are integral components of traditional Chinese ethics,[172] Mulan ultimately decides to live her truth rather than fulfilling the role of wife for her family's "honor."

I see two possible ways of reading Mulan's lyrics in "Reflection" (**Fig. 3.17**). First, she could simply be a cis-gendered woman who experiences *body dysmorphia*, and does not identify with the traditionally feminine looks or qualities her family wants her to conform to. In this situation, she merely puts on a soldier's garb, is a cross-dresser, and is comfortable being masculine but not male. On the other hand, she can be read as transgender, or even potentially non-binary, experiencing *gender dysphoria*. Instead of being a woman who puts on a man's clothing, Mulan, according to this second interpretation, would be a man or non-binary individual who finally gets to be their authentic self. Of course, Mulan is not canonically trans.

[170] Dunn, "Honor and Authenticity in *Mulan*," 11-24.
[171] Vuong, "Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan,*" 3.
[172] Dunn, "Honor and Authenticity in *Mulan*," 14-17.

"Reflection"

Verse
Look at me
I will never pass for a perfect bride
Or a perfect daughter
Can it be
I'm not meant to play this part?
Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself
I would break my family's heart

Chorus
Who is that girl I see
Staring straight back at me?
Why is my reflection someone I don't know?
Somehow I cannot hide
Who I am, though I've tried
When will my reflection show
Who I am inside?

When will my reflection show
Who I am inside?

Mulan's Voices:
Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)

Figure 3.17, "Reflection" Lyrics Chart

However, as we will see with Elsa in *Frozen*, the beautiful thing about Disney is that their lyrics and stories often leave open possibilities for queer readings. See, for example, Jess Kung's exploration of *Mulan* and Asian-American queerness, Katie Kapurch's discussion of *Tangled* and lesbian girlhood, or Molly Farris's queer analysis of *Frozen*.[173]

In either case, Mulan reveals the construction of gender performativity in her reaction to her reflection. When she participates in traditionally feminine gender behaviors—such as heavy makeup and costuming—she does not recognize the woman in the mirror. See, for example, **Figure 3.18**. She knows she "will never pass for a perfect bride." The choice of wording, "to pass," is significant here because of its connotations in the queer community. She will never "pass" as the woman her family and her community want her to be. Gender, then, is not just something we feel "inside," but an action or an appearance we take on in order to be perceived in a certain way.

[173] Kung, "Disney's *Mulan* and Unlocking Queer Asian-American Masculinity," 40-49.
Kapurch, "Rapunzel Loves Merida," 436-53.
Farris, "A Queer Analysis of the Metaphors in Disney's *Frozen* Franchise."



Figure 3.18, Mulan Looks at her Reflection Unhappily (left), and Spills Tea (right)

In a cis reading, Mulan feels pressured to look and act a certain way in order to be the "perfect bride" and "perfect daughter." She must look perfectly beautiful, not a hair out of place; she must not speak unless spoken to; she must pour tea gracefully; and she must remain poised. With such strict expectations for how women should look and act, Mulan then looks into the mirror and sees herself failing to be that model of femininity. She goes on to prove that a woman can be good at physical activity, military training, and strategy instead. Through her success in the army, she shows us that a princess no longer has to be an object to be admired, but women can do all the same things that men can do—even at an extremely high level. In this reading, when Mulan returns home, she is content dressing as a woman again, going back to her old life, so the men's clothing was simply a temporary means to an end. She reveals to us that gender norms are fake without necessarily leaving the binary entirely behind.

In a trans or non-binary reading of "Reflection," Mulan realizes they can never "pass" for a perfect bride or daughter. They move fluidly between different modes of gender expression, feminine and masculine, and eventually they feel comfortable in

both. That same military success and athleticism might translate to *gender euphoria*, as Mulan experiences joy in traditionally masculine activities and appearances. He "passes" as male, and excels at it. Where before, he was "play[ing] this part" of woman, bride, and daughter, Mulan thrives, given the chance to be his authentic self in the military. At the end of the movie, they return to living as "female," but do not subscribe to those traditional scripts for femininity. Mulan is no longer required to don the heavy makeup, fancy dress, fans, or parasols, and their family accepts them back into the home as they are. Though not canonically described as feeling like man (or a non-binary person) "inside," Mulan's ability to move between various modes of gender expression and their dysphoria at seeing their reflection opens up the possibility of these queer readings.

Returning back to Mulan's voice in "Reflection," in particular, this song focuses on Mulan questioning her own identity. See **Figure 3.19** for the following analysis. In her longing and her struggle to define who she is, "Reflection" is very much a prototypical "I Want" song. Vocally, she uses similar techniques to her contemporaries—Pocahontas, Belle, and Ariel—to create tension, resolution, and trajectory. She begins with a breathy twang-y voice in the verse and then gives it her all with a strong belt in the chorus. Like Pocahontas (more than their predecessors), Mulan belts for an extended amount of time in the chorus, and she exerts a significant amount of effort to do so.

At the beginning of the chorus, also, Mulan sings "who" ("*who* is that girl I see?") on a moment of dissonance: scale degree 2 over a I chord. This happens again when she sings "somehow" ("*somehow* I cannot hide"). These moments of melodic tension underline her shift to a stronger timbre, belting at the beginning of the chorus and with

renewed strength halfway through the chorus. They also emphasize the longing of her lyrics, as she tries to figure out who she is.

“Reflection”

Chorus
Who is that girl I see
Staring straight back at me?
Why is my reflection **some^one** I don't know?
Some^how I cannot hide
Who I **am**, though I've tried
When will my reflection show
who I **am** **’** inside?

Coda
When will my reflection show
who I am inside?

Mulan’s Voices:
Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid)
^ break, **’** breath, and emphasis through diction

Figure 3.19, “Reflection” Chorus and Coda

I hear this longing, and the effort it takes for Mulan to belt, in a couple of small vocal breaks in between syllables: “some^one” and “some^how,” as though it is quite difficult to sustain her chest voice up at these pitch levels (A4-D5). On “some^one,” this is merely a slight pause in the sound as if the second syllable is difficult to phonate. On “some^how,” however, her voice breaks upwards on the [m]. Through these small signals, we can tell this is a vocally taxing chorus for her voice actress, Lea Salonga. I also hear great effort in how Salonga emphasizes the [m] consonants at the end of the word “am,” twice in the chorus and once, less so, in the coda.

Additionally, Salonga takes a big breath between words on the phrase “who I am ’ inside.” She just recently breathed after “when will my reflection show,” and although the word “inside” is held for a long time, this breath breaks up the sentence in an odd,

un-speech-like spot. But Salonga is working so hard to belt for extended amounts of time that she needs that sudden intake of air to continue. As a result, her delivery of the sentence "when will my reflection show [breath] who I am [breath] inside" emphasizes the middle segment—"*who I am*"—most of all.

Lastly, in the short coda, Mulan returns to a quiet, breathy voice for two lines. Pocahontas also did something like this in her song "Just Around The Riverbend," where she switched to an entirely new vocal timbre for the last two lines. Mulan, though, foreshadowed her breathiness earlier in the song, with a small amount of Little-Girl Voice in the chorus. She smoothly transitions between different colors of vocal qualities, and they are less intensely contrasting—that is, her Little-Girl Voice is not overly exaggerated, nor is her Whisper.

Where Pocahontas immediately switched from Belt to "Legit" vocal qualities in "Riverbend," Mulan uses smaller nuances to add breathiness in her voice in the chorus, and gradually moves into Little-Girl Voice, and then Whisper, at the very end of the song. Mulan's lyrics are also not an immediate contrast, unlike Pocahontas's sudden mention of a love interest. Mulan merely repeats the last line, "when will my reflection show who I am inside?" Mulan is not becoming more traditionally feminine or cutesy in response to a man, but rather as a note of wistfulness coloring her delivery when she repeats the same sentence twice. On the first iteration, she sang with great longing, belting, emphasizing the [m], and taking a deep breath before the last word. On the second iteration, she takes on a more intimate tone, more in the style of the wistful wishing of earlier princesses like Ariel and Belle.

Salonga's vocal performance, including belting, strategic breaths, and diction, emphasizes the main question of the song: who is she? Her smooth transitions between Belt and Little-Girl qualities reveal a state of vocal flux, as she is uncertain of who she is. On the other hand, these vocal colors are less starkly contrasting than they could be, suggesting that she is not emphasizing her girly naïveté quite so much as the earlier princesses, such as Ariel, for example. She is at the cusp of adulthood, wishing for answers, yes, but she is not so immature as the Disney damsels were before her. Mulan is even further from the original damsel archetype as she takes the sword and fights in the army. Instead, her vocal longing reflects a desire to express herself authentically, because the traditional mold of femininity does not feel right to her.

"A Girl Worth Fighting For," "Honor to Us All," and "I'll Make a Man Out of You"

Near the beginning of the film, Disney sets up strong gender binaries in "A Girl Worth Fighting For," "Honor to Us All," and "I'll Make a Man Out of You." Dunn tells us that these "strictly demarcated" gender roles were common in ancient Chinese society: men were expected to take on the labor of warfare, while women were responsible for "礼乐 (lǐyuè), the social graces and the arts."[174] At first, Mulan abides by these values with a hyper-feminine voice, but by the end of her military training, in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," she transitions into a lower, gruffer voice as part of her more masculine demeanor.

In "Honor to Us All," Mulan's grandmother and several other women beautify her before she goes to see the matchmaker. They "primp" and "polish" her and sing about the virtues of a good wife: calm, obedient, soft, and pale, with a tiny waist. And although Mulan feels visibly uncomfortable in this scene (before she sings "Reflection"), she still

[174] Dunn, "Honor and Authenticity in *Mulan*," 14.

tries to abide by these strict beauty standards and desperately pleads for her family's honor (**Fig. 3.20**):



Figure 3.20, The Women Dress Mulan in "Honor to Us All"

In her attempts to fit in, Mulan uses Little-Girl Voice for all four of her lines in "Honor To Us All" (see **Fig. 3.21**). She sings primarily in a breathy mixed voice, more head-dominant than chest-dominant, between A ♭ 4-D ♭ 5. It is quite twang-y, as she constricts her vocal tract to sound youthful and bright. Compared to her vocal timbre in "Reflection," Mulan's conventionally girly voice in "Honor To Us All" sounds small, light, and hyperfeminine, while she is still trying to conform to those impossible gender ideals.

In addition, the treble chorus in the last stanza of "Honor to Us All" (**Fig. 3.21**) takes on a very head-dominant quality. Even though each individual woman has her own unique vocal timbre, some brighter, some darker, some belting, some not… when they all come together, they blend and they raise their soft palates, sounding rather like a classically-trained choir.[175]

[175] Interesting comparisons could be made here with the traditional *dan* role in Peking opera, using Liu and Wallmark's spectrogram-based methodology. Annie Y. Liu and Zachary Wallmark, "Identifying Peking Opera Roles Through Vocal Timbre: An Acoustical and Conceptual Comparison Between Dan and Laosheng," *Music & Science* 7 (2024): 1-10.

“Honor To Us All”

[BATHER]
This is what you give me to work with?
Well, honey, I've seen worse
We're gonna turn this sow's ear
Into a silk purse
We'll have you washed and dried
Primped and polished 'til you glow with pride
Trust my recipe for instant bride
You'll bring honor to us all

[HAIRDRESSERS & FA LI]
Wait and see, when we're through
Boys will gladly go to war for you
With good fortune
And a great hairdo
You'll bring honor to us all

[FA LI & Chorus]
A girl can bring her family
Great honor in one way
By striking a good match
And this could be the day

[DRESSMAKERS & FA LI]
Men want girls with good taste
Calm, obedient
Who work fast-paced
With good breeding
And a tiny waist
You'll bring honor to us all

[FA LI & Chorus]
We all must serve our emperor
Who guards us from the Huns
A man by bearing arms
A girl by bearing sons

Mulan’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid)

[FA LI]
When we're through (When we're through)
You can't fail (You can't fail)
Like a lotus blossom (Like a lotus blossom)
Soft and pale (Soft and pale)
How could any fellow (How could any fellow)
Say, "No sale" (Say, "No sale")
You'll bring honor to us all
(You'll bring honor to us all)

[FA LI, spoken]
There, you're ready

[GRANDMOTHER FA, spoken]
Not yet
An apple for serenity, a pendant for balance

(sung)
Beads of jade for beauty
You must proudly show it
Now add a cricket just for luck
And even you can't blow it

[MULAN]
Ancestors, hear my plea
Help me not to make a fool of me
And to not uproot my family tree
Keep my father standing tall

[MULAN & Chorus]
Scarier than the undertaker
We are meeting our matchmaker

[Chorus]
Destiny, guard our girls
And our future as it fast unfurls
Please look kindly on these cultured pearls
Each a perfect porcelain doll
Please bring honor to us (x5) all

Figure 3.21, Lyrics, “Honor to Us All”

In this range from A4-D5, many sopranos and mezzos could sing this section in head, chest, or mixed voice, but when they sing together, they blend together with a light, well-blended head voice. (At least until the lowest note, a D4, which is low enough to require chest voice.) I read this homogeneous use of head voice as another example of gender conformity, to not stand out from the crowd. When they assemble the women together in the ritual of beautifying the girls for the matchmaker, their voices are at their most homogenous and hyper-feminine.

If we are tracking the early story line through these songs, then Mulan is primped and polished during "Honor to Us All," after which she goes to see the matchmaker and fails miserably, and then she sings "Reflection," wishing for her identity to match on the inside and the outside. After "Reflection," she decides to join the military to take her aging father's place, and while she is training with the other soldiers, Shang (Donny Osmond) sings "I'll Make a Man Out of You." Some of the other men, Chien Po, Yao, and Ling each get a line in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," as does Mulan (who goes by Ping now). Mulan's voice stands out from the others not just in her range, but also in her vocal timbre. Ling and Mulan both sing an octave above the others, but Ling's voice breaks several times in just the one line,

[LING] Boy^, was I a fool in school for^ cutting gym

uncontrollably, and his timbre is exaggeratedly nasal. It is not breathy at all. This combination of timbre and vocal breaks in the treble range makes Ling sound like a teenage boy just entering puberty. Mulan, on the other hand, sounds breathy, and vocally relaxed (i.e., not nasal), as if she is comfortable singing in that range and therefore has a relatively unmarked sound. Though "I'll Make a Man Out of You" includes a variety of

different modes of vocal masculinity—Shang's clear tenor, Yao's gravelly bass, and Ling's pubescent breaks—Mulan still does not fit in when she sings "hope he doesn't see right through me." It is not until the end of the song, when she climbs the wooden pole (**Fig. 3.22**), that she succeeds athletically and therefore in being "made" into a "man."



Figure 3.22, Mulan Climbs a Pole, Tying Weights Together and Using Them as Leverage

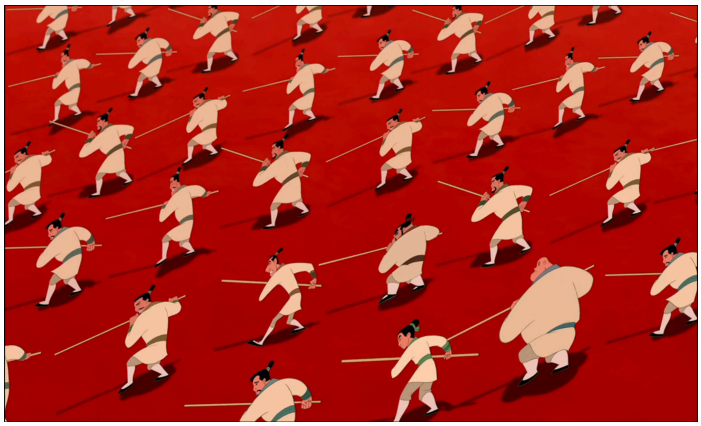


Figure 3.23, Yin Shou Gun (Shaolin Stick Fighting) Practice

“I’ll Make a Man Out of You”

[SHANG]
Let's get down to business to defeat the Huns
Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?
You're the saddest bunch I ever met
But you can bet before we're through
Mister, I'll make a man out of you

Tranquil as a forest, but on fire within
Once you find your center, you are sure to win
You're a spineless, pale, pathetic lot
And you haven't got a clue
Somehow, I'll make a man out of you

[CHIEN PO] I'm never gonna catch my breath
[YAO] Say goodbye to those who knew me
[LING] Boy, was I a fool in school for cutting gym
[MUSHU] This guy's got 'em scared to death
[MULAN] Hope he doesn't see right through me
[CHIEN PO] Now I really wish that I knew how to swim!

[SHANG, Chorus]
(Be a man) We must be swift as a coursing river
(Be a man) With all the force of a great typhoon
(Be a man) With all the strength of a raging fire
Mysterious as the dark side of the moon

[SHANG]
Time is racing toward us 'til the Huns arrive
Heed my every order, and you might survive
You're unsuited for the rage of war
So pack up, go home; you're through
How could I make a man out of you?

[SHANG, Chorus]
(Be a man) We must be swift as a coursing river
(Be a man) With all the force of a great typhoon
(Be a man) With all the strength of a raging fire
Mysterious as the dark side of the moon

x2

Mulan’s Voices: Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid)

Figure 3.24, Lyrics, “I’ll Make a Man Out of You”

Unsurprisingly, “I’ll Make A Man Out of You” is hypermasculinized through its lyrics, visuals, and instrumentation. Its lyrics (**Fig. 3.24**) praise swiftness, force, strength, and mysteriousness, and present military success as the way to achieve manly honor. Over the course of the song, we see a great number of men working on their fighting skills, such as in **Figure 3.23**, where they practice Yin Shou Gun, or Shaolin stick fighting. With grunts and shouts of “huh!,” they fight off imaginary enemies with long sticks, and we can see their progress in these various athletic skills over the course of the song.

These traditionally masculine activities are accompanied by electric bass, snare drums, and an emphasis on low-voiced instruments like low brass, cellos and basses, and left-hand piano octaves. In contrast, "Honor To Us All," in all its femininity, featured high, metallic mallets and cymbals, and tinny, synthesized "world music" flutes. These two juxtaposing soundworlds musically exaggerate the gender binary between the militant male and the graceful female. And in both "Honor To Us All" and "I'll Make a Man Out of You," despite Mulan's first attempts at passing as male, she still sounds like a woman. Especially in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," her hyperfeminine Little-Girl Voice marks her as Other in the crowd of men. At this point in the film, Mulan still conforms to vocal femininity, even as she performs other masculine-coded behaviors.

That being said, "I'll Make a Man Out of You" is a fascinating revelation of the construction of gender roles, again, because it suggests that a "man" is something that can be *made*. Like Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote, "one is not born, but becomes, a woman,"[176] Shang's song and Mulan's progress show us how the role of "man" is not just a qualification earned at birth, but something you can become. Through performing the correct actions, and doing them well, Mulan becomes a man in this montage. *The Second Sex* was quite a few decades old by this point—published in 1949 and translated to English in 1953. But, as we've seen with several of these princess stories, Disney seems to respond to feminist messaging a decade or two later, never radically innovative, always slightly behind the times, so it can appeal to the broadest possible audience and avoid offending the most conservative ones. Mulan's ever-changing relationship with gender can therefore appeal to more feminist and more queer audiences in her ability to break

[176] "Simone de Beauvoir," *Library of Congress Research Guides,* accessed Dec. 12, 2025, https://guides.loc.gov/feminism-french-women-history/famous/simone-de-beauvoir.

gender norms and question the binary itself, while still appealing to more conservative viewers who might see her as just a girl who can run, fight, and pretend.

Moving on, Mulan's fourth and final song in the film is "A Girl Worth Fighting For." Here, the soldiers bemoan their aching feet after a long, exhausting march across the countryside (**Fig. 3.25**). To get their spirits up, the men dream about their ideal "girl," who would be waiting for them back home. The preferred traits they mention in connection to this "girl" are quite similar to those described in "Honor to Us All:" pale, adoring, a good cook, and not particularly bright.



Fig. 3.25, Soldiers March through the Countryside Singing "A Girl Worth Fighting For"

"A Girl Worth Fighting For" features both the stereotypically masculine and feminine instruments: militant snare drums and tinny fake flute sounds. The snare drum is rhythmically connected with the action of marching step-by-step that we see on screen. And, once again, the synthesized flute plays painfully pentatonic melodies in the novelty layer, as we heard in the "musical stereotyping" portion of this chapter.

What is most interesting, though, is Mulan's first attempt at a masculine singing voice. In "A Girl Worth Fighting For" (**Fig. 3.26**), the soldiers each rotate between lines, allowing us to hear the full male chorus as well as Yao, Ling, Chien Po, and Mulan in short solos. Once again, each member has a unique vocal timbre. Yao's bass voice is gravelly and raspy. Ling's tenor is nasal and pressed, untrained, while Chien Po's baritone has a nice chiaroscuro (balance of light and dark), clear and well-trained. Mulan, finally, sings in the tenor range, like Ling, but takes on a significantly different timbre from her usual Little-Girl Voice or Soft Voice in that register (B3-G♯4).

To sound masculine, Mulan removes the breathiness and twang from her voice, two qualities that I've been connecting with Little-Girlishness in all of my analyses, and sings in a low/mid chest voice. She even moves into a dark sound, engaging the "sob" resonances (though not so far as to call it a "sob"): what a voice teacher would call "back space" and an open throat. Taking a moment to engage with mimesis, as per Kate Heidemann,[177] if I were to try to make this sound, I would try to stay very relaxed and open in my vocal mechanism, feeling resonance in my throat and the back of my head rather than in the "mask," or my front resonators in my sinuses around my nose and eyes. I would also be careful to use just the right amount of air to make sure my vocal folds are fully phonating, not breathy, but also not pressed either. These are the vocal production techniques Mulan (or Lea Salonga) seems to use to sound masculine.

[177] Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre."

“A Girl Worth Fighting For”

A
[Chorus] For a long time, we've been marching off to battle
[YAO] In our thundering herd, we feel a lot like cattle
[Chorus] Like the pounding beat, our aching feet aren't easy to ignore
[LING] Hey! Think of instead a girl worth fighting for
[MULAN, spoken] Huh?
[LING] That's what I said! A girl worth fighting for

B
[LING]I want her paler than the moon with eyes that shine like stars
[YAO] My girl will marvel at my strength adore my battle scars
[CHIEN PO] I couldn't care less what she'll wear or what she looks like
It all depends on what she cooks like (spoken) beef, pork, chicken, mmm...

A
[YAO] Bet the local girls thought you were quite the charmer
[LING] And I'll bet the ladies love a man in armor
[Chorus] You can guess what we have missed the most since we went off to war
[LING] What do we want?
[Chorus] A girl worth fighting for

B
[YAO] My girl will think I have no faults
[CHIEN PO] That I'm a major find
[MULAN] Uh, how 'bout a girl who's got a brain [1:33] *chest, neutral, dark, low/mid
Who always speaks her mind? *spoken, moving upwards towards LGV

[YAO, LING & CHIEN PO, spoken] Nah!

[LING] My manly ways and turn of phrase are sure to thrill her
[YAO] He thinks he's such a ladykiller

A
[CHI-FU] I've a girl back home who's unlike any other
[YAO] Yeah, the only girl who'd love him is his mother
[Chorus] But when we come home in victory they'll line up at the door
[LING] What do we want?
[Chorus] A girl worth fighting for

[LING] Wish that I had
[Chorus] A girl worth fighting for **[1812 quote]**
A girl worth fighting—

Mulan’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Masc Voice (chest, neutral, dark, low/mid)

Figure 3.26, Lyrics, “A Girl Worth Fighting For”

It is important to note, once again, that Mulan and Ling are singing in the same exact range, around B3-G♯4, which would be a slightly high tenor range or a fairly comfortable alto range. This is, of course, not the case in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," in which Mulan's short phrase was noticeably higher: F♯4-B4. As Nina Eidsheim shows in her analysis of Jimmy Scott's voice singing "high" for a man, it isn't just range that carries information to our listening ears about gender. Many voices of any gender can sing around the G♯3-G♯4 range. But the quality of one's sound *in* that range carries more information, for example a man going into falsetto, a woman taking on a little huskiness, or Jimmy Scott sounding nice and clear in his unmarked modal voice.[178]

To be fair, Mulan does not stay in what I call "Masc Voice" for very long. On her second of two lines, she switches to more of a speaking voice and moves upwards towards Little-Girl Voice, as in **Figure 3.27**:



Figure 3.27, Mulan's Two Lines in "A Girl Worth Fighting For"

Of course, she doesn't just move upwards in pitch but also takes on a little bit of twang, becoming higher and smaller at the same time on "mind." In context, Mulan trails off here because she sees that the men around her are not interested in a girl who "always speaks her mind." Clearly, they don't value brains or the ability to speak for oneself in a partner. And yet she goes against the grain and says it anyway. Her move into Little-Girl

[178] Nina Eidsheim, "Familiarity as Strangeness: Jimmy Scott and the Question of Black Timbral Masculinity," in *The Race of Sound* (Duke University Press, 2018), 101-10.

Voice reveals that she is asserting herself very briefly in her own voice. She *is* speaking her mind.

However, this moment is pivotal for Mulan both in her journey to "passing" as male, and for the Disney Princesses who never before have tried to sound masculine. Neutral (not breathy) phonation and darker, sob-influenced resonance are two vocal qualities that tend to be avoided: the Disney Princesses prefer breathiness and brighter sounds as a general rule. Even when they sing in lower ranges (B3-G♯, or even lower), the princesses tend to either take on a breathy chest voice, what I call Mutter, or some measure of brightness, as we'll see with Anna and Elsa in a later chapter, for example. Even though she is not entirely successful staying in this "masc" voice for very long, Mulan's complete change in vocal quality from "Honor to Us All" and "I'll Make a Man Out of You" to "A Girl Worth Fighting For" shows that she is beginning to take on more and more masculine characteristics. A man is not born, but made.

Finally, "Honor to Us All" and "A Girl Worth Fighting For" reveal how compulsory heterosexuality is a significant component of gender construction. In songs where femininity and masculinity are emphasized, love and attraction for the opposite sex are also emphasized. In "Honor to Us All," the women are encouraged to be the "perfect bride" by dressing and acting perfectly to appeal to a potential husband. In "A Girl Worth Fighting For," these men list all of their ideal traits in a potential wife, and dream of adoring women swooning over their battle scars and armor. In both cases, "man" and "woman" are constructed not just in their ideal traits (pale, pretty, big, strong) but in their relationship to one another: to be an ideal man, you must attract many women, and to be an ideal woman, you must attract many men.

Conclusion

So what does it mean that Mulan transgresses these gender norms? I find it interesting that Disney describes her story as: "a girl hides her identity to take her father's place in the Imperial Army" (**Fig. 3.28**):



Figure 3.28, Title Screen for *Mulan* on DisneyPlus.com

If we think of Mulan as merely hiding her identity, then she still teaches us (and all the young children watching *Mulan* in the late '90s) that women can be physically strong, athletic, and strategic. For many audiences, this is enough—and even for me as a five year old, Mulan was inspiring because she was a girl who could do all of those things. However, unlike Disney's wording, I prefer to think of her time in the military as an authentic expression of her identity, not a fake separate identity. Her discomfort while female (see "Reflection") and her ability to move between different modes of gender expression opens up the possibility of queerness, whether that be through a trans, non-binary, or otherwise genderqueer identity. And no matter how you look at it, Mulan

brings into question the binary itself by rejecting traditional feminine aesthetics, cutting off her hair, and joining the military.

Musically, Disney sets up exaggeratedly distinct gender norms through these four songs, "Honor to Us All," "Reflection," "I'll Make a Man Out of You," and "A Girl Worth Fighting For." We hear Mulan attempting to conform to traditional femininity through her Little-Girl Voice in "Honor to Us All," and we can also hear her longing to express herself authentically in "Reflection." She still sings in Little-Girl Voice in "I'll Make a Man Out Of You," but she begins to feel comfortable in traditionally masculine roles and takes on a Masc Voice in "A Girl Worth Fighting For."

Through Mulan's highly contrasting Masc Voice in "A Girl Worth Fighting For," we can see how these different vocal markers signify femininity and masculinity. As with Ariel and Belle, and Rapunzel in the upcoming chapter, a combination of breathiness and twang are associated with traditional femininity. The lack of breathiness and twang, and the incorporation of "back space," or a slightly sob-like, darker timbre, are associated with masculinity. No other princess attempts to sound masculine, and indeed, no other princess breaks the gender binary quite like Mulan. Her character and her voice teach us that gender is a culturally constructed norm, made up of appearances (makeup, hair, clothes), actions (pouring tea, fighting in the army), compulsory heterosexuality, and, of course, vocal timbre.

Renaissance Era Voices

After listening to the voices of Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan, a trend emerges in their voices across the Renaissance Era. I call this the spectrum of belting, which takes into consideration both the frequency and endurance of belting, the weight and pitch height of belting, and the artifacts of vocal effort that we can hear, like breaks, exaggerated diction, and big breaths. **Figure 3.29** charts these four princesses, Ariel through Pocahontas:

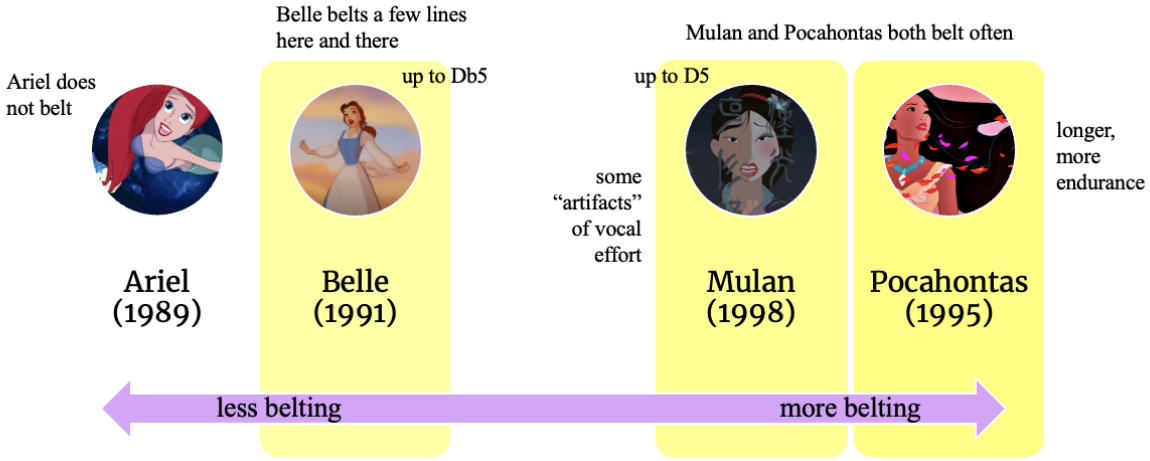


Figure 3.29, Belting Spectrum in the Four Princesses Studied Thus Far

First, in 1989, Ariel does not belt. She does move from weaker to stronger timbres across a song, using primarily Whisper (breathy head voice), Little-Girl Voice (breathy twang-y mixed voice), and Modal Voice (twang-y chest/mix voice). Belle, in 1991, however, does belt, for the very first time, in her eponymous song "Belle." She uses Little-Girl Voice and Modal Voice, like Ariel, but uses two different vocal qualities in her upper register: "Legit" (a classical-sounding head/mix voice) and Belt (chest voice

brought up high, to a D ♭ 5). However, she only belts for short moments, especially when singing above a crowd or just at the climax of a song.

A few years later, both Pocahontas (1995) and Mulan (1998) belt for longer periods and with a stronger quality to that belt. Unlike Ariel and Belle, I hear what I call "artifacts" of the great physical effort they put in, such as breaks and breaths. Mulan has more of these artifacts, but Pocahontas belts for much longer. For this reason, I place both Mulan and Pocahontas on the right side of the diagram, but keep them near each other, because they are each belting more than Ariel and Belle, in slightly different ways. In the following chapters, we'll see princesses who are even further along the diagram, belting up above D ♭ 5 for long periods and with even more audible effort.

Finally, for completion's sake, I've placed Jasmine (*Aladdin,* 1992) near Belle, too. Since she is not the main character in her own film, I've chosen not to analyze Jasmine's voice in depth. However, in "A Whole New World," she uses a light belt for short moments of climax and otherwise tends to sing in a Little-Girl Voice most of the time. For these reasons, I'm placing her slightly to the left of Belle (**Fig. 3.30**):

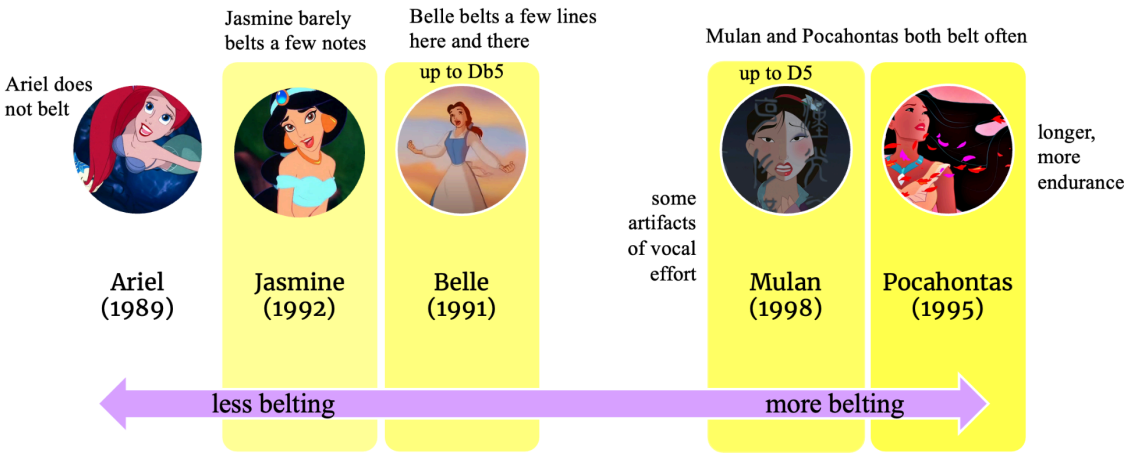


Figure 3.30, Belting Spectrum, including Jasmine

Many musical and cultural changes were happening in the 1990s, which we have seen and heard through these Disney-Renaissance-era princesses. They all sing more in a musical theater style than the earliest princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora; and they begin to belt more and more. We also see longer song forms, a wider variety of vocal colors, and "I Want" songs that dream of something more than a man, as these princesses become more independent and less romance-driven. (They are still romance-driven, all ending up with their princes by the end of the film except Pocahontas, but less flat and single-minded than their predecessors.) Just as synthesized musical instruments are coming into the Disney musical soundscape, so too are ethnically diverse princesses, as the franchise responds to calls for diversity—however, their treatment of non-Western materials and non-Western princesses still falls into tropes and stereotypes, and their casting still leaves much to be desired in terms of authenticity, respect, and due diligence.

To be more specific, Filipina actress Lea Salonga was cast as both Jasmine and Mulan, and white actress Judy Kuhn provided the singing voice for Pocahontas. Although Salonga should be commended for her amazing work breaking barriers for Asian women in the film and musical theater industry, it should be said that she was cast as both an Arab character, Jasmine, and a Chinese character, Mulan. This is rather typical of what the industry calls "ethnically ambiguous" roles and actors, conflating different non-white ethnicities. In addition, film scholar Jennifer Fleeger points out that Lea Salonga's vocal performance for both roles was quite similar to Jodi Benson's Ariel, erasing the possibility of diversity and individuality. As Fleeger writes, "consistent with the logic of 1990s multiculturalism, which values diversity so long as the representatives

all exist in the same national marketplace, the princesses retain a conspicuously American sound. [...] So as to not threaten the profitability of the princess identity, the Broadway singing style connects the "ethnic" princesses to their white predecessors."[179] It is not surprising, then, that these "ethnic" princesses—Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan—do not sound significantly different than their white counterparts, Ariel and Belle. Despite Disney's attempts to diversify their princess characters, these vocal castings and performances suggest that "ethnicity is both performative and assimilable," as they only engage with difference on a surface, stereotypical level.[180]

Now, I'm not saying that Disney should have found a specifically Arab vocalist for Jasmine and a specifically Chinese vocalist for Mulan—although that would make a powerful statement. They likely chose the most famous Asian woman on Broadway at the time. However, in the '90s, Disney had not yet started prioritizing specific matches in their casting, as they did with Auli'i Cravalho for *Moana* (2016). Given their problematic musical stereotyping in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan,* and the Western tendency to conflate the entire "East" as "Other," we now realize that what seemed like responsible cultural inclusivity in the '90s was in fact still contribute to problematic narratives of Western hegemony.

Returning to the bigger picture of the '90s, all of these musical changes happened at the same time as Disney was responding to calls for stronger and more independent women in the era of third-wave feminism. These princesses' lyrics explicitly reject male suitors, call for peace and for taking care of the environment, and they even question the gender binary itself. Their longer songs and wider palette of vocal colors communicate a

[179] Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 118-19.
[180] Fleeger, "The Disney Princess," 126.

greater variety of emotions and messages, building them up into more complex characters. They are no longer entirely flat damsels, objects of the princes' affections, but women who can save a man's life, speak up for themselves, and make change outside of their immediate social circle. In these ways, they *were* a significant improvement upon the classic Disney damsels, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora.

Here ends the Renaissance era, with Ariel, Belle, (Jasmine,) Pocahontas, and Mulan. In the next two chapters, I will analyze the voices of (Tiana), Rapunzel, Anna, Elsa, and Moana. Through the 21st-century princesses, we will see further changes in their musical forms, lyrics, and accompaniments, as well as even wider vocal palettes of colors, moods, strengths, and storytelling.

Chapter 4
"Running and Racing and Dancing and Chasing": Rapunzel as a Postfeminist Princess in *Tangled* (2010)

Introduction

Fast forward to about a decade later. In 2010, Rapunzel's movie came out during a time of tension between traditional fairy-tale notions of gender, newer feminist ideas of "can-do" girlhood, and post-feminist backlashes from the early 2000s.[181] In this chapter, I show how Rapunzel both conforms to and subverts *Disney damselhood* in her singing voice, as performed by Mandy Moore in *Tangled.* Through lyrical, vocal, and textual analysis, I argue that Rapunzel's voice reveals contemporary social conflicts surrounding gender; girls at the time had to be both strong and weak, independent and obedient, powerful and vulnerable, mature and naïve, all at once. And her foil, Mother Gothel, further emphasizes Rapunzel's "ideal" traits, like youth and submission. Through my analysis, I argue that vocal timbre not only influences our perception of gender, but also tells stories of coming-of-age, submission and subversion, and, ultimately, power.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at several songs to see how Moore's Rapunzel conforms to and subverts this idea of *Disney damselhood.* First, I demonstrate how what I call "Little-Girl Voice" makes Rapunzel sound small and submissive, a hyper-feminine physical image of a princess. I then examine three different renditions of "When Will My Life Begin?" from *Tangled* to compare Moore's use of various vocal timbres for distinct narrative themes. In the first third of the movie, Rapunzel sings from a place of submission, domesticity, and childishness, but after she leaves the tower, she gains confidence, physical freedom, and independence. By reading into the physical and sonic

[181] Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," 13-35.

strength required for belting, I connect Rapunzel's strongest actions with her more powerful vocal timbres, such as those in "I See the Light" and "Healing Incantation." However, Rapunzel returns to *Disney damselhood* in the final moments of "The Tear Heals," when she, Mother Gothel, and Flynn Rider are back in the tower at the climax of the film. Finally, I look to "Mother Knows Best" in order to distinguish between two types of womanhood: the archetypal evil stepmother (Gothel) and the pretty-in-pink virtuous girl (Rapunzel).

Even when Rapunzel is made out to be a stronger and more rebellious female role model than her predecessors, she still exhibits so many signs of this old-fashioned, conventionally beautiful *Disney damsel*. She lives somewhere in-between, an artifact of the postfeminist 2000s, when audiences "indulge[d] in hyper-feminine glamourous bodies onscreen with the assurance that these characters [were] also strong female role models for modern girls."[182] And her voice reveals this tension through breathiness, belting, strength, and weakness. Over the course of these seven songs from *Tangled*, Rapunzel pushes outside of the box *Disney damsels* originally had to maintain, but only so far as she could at the time. She is neither quite the perfect damsel like her predecessors nor a fully independent, liberated woman, instead living in a liminal space characterized by changing, complex, and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards gender.

[182] Caroline Ferris Leader, "Magical manes and untamable tresses: (en)coding computer-animated hair for the post-feminist Disney Princess," *Feminist Media Studies* 18.6 (2018): 1087.

Disney Damselhood

In my dissertation's Introduction, I put forth the term *Disney damselhood* for consideration. To recap the most important components of this archetype, these damsels are often physically weak, submissive, affectionate, nurturing, and they accept help and collapse crying.[183] They are rescued, they fall in love at first sight, and they perform domestic labor, and their stories resolve through hetero-marriage.[184] In this chapter, when Rapunzel expresses these characteristics or behaviors, I read her as *conforming* to Disney-fied, traditional femininity. When she acts in opposite ways, strong and independent, I read her as *subverting* those norms. Because she is entangled between submission and subversion, Rapunzel is a postfeminist princess who symbolically chooses her own path, but looks and acts hyper-feminine while doing so, perpetuating expectations that a strong woman must be sweet and pretty, too.[185]

What, then, does *Disney damselhood* sound like? These princess voices share several elements with baby voice and teen girl voice, as theorized respectively by Kate Heidemann and Diane Pecknold, including high pitch, oral twang, and breathiness.[186] In addition to these vocal markers of femininity from pop, the *Disney damsel* voice in 2010 also draws upon vocal conventions from musical theater, as we saw in the '90s with Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan. Generally speaking, the *Disney damsels* of the '90s

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[183] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559-60.
[184] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559.
Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 241.
Anindita, "Earlier and Recent Princess of The Third Generation of Disney Animated Films," 51.
Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," 248.
Matyas, "A Textual Analysis of Race and Gender in Disney Princess Films," 5.
[185] McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255.
Gill, "Postfeminist media culture," 147-66.
[186] Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre," [3.16].
Diane Pecknold, "'These Stupid Little Sounds in her Voice': Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity,* ed. Allison Adrian and Jacqueline Warwick, 77-98 (Routledge, 2016).

sang with a sweet, small, breathy sound, only belting for a moment at the climax of their "I Want" songs.

Little-Girl Voice

Through song, a character's voice tells us more about who they are. As Susan Monks remarks, "communicating with the voice is often a combination of visual and auditory cues."[187] While we receive plenty of information on screen, a film's songs are just as crucial to our understanding of *who* is singing, *what* they want, and *how* they relate to other characters. Even when isolated from the film, as in radio airplays, Spotify streams, and karaoke, we imagine and we embody hyper-feminine princess characters when we hear these songs. In my analysis, I break this auditory information down into two musical parameters—lyrics and vocal timbre—and consider how they interact with the film's narrative. Because we associate someone's voice so closely with their identity,[188] timbre in particular is vital to our understanding of these female characters.

When listening to vocal timbre in Disney Princess songs, I most often hear Little-Girl Voice, which I define as a combination of mixed voice, breathy quality, twang, and mid-treble range,[189] all of which work together to characterize the princesses as small, feminine, childish, and romantically available. Mixed voice and mid-treble range are relatively neutral qualities in musical theater and pop genres.[190] But consistent use of breathy phonation carries with it connotations of femininity, intimacy, relaxation,

[187] Monks, "Adolescent Singers," 246.
[188] Monks, "Adolescent Singers," 246.
Morgan Blue, "Performing Pop Girlhood on Disney Channel," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, ed. Allison Adrian and Jacqueline Warwick (Routledge, 2016), 177.
[189] Mixed voice refers to a "mix" of chest and head voice, somewhere in the middle of a singer's range. See Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word*, 50.
[190] Malawey, *A Blaze of Light*, 50.

sensuality, and/or eroticism.[191] Based on pedagogical research regarding the adolescent female voice, I argue that breathiness and uneven register shifts signal adolescence, a time period when a girl's voice is at its most uneven and unsteady.[192] Finally, vocal twang—that is, producing sound through smaller physical resonance chambers—"emphasizes higher partials of a tone's harmonic spectrum,"[193] and makes the singer sound younger, smaller, and less mature.[194] Through breathiness and vocal twang, Rapunzel's Little-Girl Voice portrays a very hyper-feminine type of princess.

On the *Tangled* soundtrack, Mandy Moore uses four primary vocal styles: Whisper, Little-Girl Voice, Modal Voice, and Belt (see **Fig. 4.1**). Her Little-Girl Voice is the most common, featuring mixed voice, breathiness, twang, and medium pitch range. When Moore whispers, she flips up into head voice[195] for higher pitches, keeping a breathy, twangy quality that makes her sound small and young. Modal and Belt qualities, on the other hand, are marked by neutral (not breathy) phonation, and chest voice, giving greater weight to the sound. Affect-wise, Modal and Belt neutralize everything I just associated with breathiness: Rapunzel may still sound small and young due to twang, but the feeling of intimacy suggested by her breathiness disappears. Additionally, belting has been analyzed to project strength, power, and dominance,[196] so when Moore Belts, she portrays Rapunzel as a strong, independent woman.

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[191] Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre," [3.6].
Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 46-50, 109-10.
Drew Nobile, "Alanis Morissette's Voices," [3.12].
[192] Sweet, "Voice Change and Singing Experiences of Adolescent Females," 134-135, 145.
Gackle, "The Adolescent Female Voice," 17-19.
Monks, "Adolescent Singers," 244-45.
[193] Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 119.
[194] Heidemann, "Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," [3.16].
[195] Head voice is usually both lighter and higher than mixed (middle) or chest (low) voice. See Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 40-56.
[196] Nobile, "Morissette's Voices," [3.11], [5.4].

Vocal style[139]	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Cinderella	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little-Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 4.1, Mandy Moore's Vocal Styles

To be fair, vocal timbre is subject to personal interpretations, unique qualities of individual voices, and the ambiguous, nebulous metaphors we use to describe timbre. However, I frame my analysis around the changes Moore makes to Rapunzel's voice over the course of the movie, by tracking readily accessible vocal qualities like head versus chest voice, phonation, twang, and pitch. When possible, I define what physical changes might cause the vocal nuances we hear, and I consult with multiple external sources for *interpreting* those nuances, rather than relying only on my own perception of these sounds. In addition, it is important to keep in mind two things about the performer: first, Disney chose Mandy Moore specifically for the role of Rapunzel's voice: presumably, she must well embody their vision for her character. Secondly, as Nina Eidsheim asserts, vocal timbre is not always passive, but rather "actively shaped," a performative phenomenon; such a professional singer as Moore likely has great control

over "each part of the body that participates in the creation of vocal sounds."[197] By shaping her sound in certain ways, Moore shapes our perception of Rapunzel's character.

From the listener's point of view, it is impossible to say to what extent Mandy Moore was consciously or unconsciously shaping her vocal timbre to sound particularly girly, or weak, or strong, for Rapunzel's character in *Tangled*. However, Alexandra Apolloni argues that regardless of intention, vocal timbres are "always respond[ing] to timbral conventions associated with both musical genres and social categories."[198] With this in mind, in my analysis, I interpret how different elements of her vocal timbre signal certain types of femininity based on cultural norms. This is not to say that everyone will hear these songs in the exact same way, but rather that, just like baby voice or teen girl voice, there is a certain commonality of sound that spans the Disney Princesses over several decades, and we associate that sound with a certain model of femininity.

Moore's vocal performance of Rapunzel signifies a "socially constructed ideal of what a girl is or should be," to quote Morgan Blue on other Disney girl voices.[199] Furthermore, the timbre of her voice communicates paratextual meanings like emotion, tone, and identity.[200] In the ensuing analysis, I argue that Rapunzel embodies conflicted gender ideals of postfeminist media in her actions, body language, words (lyrics), vocal quality, and relationships with other characters in the film. Both the animation and the music work together to construct her character's femininity. Even though Disney films like *Tangled* are beloved childhood favorites for many viewers, it is important to critically

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[197] Nina Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race: Towards and Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre," *Revista Transcultural de Musica* 13 (2009).
[198] Alexandra Apolloni, "Starstruck: On Gaga, Voice, and Disability," in *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion, and Culture,* ed. Martin Iddon and Melanie Marshall (Taylor & Francis, 2014), 193. See also Eidsheim, "Performativity of Vocal Timbre," (2009).
[199] Blue, "Performing Pop Girlhood on Disney Channel," 172.
[200] Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 94-97.

examine the ways Disney portrays leading women for exactly that same reason: popular media create and perpetuate "myths" of gender that have a lasting impact on viewers.[201] Every time we watch, re-watch, sing along to, and buy merchandise from *Tangled* (and *Frozen*, *Moana,* etc.), we strengthen Disney's hold on the construction of gender in our society.

CASE STUDY: *Tangled* (2010)

Disney's adaptation of Rapunzel retains much the same fairytale as was first published by The Grimm Brothers in 1812.[202] Rapunzel is stuck in a tower, a man helps her down (rescues her), they get married, and they live happily ever after. But beyond these key points, Disney makes small and large alterations to the plot, Rapunzel's character, and her relationship with Flynn Rider, the love interest.[203] In Disney's *Tangled* remix, Rapunzel has much more agency over her future, striking a deal with Flynn before getting down from the tower on her own. Together, Rapunzel and Flynn go on an adventure to see the lanterns that light up the sky on her birthday, haphazardly dodging and befriending royal officials, thugs, and ruffians along the way. But unlike previous versions of the story, Rapunzel saves Flynn as often as—if not more than—he saves her, and she rebels against the limited domestic life Mother Gothel wants for her.[204]

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[201] Anneke Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook, 3rd ed. (BFI, 2007), 491.
[202] As often happens with fairy tales, due to oral tradition, there are multiple origin sources. For more information, see Komal Tujare, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Has Finally Let Down Her Hair! The Feminist Evolution of 'Rapunzel' from the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 60.1 (2022): 77.
[203] Flynn's real name is revealed to be Eugene later in the film, but for consistency, I keep Flynn's name the same throughout my analysis.
For more discussion of the "remixed" fairy tale, see: Anindita, "A Comparison," 51-57; Angela Smith, "Letting Down Rapunzel: Feminism's Effects on Fairy Tales," *Children's Literature in Education* 46 (2015): 424-37; and Tujare, "Rapunzel," 77.
[204] Tujare, "Rapunzel," 79-80.

Considering the film as a whole, then, I analyze the following tracks (**Fig. 4.2**) sung by Rapunzel in *Tangled*, highlighted in lighter pink, and one by Mother Gothel, highlighted in darker purple:

Track[205]	**Title**	**Summary**
1	When Will My Life Begin?	**Rapunzel** bemoans her life in captivity and dreams of leaving to see the lights.
2	When Will My Life Begin? (Reprise 1)	**Rapunzel** wistfully wishes for more.
3	Mother Knows Best	**Mother Gothel** gaslights Rapunzel.
4	When Will My Life Begin? (Reprise 2)	**Rapunzel** leaves the tower!
5	I've Got A Dream	(Ensemble) (adventure!)
6	Mother Knows Best (Reprise)	(Mother Gothel)
7	I See the Light	**Rapunzel** achieves her dream and falls in love with Flynn underneath the stars.
8	Healing Incantation	**Rapunzel** heals Flynn's injured hand.
9-17	Flynn Wanted - Realization and Escape	(Instrumental) (more adventure!)
18	The Tear Heals	**Rapunzel** saves Flynn from the brink of death.
19-20	Kingdom Celebration - Something that I Want	(Instrumental) (End Credits)

Figure 4.2, Track Summary, *Tangled* (2010)

[205] Mandy Moore, Donna Murphy, and Zachary Levi, *Tangled,* Walt Disney Records (2010), Spotify. https://open.spotify.com/album/1l0aFrH24oPrQSqGtfeFyE?si=GqI3PbjbSD6z7KBas0pe8Q.

At first, these songs serve as introductions to *who* she is and *what* she wants,[206] such as in Rapunzel's "I Want"[207] song, "When Will My Life Begin?" Later, once she and Flynn get to the lantern festival, "I See the Light" seems romantic, set on the water under the stars, but Rapunzel's relationship with Flynn is not so fast and shallow as previous princess films would have us expect.[208] In addition, the "Healing Incantation" threads through the film as a refrain whenever Rapunzel casts her spell to enliven Mother Gothel, heal Flynn, or make her hair glow. And "Mother Knows Best" highlights the juxtaposition between Gothel's and Rapunzel's expressions of femininity, painting Gothel as the evil, exotic stepmother to Rapunzel's good girl persona. When considered all together, these songs tell us Rapunzel's coming-of-age story, communicating her wants, needs, relationships, powers, strengths, and weaknesses.

Three Renditions of "When Will My Life Begin?"

The first time we hear Rapunzel's "I Want" song, Moore switches vocal styles constantly, rarely completing a sentence or stanza in the same mode. She begins and ends the song with breathy timbres, and flips into a tiny, airy head voice in the middle of phrases (like "I'll add a few *new* paintings to my gallery" and "I'll play guitar *and knit*"). Color-coded lyrics charts like **Figure 4.3** make it easy to see these frequent changes in every stanza. But not only are these changes frequent; they are also uneven and abrupt.

[206] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 30.
[207] Jack Viertel, "3. The Wizard and I: The 'I Want' Song,'" in *The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built,* (Sarah Crichton, 2016), 74-98.
[208] M. Davis, "The Progression of Disney Princesses," 48-52.

“When Will My Life Begin?”

Verse
7 AM, the usual morning lineup
Start on the chores and
sweep 'til the floor's all clean
Polish and wax, do laundry,
and mop and shine up
Sweep again, and by then it's like 7:15!

Chorus
And so I'll read a book
Or maybe two or three
I'll add a few new paintings to my gallery
I'll play guitar and knit
And cook and basically
Just wonder when will my life begin?

Verse
Then after lunch it's puzzles
and darts and baking
Papier-mâché, a bit of ballet and chess
Pottery and ventriloquy, candle making
Then I'll stretch, maybe sketch,
Take a climb, sew a dress!

Chorus
And I'll reread the books
If I have time to spare
I'll paint the walls some more
I'm sure there's room somewhere
And then I'll brush and brush
and brush and brush my hair
Stuck in the same place I've always been

(add-on)
And I'll keep wonderin' and wondering
And wondering and wondering
When will my life begin?

Coda
And tomorrow night
The lights will appear
Just like they do on my birthday each year

What is it like
Out there where they glow?
Now that I'm older
Mother might just
Let me go…

Rapunzel’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 4.3, “When Will My Life Begin?” Color-Coded Lyrics

Such “audible prominent register breaks” have been associated with untrained voices by Tim Wise, Bridget Sweet, and Victoria Malawey,[209] characterizing Rapunzel as breathy, feminine, sweet, young, submissive, and small. And in the last stanza, Moore uses her lightest, breathiest, sweetest head voice (Whisper) to wish that “Mother might

[209] Tim Wise, “Yodel Species: A Typology of Falsetto Effects in Popular Musical Vocal Styles,” *Radical Musicology* 2 (2007): para. 27.
Sweet, “Voice Change,” 145.
Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 54.

just let me go." Right at the end of the song, Rapunzel makes herself small and childlike in deference to her "Mother." Considering the fact that Mandy Moore was neither untrained nor a child in 2010,[210] I argue that she *actively shaped* [211] a princess voice in "When Will My Life Begin?"

The lyrics themselves reveal what activities she fills her time with at home: domestic chores like sweeping, laundry, and cooking; artistic endeavors like knitting, ballet, and painting; and tending to her appearance by brushing her hair. As multiple scholars have noted, domestic labor and tending to appearance are both associated with female characters in the Disney Princess franchise.[212] And during the last stanza of this song, we see Rapunzel gazing wistfully out the window of her tower, an image of feminine confinement, domesticity, and passivity.[213] When Rapunzel is at her most passive and homebound, Mandy Moore makes her voice sound most submissive and childish (the purple Little-Girl Voice and especially the light pink Whisper in **Fig. 4.3**).

Furthermore, it is during "When Will My Life Begin?" that we see Rapunzel as a fully grown woman for the first time. She looks conventionally beautiful: light-skinned, blonde-haired, with big green eyes and a slender figure. In addition, as Courtney Gazda and Katie Kapurch have noted, Rapunzel's long, luscious hair symbolizes female sexuality.[214] Contradictorily, Rapunzel is infantilized and sexualized all at once, a major problem with the entire franchise: these young women are presented as small, submissive, and childish while somehow also being beautiful, attractive, and sexually

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[210] "Mandy Moore," *IMDb,* accessed Dec. 4, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0601553/.
[211] Eidsheim, "Performativity of Vocal Timbre," para. 39.
[212] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 556-60.
[213] Bridget Whelan, "Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the 20th Century Princess Narrative," *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 29, no. 1 (2012): 29.
[214] Gazda, "The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess," 36-37.
Kapurch, "Rapunzel Loves Merida," 438.

available.[215] All combined, Rapunzel perpetuates an image of beauty that is both problematic and inaccessible: Disney Princesses continue to be primarily thin, white, young, and conventionally pretty, and out-of-reach for many girls and women today.[216] At the beginning of her journey in *Tangled*, then, Rapunzel is portrayed as the archetypal *Disney damsel*: she is domestic, tends to her appearance, stares wistfully out her window, and is stereotypically beautiful.

"When Will My Life Begin? (Reprise)"



I've got my mother's love
I shouldn't ask for more
I've got so many things
I should be thankful for
Yes, I have everything
Except, I guess, a door
Perhaps it's better that I stay in
But tell me…when will my life begin?

Rapunzel's Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix)

Figure 4.4, "When Will My Life Begin?" (Reprise)

In the first reprise of "When Will My Life Begin?" (see **Fig. 4.4**), Moore's vocal style is much more consistent than in the introduction. Since her voice is nearly always breathy during these seven lines, Moore continues the thread of quiet, childish wishing from the end of the first "When Will My Life Begin?"

[215] Gazda, "The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess."
[216] Gazda, "The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess," 43-44.

She also tends to start phrases stronger, then fades away as if she runs out of breath, a common struggle among adolescent female voices.[217] Moore-Rapunzel[218] *sounds* young and helpless, and again, she mentions her mother's love, which confines her to this tower. Not only does Mother Gothel have power *over* her, Rapunzel is also beholden to her for everything. Therefore, these Little-Girl lines once again minimize Rapunzel's agency in submission to her mother. In the two first songs, Disney repeatedly emphasizes Rapunzel's submissive qualities while she is subjugated in the tower, a true damsel in distress.

Though not included in the film, Reprise 1 is recorded by Mandy Moore on the official *Tangled* soundtrack and shows up as an additional scene in *Tangled: The Musical*.[219] In the musical, Rapunzel is voiced by a different actress, Elisha Ainsley,[220] whose vocal quality nonetheless sounds quite similar to Moore's in the original recording. See **Figures 4.5 and 4.6** for lyrics and imagery. Disney often emphasizes the importance of a single, unified aesthetic known as character integrity,[221] so it is unsurprising that Ainsley and Moore sound similar in their vocal performance.

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[217] Monks, "Adolescent Singers," 245-46.
[218] I use "Moore-Rapunzel" as a shorthand for "Mandy Moore's *performance of* Rapunzel."
[219] Elisha Ainsley, "When Will My Life Begin (Reprise 1)," in "Virtual Viewing: Disney Cruise Line's 'Tangled: The Musical,'" *Disney Parks,* posted Jul. 24, 2020, Youtube, [14:40], https://youtu.be/XFiQWzU5wSQ?si=8mO4Odxr13eLiwnR&t=880.
[220] Tom Stieghorst, "Disney Magic brings fairy tale to life," *Travel Weekly,* May 15, 2015, https://www.travelweekly.com/Cruise-Travel/Disney-Magic-brings-fairy-tale-to-life.
[221] Bádue and Schorsch, "Animated Broadway," 217.
Megan Willett-Wei and Kelly O'Sullivan, "Former 'Pocahontas' and 'Snow White' dish about life as Disney Parks princess," *Business Insider,* Jun. 9, 2016, https://www.insider.com/former-princesses-dish-about-life-working-with-disney-2016-6.

"When Will My Life Begin?" (Reprise)

I've got my mother's love
I shouldn't ask for more
I've got so many things
I should be thankful for
Yes, I have everything,
Except, I guess, a door
Perhaps it's better that I stay in
But tell me…when will my life begin?

Figure 4.5, "When Will My Life Begin" (Reprise)



Figure 4.6, Rapunzel in *Tangled: The Musical*

Rapunzel's Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix)

Ainsley-Rapunzel still sings with that same type of vocal twang that makes her voice sound smaller and younger, though she uses stronger and less breathy phonation than Moore does in Reprise 1. On one hand, these differences may be due to Ainsley's unique voice, though I also speculate that she sings stronger for better projection in a live performance space. Even though she is mic'd, Ainsley sings to a wide open theater, while Moore sings in a small recording studio. Further comparison of Ainsley and Moore is beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice to say that I still perceive Rapunzel as a little girl, longing for more, in both versions of "When Will My Life Begin? (Reprise 1)."

During this reprise, Rapunzel stands in front of her window to the outside world, a central focus point in the stage design **(Fig. 4.6**). Unlike previous scenes, her surroundings are dark with a single spotlight on Rapunzel. Setting the stage and lighting in this way highlights Rapunzel's isolation. She is so close to freedom (the window), but due to Mother Gothel's power over her, she is alone, conditioned to believe that she must

stay put, docile and obedient. The reprise's lyrics reveal Gothel's manipulative messaging. Rapunzel feels obligated to express gratitude: "I've got so many things I should be thankful for," and "I shouldn't ask for more" because not only has Gothel kept Rapunzel in the tower for years and years; she has also gaslit her into believing that she is her mother, her protector, only doing what's best for her. By dreaming of the outside world, Rapunzel desires both physical freedom and freedom from her "mother."

The third rendition takes place just as Rapunzel first leaves her tower. *Finally*, she has some agency in her own story and breaks free from her sheltered, captured childhood. In "When Will My Life Begin? (Reprise 2)," Moore's vocal timbre mimics this transition from childhood to adulthood as she moves from Little-Girl Voice to Modal Voice and Belting. Such an audible shift is not uncommon in similar Disney songs from this time period, such as "Let it Go" (*Frozen*, 2013) and "How Far I'll Go" (*Moana*, 2016). Elsa, Moana, and Rapunzel all gradually gain confidence and vocal power over the course of a song.

As for Rapunzel, she sings several lines primarily in Little-Girl Voice, with quick shifts like we heard in the original "When Will My Life Begin?" and a crescendo of louder, clearer, higher, and more powerful singing when she goes "running and racing and dancing and chasing." Finally, Moore belts out the last two lines as Rapunzel takes in the reality of her freedom outside of the tower. By shaping her voice in this way, Moore associates breathiness with Rapunzel's childhood as a damsel-in-distress and belting with Rapunzel's freedom. She uses changes in vocal timbre to reflect character development, both in-the-moment, as is the case here, and across the film, as Rapunzel gains independence and maturity.

“When Will My Life Begin?” (Reprise 2)

Look at the world, so close and I’m halfway to it
Look at it all, so big, do I even dare?
Look at me, there at last, I just have to do it

(spoken)
Should I? No

(spoken)
Here I go

Just smell the grass, the dirt,
just like I dreamed they’d be
Just feel that summer breeze,
the way it’s calling me
For the first time ever, I’m completely free
I could go running and racing
and dancing and chasing
and leaping and bounding,
hair flying, heart pounding,
and splashing and reeling and finally felling

That’s when my life begins!



Rapunzel’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 4.7, “When Will My Life Begin” (Reprise 2)

During the second reprise, Rapunzel also moves from passivity to activity. She begins the song staring longingly out her window again, but this time she carries a frying pan (a weapon), and she is about to actually leave the tower for the first time. The first three lines of Reprise 2 reflect her passive image in their lyrics: Rapunzel repeats “Look at the world,” “Look at it all,” and “Look at me,” three times, highlighting the fact that, while trapped, all she has been able to do is look at the outside world and be an

object to look at. And Rapunzel is not alone in this. Previous Disney Princesses such as Cinderella and Ariel modeled this same type of passive femininity, gazing at the outside world, wishing for a better life.[222] For many princesses, adventure and rescuing was something that happened *to* them. But in this scene, Rapunzel escapes her tower all on her own, subverting traditional expectations, and moves into a space where she has more agency. Lyrically and literally, she gets to run and race and dance and chase! These active verbs and physical athletic movements portray both her freedom and her newfound strength. Suddenly, Rapunzel is not just a girl who is acted upon by others, but a woman who can do as she pleases.

In summary, Rapunzel's voice, lyrics, and actions in "When Will My Life Begin (Reprise 2)" all represent her transition from childhood to adulthood, from captivity to freedom, and from passivity to activity at this crucial moment in the film. Mandy Moore's Little-Girl Voice is a sonic tool that characterizes Rapunzel as young, small, and submissive, especially when paired with images such as her delicate figure and her wistful window-gazing. As I will elaborate upon in the following section, however, Rapunzel is also rebellious and independent and strong, which we will see more of in the rest of the film.

Belting and Power: "When Will My Life Begin?," Once More, and "I See The Light"

Because belting is such a strong style of singing, I associate more powerful vocal styles with higher levels of agency in Rapunzel's character. Kate Heidemann observes that "timbres produced with high airflow or pressure—such as harsh phonation or

[222] Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty : Feminist Voices in Children's Novels* (University of Iowa Press, 1997), 11, in Whelan, "Power to the Princess," 16-17.

belting—also communicate a sense of full-body engagement."[223] And through spectrographic analysis, Victoria Malawey observes rich overtones up to and above 10,000 Hz in belting voices, the reason why they sound so full.[224] Because of these two things—the physical and sonic strength involved in belting—Drew Nobile argues that "belting thus projects strength and power," asserting dominance and rejecting submissive femininity.[225] In *Tangled*, I see these same characteristics in Rapunzel when she belts: full-body engagement, strength, power, and assertiveness. Thus, modal voice and belting represent freedom and adulthood for Rapunzel. When Mandy Moore sings with a bigger voice, Rapunzel is more confident, and more in control of her own life.

Moore uses chest voice throughout the film to portray Rapunzel's coming-of-age story in different ways. Chest voice represents Rapunzel's independence, her success, and her power as she grows up. In these later songs, she both sings more boldly and acts more independently, gaining confidence as she goes. This is not to say that Little-Girl Voice disappears after Rapunzel leaves the tower, nor that she somehow dismantles the patriarchy just with her voice. (If only!) However, through the newfound strength and maturity of Rapunzel's voice, we *hear* her growth just as much as we see it.

As previously mentioned, in "When Will My Life Begin (Reprise 2)," Moore's vocal timbre changes greatly over the course of the song, moving from a place of weakness to a place of strength. In addition, Rapunzel subverts traditional expectations of a princess here. She is no damsel in distress who is rescued by a prince and immediately falls in love with him. Rather, Rapunzel "reject[s] her objectification by assuming the role of a

[223] Heidemann, "Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," [3.27].
[224] Malawey, *A Blaze of Light,* 44-46. For a definition of "rich" timbre, see Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis," [1.12].
[225] Nobile, "Morissette's Voices," [3.11], [4.3], [5.6].

subject, a doer, a maker;" defies damselhood by attacking, manipulating, and rescuing Flynn; and even rescues herself from the tower.[226] Crucially, when she is *do*ing all these things, Moore sings with great physical power.

For example, at the end of Reprise 2 (**Fig. 4.8**), visually speaking, Rapunzel opens her arms and sings out with that "megaphone mouth configuration" that iconic belters like Idina Menzel use to achieve maximal sound and resonance.[227] Presumably, both Rapunzel and Moore need to engage their full bodies to create such a full sound. Moore belts to be heard over the orchestra, and Rapunzel expresses big joy at her newfound freedom.



Figure 4.8, Rapunzel Frolicking in the Forest

As a result, Rapunzel's voice fills the wide open space around her. While girls have historically been taught to be seen and not heard, to minimize themselves and their feelings, and to stay in the domestic sphere of the home, this scene musically and visually rejects minimization. Vocally, Rapunzel moves into a public proxemic zone, in which we no longer hear her intakes of breath like we're right next to her in a small

[226] Tujare, "Rapunzel," 78-81; M. Davis, "The Progression of Disney Princesses," 51.
[227] Ingo R. Titze, Albert S. Worley, and Brad H. Story, "Source-Vocal Tract Interaction in Female Operatic Singing and Theater Belting," *Journal of Singing* 67.5 (2011): 561-72.

room; instead, the environment becomes larger, she shouts, and as the orchestra swells, so does the sound of her voice.[228] Now, Rapunzel can finally be her full self: active, strong, and powerful. She takes up space and sings without abandon, no longer confined to a small tower room or to her mother's tyranny. In celebration of her freedom, Moore-Rapunzel's words, her voice, her body language, and her actions work together to tell a story of a damsel saving her*self.*

Besides images and actions, feminist readings often focus on the Disney Princesses' dreams as a site of patriarchal gender norms: the archetypal princess dreams of true love in the form of a heroic prince who she falls in love with at first sight, and at the end of each movie, she achieves her life's goal: marriage, a heteronormative Happily Ever After.[229] For Rapunzel, however, we learn from "When Will My Life Begin?" that her primary goal in life is freedom. More specifically, she wants to escape her tower and travel to investigate the lights in the sky on her birthday. It is interesting, then, to consider "I See the Light" in the moment when Rapunzel achieves this dream, about two-thirds of the way through the movie. Lyrically, Rapunzel marvels at the beauty of the lanterns and at how far she's come from "watching through the windows" to "blinking in the starlight." See her gazing at the lanterns and stars in **Figure 4.9,** along with the song lyrics. In this moment, she feels fulfilled and strong, again progressing from Little-Girl Voice when recalling her far-off childhood to stronger Modal and Belt qualities when singing about the here-and-now.

[228] "Public proxemic zone" refers to recording techniques that place the microphone (and the listener) far away from the performer. In *Tangled*, we also see Rapunzel moving into a public sphere outside of her tower during this scene. See A. Moore., *Song Means,* 187.
[229] Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 235.
Matyas, "Tale as Old as Time," 11-27.

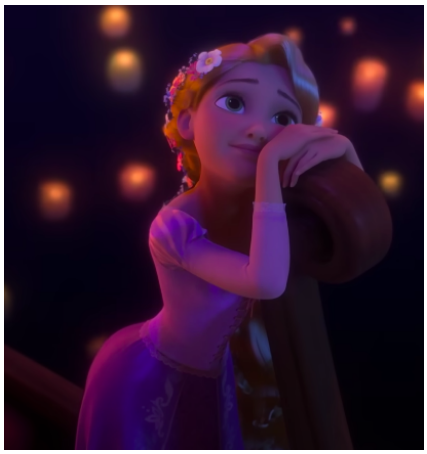
“I See the Light,” part one

All those days watching from the windows
All those years outside looking in
All that time never even knowing
Just how blind I’ve been

Now I’m here blinking in the starlight
Now I’m here suddenly I see
Standing here it’s all so clear
I’m where I’m meant to be

And at last I see the light
And it’s like the fog has lifted
And at last I see the light
And it’s like the sky is new
And it’s warm and real bright
And the world has somehow shifted

All at once everything looks different
Now that I see you



Rapunzel’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 4.9, “I See the Light,” First Few Stanzas

Moore-Rapunzel uses these stronger vocal qualities in the third stanza (“And at last I see the light…”) to celebrate achieving her dream. For the first half of the song, she doesn’t seem interested in Flynn all that much, really, looking dreamily at the lanterns and singing about how she’s “where [she’s] meant to be.” But what I find interesting is the shift at the end of this third stanza, when Rapunzel looks back at Flynn and sees him romantically for the first time. In a moment of attraction, when Rapunzel feels the butterflies of young love, her voice gets all sweet and breathy, back to Little-Girl Voice.

Her breathy Little-Girl Voice doesn't last long, however. When Flynn and Rapunzel sing together in a duet, Moore belts to be heard above Flynn and the orchestra track. Of course, some of this is due to recording techniques that even out the balance between their two voices, but I think Moore's stronger timbre in this duet tells us a lot about Rapunzel's character and how she relates to the world around her. When she feels confident and all-grown-up, she gains strength through vocal power. When she rides high on the endorphins of success and yes, love, she belts her heart out. But when she hesitantly starts seeing Flynn with new eyes, Rapunzel returns to that cutesy sound and a look that emphasizes her youth, femininity, and romantic availability. Take a look at this image from the end of the song, when Rapunzel and Flynn are about to kiss: not only does it highlight Rapunzel's big green eyes and flushed cheeks, the camera angle also looks down toward her, placing the spectator above her in stature, making her seem small:



Figure 4.10, Rapunzel Looking up at Flynn

“I See the Light” part two

[FLYNN & RAPUNZEL]
And at last I see the light
[FLYNN]
And it’s like the fog has lifted
[FLYNN & RAPUNZEL]
And at last I see the light
[RAPUNZEL]
And it’s like the sky is new

[FLYNN & RAPUNZEL]
And it’s warm and real and bright
And the world has somehow shifted
All at once everything is different
Now that I see you

Now that I see you

Rapunzel’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),

Figure 4.11, “I See the Light,” Last Few Stanzas—Her Duet with Flynn

In this moment, Rapunzel’s hopes and dreams change. She originally wanted freedom and discovery, and now that she has achieved that, she realizes that she has feelings for Flynn, who has gone through this journey with her. Importantly, they do not fall in love at first sight. It takes about an hour of the film to get here, and their relationship develops over shared experiences and adventures, like running through a forest, avoiding enemies, and swimming to escape a quickly-flooding cave. But much of the “I See the Light” scene resonates with more traditional models of femininity: Moore-Rapunzel’s girly voice, the camera angles of her pretty face, and her vulnerability when falling in love all replicate a more passive, doll-like *Disney damselhood*. When placed in a romantic setting—in a boat underneath a night sky filled with lanterns—this song manages both to celebrate Rapunzel’s success in achieving her own dream and to return her to the status quo of old-fashioned models of femininity.

After Rapunzel leaves her tower, she is empowered by her newfound freedom to take up space, make her own choices, and sing out loud her joy and her success. She belts

in "When Will My Life Begin" to celebrate her escape, and in "I See the Light" to celebrate achieving what she's always wanted: to see the lantern festival. In these songs, her stronger voice signals greater personal agency and therefore character growth. However, when she experiences the butterflies of first love, Rapunzel returns to the Little-Girl Voice and little-girl looks that emphasize her small frame and sweet docility. Even when she is at her strongest, Disney feels the need to remind us that Rapunzel is a "perfect girl," someone "who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind," and is small and submissive in relationship to her love interest, Flynn.[230]

The "Healing Incantation" as a Site of Both Power and Powerlessness

Rapunzel saves Flynn twice in *Tangled* with her magical powers, activated by an incantation. In an earlier scene, they get trapped in a cave, but by singing these magical words, Rapunzel lights up her hair to show them the way out. Shortly after, she heals Flynn's injured hand by completing the "Healing Incantation." And, finally, at the climax of the film, Flynn is gravely injured, Rapunzel collapses crying,[231] and she heals him once again, saving his life. "Healing Incantation" and "The Tear Heals" are two sides of the same coin, showing Rapunzel's conflicted expressions of gender and power. Rapunzel takes on heroic characteristics by rescuing Flynn multiple times, but at the same time, she perpetuates weak female stereotypes like hysteria and helplessness in these scenes.

The first "Healing Incantation" reflects Rapunzel's subversion of stereotypical gender roles through rescuing Flynn. Since 1937 (*Snow White*), rescuing behaviors continue to be important in constructing the gender divide between the rescuer—the

[230] L. Brown and G. Gilligan, *Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girl's development* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 59, in "Construction of the Female Self," by Henke et al., 231.
[231] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559-61.

prince—and the one who is rescued—the princess. So, it is inspiring that Rapunzel is the active hero in this situation, thwarting expectations of victim- and damsel-hood. Vocally speaking, although she begins "Healing Incantation" with that breathy, whisper-y Little-Girl Voice, Rapunzel gains confidence and begins to sing with her full, modal voice (i.e., chest voice) more and more throughout the song. Through her use of chest voice and magic, Rapunzel exerts power in this scene. Where before she needed Flynn to protect her from thugs and ruffians like a little girl, now she guides him from danger, heals his hand, and accesses powerful magic with a richer, more mature voice.

"Healing Incantation"

Flower, gleam and glow
Let your power shine
Make the clock reverse
Bring back what once was mine

Heal what has been hurt
Change the Fate's design
Save what has been lost
Bring back what once was mine
What once was mine

"The Tear Heals"

Heal what has been hurt
Change the Fate's design
Save what has been lost
Bring back what once was mine
What once was mine

Rapunzel's Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high)

Figure 4.12, "Healing Incantation" and "The Tear Heals"

In a complete contrast, in "The Tear Heals," Moore-Rapunzel sounds weaker and more helpless than ever before. The listener is placed so close to her voice that we can hear her singing barely above a whisper, as well as her shaky inhalations before each line

as if she is singing through tears. Via this intimate proxemic zone,[232] we see even the smallest details of Rapunzel's emotional breakdown when she believes Flynn to have died. She collapses crying over his body, a visual sign of passive femininity, "loss of power and hopelessness."[233] And unlike the prior scene when she was confident in her abilities, Rapunzel feels powerless while she sings this incantation, unsure if she can save him from the brink of death. This is audible through her extremely breathy, barely-there vocal timbres. She can barely get the words out, and is on the verge of sobbing. Through proximity, body language, and vocal timbre, "The Tear Heals" portrays Rapunzel as weak, hysterical, and powerless, even in the few moments before she performs the most powerful magic we have seen yet in the film.

On the other hand, Rapunzel's power is a nurturing one. Though some Disney women are empowered by offensive magics, like Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid,* they are always portrayed as evil, archetypal witches.[234] Instead of causing harm, Rapunzel's magic heals. Through healing Flynn, she is characterized as affectionate, nurturing, and helpful, three stereotypically feminine traits; even in her rescuing behaviors, Rapunzel cares for others in a mothering way.[235] Ironically, she takes on a hero role while still conforming to more traditional ideals of femininity through nurturing behaviors.

Rapunzel *is* a stronger female character than many previous princesses because she has the power to save Flynn. But her body language and vocal timbre show helplessness, through collapsing crying, Little-Girl Voice, whispering, and an intimate

[232] "Intimate proxemic zone" refers to recording techniques that place the microphone (and the listener) intimately close to the performer. See A. Moore, *Song Means*, 187.
[233] England et al., "Gender," 563.
[234] Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 243-44.
[235] Mothering is also identified as stereotypically feminine. England et al., "Gender," 559-61, 599.

proxemic zone, even in moments where she wields powerful magic. Ultimately, Rapunzel expresses a conflicted type of femininity, in which she rebels and exerts power but still embodies antiquated ideals of women as weak, overly emotional, and nurturing.

Rapunzel's Foil: Gothel's "Mother Knows Best"

In order to better define Rapunzel's femininity, I find it helpful to compare her to Mother Gothel, the film's antagonist. Gothel kidnapped Rapunzel at birth, raised her, and locked her in a tower, using Rapunzel's powers to unnaturally maintain her youthful beauty. In "Mother Knows Best," Gothel vocally and physically contrasts Rapunzel. Her voice is both lower and darker, and she appears dark-haired, heavily made-up, with bold red and black clothing, and she is, of course, older. As Rapunzel's foil, Gothel serves to emphasize her daughter's more positive traits, and as the antagonist, she also represents everything Rapunzel tries to run away from. In doing so, however, Disney paints the older, darker, bolder woman as evil, implying that these traits are undesirable, even villainous.

As Laura Sells so aptly puts it, "within Disney's patriarchal ideology, any woman with power has to be represented as a castrating bitch."[236] More specifically, these female villains often have power *over* other people, whether that power is magical or mundane. Mother Gothel perfectly fits this archetype, as described by Henke, Umble, and Smith:

> Disney's evil females are magnificent in their strength, presence, and rage. Visually, they loom large and dark on the screen as they trick, manipulate, and threaten. They control others' options and access to money, shelter, and relationships with men. These evil females – Cinderella's stepmother, Maleficent, and Ursula – often are alienated from their communities. In Disney tales, evil women are driven by the desire to have what isn't theirs – purity, beauty, acceptance, love. [...] In each case, however, the use of power by these strong, evil females results in each's literal or social death.[237]

[236] Laura Sells, "'Where Do the Mermaids Stand?': Voice and Body in The Little Mermaid," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Laura Sells, Elizabeth Bell, and Lynda Haas (Indiana University Press, 1995), 181.
[237] Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 244.

Gothel looms, manipulates, and threatens Rapunzel; she controls Rapunzel's options and is alienated from any sort of community; and she is driven by her desire for eternal youth and beauty, resulting in her literal death at the end of *Tangled*. Through her flaws, Gothel becomes everything a woman shouldn't be: powerful, greedy, and controlling, while Rapunzel is portrayed as her exact opposite, the ideal woman.

In the film and official soundtrack, Mother Gothel is voiced by Donna Murphy, who is some 25 years older than Mandy Moore in real life. She also *sounds* older and darker through the way she actively shapes her voice for this character. In "Mother Knows Best," Gothel consistently uses more chest voice, neutral and open tones (no breathiness or twang), and sings in a lower register than Rapunzel. Gothel also makes her voice sound raspy, growly, and overly dark at times to scare Rapunzel into submission, such as when she sings about ruffians and thugs, large bugs, and men with pointy teeth.[238] To clarify, by "overly-dark," I mean that there is a yawn-like, lower resonance to her tone, which Gothel exaggerates in contrast to Rapunzel's bright, higher resonances.[239] In addition, Murphy often slides between pitches, sometimes even within the same word or syllable. These slides add drama to her words, such as when she slides up and growls on the third refrain of "Mother knows best," (**Fig. 4.13a**) emphasizing her monstrous version of motherhood.[240]

[238] Malawey, *A Blaze of Light*, 103.
[239] Heidemann, "Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," [3.19]. For other dark tones, see Bing Crosby or Cher.
[240] Donna Murphy, "Mother Knows Best," *Tangled,* Walt Disney Records (2010), Spotify, [1:47], https://open.spotify.com/track/1lOSxJNCLvWm2bYaTcTSmK?si=b96d2362a0144503.

“Mother Knows Best”

Mother knows best, listen to your mother
It's #a #scary world out there
Mother knows best, one way or another
Something will go wrong, I swear
#Ruffians, thugs, poison ivy, quicksand
Cannibals and snakes
The plague

 # = growl

Mother Gothel’s Voices:
MG1 (chest, neutral, open, low/mid), MG 2 (mix, neutral, open, mid/high),
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Fake Little-Girl Voice (mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 4.13a, “Mother Knows Best,” Growls in the Third Refrain

“Mother Knows Best”

Gullible, naïve, positively grubby
Ditzy and a bit, well, hmm, vague
Plus, I believe, gettin’ kinda chubby
I’m just saying ~ ‘cause I love you

Mother understands,
Mother’s here to help you



~ = portamento

Mother Gothel’s Voices:

MG1 (chest, neutral, open, low/mid), MG 2 (mix, neutral, open, mid/high),
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Fake Little-Girl Voice (mix, neutral, twang, mid),

Figure 4.13b, “Mother Knows Best”[241]

[241] For a complete lyrics chart, see Appendix B.

In another instance (**Fig. 4.13b**), Murphy slides up and down, and actually sings out of tune when she uses baby-talk. Besides making her seem falsely mother-like—since Rapunzel is hardly a baby anymore—Gothel's attempt at a Little-Girl Voice pushes her farther away from Rapunzel vocally. She does sound high and twangy—but she lacks the breathiness and (what we perceive as) authentic girlishness of Rapunzel's Little-Girl Voice. Here, Mother Gothel sounds sickeningly sweet. Sometimes she growls to scare Rapunzel, and sometimes, she puts on a fake sweetness to endear herself to Rapunzel.

Visually speaking, Mother Gothel's appearance emphasizes her difference and her power over Rapunzel. As alluded to previously, she has dark, black, curly hair, wears heavy makeup, and is clothed in deep red, black, and gold, in direct contrast to Rapunzel's lighter pinks, purples, and whites. *Tangled* director Byron Howard even described Gothel as "tall, curvy, voluptuous," and "exotic" in an interview, explaining that they animated her as such to foreshadow the fact that she is not Rapunzel's birth mother.[242] But yikes! Howard's use of the word "exotic" leads me to believe that the creative team was thinking of some ambiguous Other when designing Mother Gothel, favoring lighter features, pinks, and purples for the good girl and darker "exotic" features for the bad woman.

In addition, one of the most hair-raising moments of the film happens when Gothel gravely reprimands Rapunzel, "Don't ever ask to leave this tower again." Not only is her spoken voice dark and threatening, she also stands perhaps a foot taller than Rapunzel and looks down at her (see **Fig. 4.14**). This height difference and camera angle emphasize Gothel's power over Rapunzel, as if she is admonishing a small child:

[242] "Cher gets the Disney treatment," *Stuff* (Jan. 27, 2011), https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/4585068/Cher-gets-the-Disney-treatment#:~:text=Cher%20was%20the%20inspiration%20for,base%20Mother%20Gothel%20on%20her.



Figure 4.14, Mother Gothel Reprimands Rapunzel

As per Henke, Umble, and Smith, women with power over others in Disney are usually the evil ones, like Ursula, Maleficent, or Cinderella's stepmother.[243] By continuing to cast powerful women as bad women (and bad mothers), *Tangled* further distinguishes the "perfect girl"[244] archetype as power-*less*, especially while Rapunzel is still constrained to the tower with Mother Gothel.

On the whole, in "Mother Knows Best," Gothel is introduced as the visual and musical opposite to Rapunzel's damselhood. She is older, darker, bolder, and scarier; "exotic" and more powerful. Her voice actress, Donna Murphy, tends to use more chest voice, darker timbres, growls, and rasps, and her Fake Little-Girl Voice sounds sickeningly sweet. By emphasizing her age, Otherness, and power-over Rapunzel, Disney juxtaposes two different types of femininity: a dark-haired, older, corrupt woman and a blonde, youthful, virtuous girl.

[243] Henke et al., "Construction of the Female Self," 243.
[244] Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the crossroads*, 59, in "Construction of the Female Self," Henke et al., 231.

The Happily-Ever-After

Any Disney movie is incomplete without its HEA, the fairy tale trope in which the princess marries the prince, everything else is resolved, and they live Happily-Ever-After. These princesses usually fall in love at first sight, spending no screen time on actually developing a healthy relationship.[245] And "as the culminating event [...] marriage more importantly displays the victory of patriarchal culture itself," as if attaching herself to a man should be every girl's end-goal.[246] Obviously, real life is different from fantasy, but these shallow and normatively heterosexual relationships set expectations for how little kids view love and marriage.

Like everything else, Rapunzel both conforms to and subverts the love-at-first-sight-to-marriage trope in *Tangled*. She is not impressed by Flynn's smolder when they first meet, and doesn't fall in love with him until about two-thirds of the way through the movie, in "I See the Light." By then, they have gone through many adventures together, and Rapunzel makes an informed choice from a place of freedom and joy. And, as previously noted, her primary goal is not romantic at all: she just wants to escape her tower and see the lights on her birthday. Still, in the end, Rapunzel makes the same choice that her predecessors did: she marries Flynn.

It doesn't have to be this way, however. Queer readings of Rapunzel's tale are quite common, linking her leaving the tower to coming out of the closet. And fans love to pair Merida and Rapunzel together in "Meripunzel femslash" on the internet.[247] But these stories remain relegated to the land of fanfiction and fanart. Canonical Rapunzel marries

[245] Henke et al., "Constructions of the Female Self," 241-42.
[246] Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," 251.
[247] Kapurch, "Rapunzel Loves Merida."

Flynn, just as so many other princesses married their princes in big, romantic HEA scenes. As Carrie Cokely argues in *Thinking Straight*, "these animated fantasies perpetuate the illusion that romance represents true love and mask the ways heterosexuality and patriarchy are at work in our society today. In so doing, these films and the Disney Corporation secure the place of institutionalized and illusory heterosexuality in the ruling order."[248] Disney's myths of gender, up to and including Rapunzel, are both patriarchal and heteronormative in their iconography of marriage.

Storytelling through Timbre: Other "I Want" Songs

Beyond Rapunzel, vocal timbre and teleology[249] are also linked together in other "I Want" songs from the same time period: Tiana's "Almost There" (2009), Elsa's "Let it Go" (2013), and Moana's "How Far I'll Go" (2016). In each case, the princess begins with breathier and lighter timbres in their introductions and verses, proceeding towards heavier, more confident belting in the choruses. You can see this in the charts below (**Fig. 4.16**) as a transition from other colors towards bright yellow each time. Of course, each princess is unique, but for all of them, their vocal production (chest versus head voice) and vocal quality (breathier, lighter, stronger, heavier) highlight trajectories from the beginning to the end of the song. I propose that this is not just for musical-formal reasons—that is, increasing in energy for the chorus—but also for narrative ones.

As previously mentioned, in "When Will My Life Begin (Reprise 2)," Rapunzel sings with her breathiest and smallest voice when she gazes wistfully out her window, then with a clear and strong voice when she runs powerfully on the ground. There are

[248] Cokely, "Disney, the Heterosexual Imaginary and Animated Film," 180.
[249] Nobile, "Teleology in Verse–Prechorus–Chorus Form."

multiple layers of symbolism here: she moves from a space of confinement, childhood, and submission to a place of activity, agency, and strength. Vocal timbre, then, can signal physical changes like freedom and exertion, and emotional ones too, like independence and maturity. It offers listeners an insight into the identity of the singer (or the character), and these identities are fluid, ever changing over time.

In *The Princess and the Frog,* Tiana spends her days working towards a dream: owning her own restaurant. Like Rapunzel, she is on the cusp of adulthood, and *unlike* the archetypal *Disney damsel*, she and Rapunzel both wish for something non romantic: rather than love, they wish for freedom, a career; some action-oriented goal. In "Almost There," Tiana begins with a bit of wishing, but by the chorus, she confidently resolves to go do something about it. And like Rapunzel, her vocal timbres move from softer tones to well-anchored belting in the chorus, projecting a sense of development, not just in the song form, but also in her character.

Elsa's iconic "Let it Go" encapsulates the moment she decides to let go of expectations and embrace herself as she is. Idina Menzel is also the only princess to use her chest voice virtually all the time, but the introduction *is* noticeably breathier and softer, almost like she is muttering to herself rather than singing out fully as she does in the chorus. Visually, too, Elsa's song is set like Rapunzel's: when she belts out that chorus, she is shown running across wide open spaces, creating a huge magical ice castle, and controlling her environment. Thus, lyrics, vocal timbre, and imagery all participate in the storytelling of a girl growing up.

Anika Noni Rose as Tiana, "Almost There,"
***The Princess and the Frog,* 2009.**

Mama! I don't have time for dancing!
That's just gonna have to wait a while
Ain't got time for messing around
And it's not my style
This old town can slow you down
People taking the easy way
But I know exactly where I'm going
I'm getting closer and closer every day

And I'm almost there
I'm almost there
People down here think I'm crazy
But I don't care
Trials and tribulations
I've had my share
There ain't nothing gonna stop me now
'Cause I'm almost there

Idina Menzel as Elsa,
"Let it Go," *Frozen,* 2013.

The snow glows white on the mountain tonight
Not a footprint to be seen
A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like
I'm the Queen
The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried

Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be*
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know!*

Let it go! Let it go!
Can't hold it back anymore!*
Let it go! Let it go!*
Turn away and slam the door!*
I don't care what they're going to say!*
Let the storm rage on*
The cold never bothered me anyway

* = *tense phonation*

Auli'i Cravalho as Moana,
"How Far I'll Go," *Moana,* 2016.

I've been staring at the edge of the water
Long as I can remember
Never really knowing why
I wish I could be the perfect daughter
But I come back to the water
No matter how hard I try

Every turn I take, every trail I track
Every path I make, every road leads back
To the place I know where I cannot go
Where I long to be

See the line where the sky meets the sea
It calls me
And no one knows
How far it goes
If the wind in my sail on the sea
Stays behind me
One day, I'll know
If I go, there's just no telling how far I'll go

Figure 4.15, Timbral Changes in other "I Want Songs"

Finally, in “How Far I’ll Go,” Moana, like Rapunzel, physically sets out from her childhood home towards an adventure. Although she is not kept in a tower, she still wishes for freedom; and she seeks to save her people by leaving the island and giving back Te Fiti’s heart. Moana and Elsa both have this in common: not only are they passively beautiful princesses but they also take responsibility for their people. They each go on an adventure to find themselves and come back confident, fully-fledged rulers. Moana’s vocal trajectory is perhaps the clearest of the bunch, with Little-Girl Voice defining the verses, Modal Voice the prechoruses, and Belting the choruses. And these qualities represent similar imagery to what we’ve seen in the past: with Little-Girl Voice comes wishing and gazing, with Modal Voice comes a decision, and with Belt comes confidence and action.



Figure 4.16, Moana (left) and Elsa (right) during their “I Want” Songs

Of course, some of these vocal patterns do apply to male characters who go through life changes as well. For example, in “Go the Distance” (*Hercules,* 1997), Roger Bart starts singing with a soft, breathy tone, and finishes triumphantly with a clear, strong belt. In “Out There” (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* 1996), Tom Hulce uses even more contrast in his vocal styles, from whispering to shouting, from singing quietly to himself to literally shouting over the rooftops. Such trajectories are therefore not limited

to female characters or princesses, but are especially prominent in "I Want" Songs from this post-1989 era of Disney movie musicals. However, in the context of the Disney Princesses' history, I find that character development via the voice is inextricably tied to femininity and the performance of archetypal gender norms.

Vocal timbre not only communicates how a princess is feeling in one particular moment; it can also tell the story of these young women growing up. Familiar symbolism and tropes recur: these girls have dreams that take them away from their childhood homes; they gain a sidekick and figure out who they are away from their parents (or captors); some of them fall in love along the way (Rapunzel and Tiana, *not* Elsa or Moana); and they save the day and return home to reunite with family. While we already know that vocal timbre can communicate aspects of identity, it can also signal journeys *between* identities, for instance from girlhood to adulthood and from isolation to community. In its symbolism and teleology, then, vocal timbre is not just a secondary parameter—it can tell stories on its own. These singers use vocal timbre to project not just who these princesses are but also *who they become*.

Conclusion

At the beginning of her story, Mandy Moore's breathy Little-Girl Voice, domestic and passive behavior, submission to Mother Gothel, and literal confinement in a tower all work together to portray Rapunzel as a *Disney damsel* who is as sweet and pretty as she is powerless. Gothel's solo song, "Mother Knows Best," emphasizes this power dynamic, implying that powerful women become evil women and bad mothers. Once Rapunzel leaves the tower, however, her voice gains strength, and she also gains freedom. As

Rapunzel grows up, modal voice and belt signify independence, agency, and power. Beyond her escape, she also achieves her primary goal of attending the lantern festival, and rescues Flynn multiple times, subverting conventions of earlier Disney films.[250] However, at the climax of *Tangled*, Rapunzel still collapses crying when she believes Flynn to be dead, and sings with her tiniest voice in the "The Tear Heals." And, in the end, she and Flynn have to get engaged for her story to feel complete. Up to 2010, all of the Disney Princesses required husbands to live happily ever after, and Rapunzel is no different.

Disney's conflicted portrayal of femininity through Rapunzel reflects the "double entanglement"[251] of feminist and anti-feminist ideas in the early 2000s: women had to be strong and independent, but still conventionally beautiful and, of course, married to a man. Even today, as beautifully put by America Ferrera in *Barbie* (2023), "You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas," and "You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much."[252]

Beyond characterizing princesses as submissive or subversive, vocal timbre also reveals journeys between multiple identities, developing over the course of a song or an entire film. For example, as we'll see in the next chapter with more depth, other contemporary princesses like Tiana, Elsa, and Moana also progress from breathier to stronger timbres in their "I Want" Songs, suggesting that the resonance between vocal timbre and coming-of-age stories is bigger than just Rapunzel's. These vocal nuances do

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[250] M. Davis, "The Progression of Disney Princesses," 51.
England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal," 559.
Henke et al., "Constructions of the Female Self."
[251] Gill, "Postfeminist media culture," 147-66.
McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255.
[252] America Ferrera, "It is Literally Impossible to Be A Woman," in *Barbie*, dir. Greta Gerwig (Warner Bros, 2023).

more than just offer insight into who they are and what they want; they reveal important changes that are happening in these women's lives and experiences.

In this chapter, I have shown how gendered characterizations can change over the course of a song (as in "When Will My Life Begin [Reprise 2]) or over the course of a movie (as in the "Healing Incantation"). I have also shown how Rapunzel is made to seem youthful and passive at times, and mature and powerful at other times. This is why vocal timbre gives us such a great insight into the socio-cultural expectations we have for women, from the decades-long history of the Disney Princesses, their Broadway ties in the '90s, and the complicated political climate of the 2000s.

Chapter 5
"How Far I'll Go": Elsa, Anna, and Moana in the Modern Era (2013-16)

Introduction

Nearly every article and chapter I've read has argued that Disney's female characters improve over time, and the most recent Princess is the most empowered, liberated, and feminist one yet. This is likely true, if difficult to quantize, but I hope I have revealed in this dissertation how nonlinear and complex this process has been since 1989. Disney's leading women have had their ups and downs, and none are without flaws.

That being said, by today's standards, there is a lot to celebrate in the stories of Elsa, Anna, and Moana. They break stereotypes and assert their own powers unfettered by men more so than any other princesses before them. They do not fight a discrete, single, human antagonist but rather go on a journey towards understanding themselves better. And their stories resolve not with romantic relationships but with familial and communal ones. In fact, Elsa and Moana do not require male partners to become queen or chief, while even Rapunzel and Tiana were engaged or married by the end of their films.

Musically, Elsa and Anna act as foils to support their contrasting character types, as Anna is the "perfect princess," a light soprano, while Elsa is a "deconstructed diva," a heavy mezzo.[253] Their musical materials contrast, too, in key areas, instrumentation, and mood. Elsa in particular, with her great belting ability and liberatory text to "Let it Go," is iconic for her power and independence. Though Moana has her own strengths, Elsa is the peak of this particular vocal mountain—after all, who could belt better than Idina Menzel?

[253] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas."

Moana, like Rapunzel, Tiana,[254] Elsa, and Anna, belts when she is at her most confident and determined, and like her contemporaries, she also moves from breathy to belty timbres within song forms. Unlike the other voice actors, however, Auli'i Cravalho voiced Moana when she was about 16 years old; and so her light belt must be viewed within the context of vocal maturity. For example, in contrast, Idina Menzel was about 40 years old when she voiced Elsa for the first time in *Frozen* (2013). In addition, Moana's songs mimic her character arc in multiple parameters, including but not limited to vocal timbre, lyrics, and harmony. Right before our eyes, Moana grows up from a little girl to a strong woman, and when she is most certain of herself—"I am Moana"—she sings with the greatest power we've seen from her yet.

In this chapter, I will analyze "For the First Time in Forever" (Elsa and Anna), "Love is an Open Door" (Anna), and "Let it Go" (Elsa) from *Frozen*; and "How Far I'll Go," "How Far I'll Go - Reprise," and "I am Moana" from *Moana*.

In addition to their use of voice and lyrics to show growing-up and female-empowerment narratives, *Frozen* and *Moana* also share other important musical representations of women: they each open with an indigenous song sung by a choir (a community); they both feature women who are royalty through birth, not by marriage; and they both actively subvert the heteronormative-marriage-as-end-goal plot device. Elsa and Moana both take charge with no need for a male love interest at all.

[254] See, for example, Tiana's song "Almost There" from *Princess and the Frog* (2009).

The Literature

First of all, I am surprised that I have yet to see an analysis of "Let it Go" in music theory scholarship, given its immense popularity. It is somewhat understandable, however, as analysis of musical theater is a small and budding subfield of our discipline. To that end, I will summarize the current scholarly attitudes toward *Frozen* and *Moana* that are available to me, namely those from musicology, gender studies, fairy tale media studies, and indigenous studies.

For example, musicologist Robin Armstrong argues that Disney is ultimately colonialist in the way that they frame Polynesian music in *Moana*, despite their efforts with the Oceanic Trust to be "authentic."[255] Ethnic studies scholar Ida Yoshinaga points to the lack of Native Pacific Islander screenwriters: despite consulting with the Oceanic Trust, they were consultants, not decision makers, so the film was more colonialist than collaborative. She calls this process extractive, even.[256] Disney, in this way, follows a long history of colonization of fairy tales: European (and, in this case, U.S.-American) storytellers have for centuries taken what they want from pre-existing indigenous stories, messed with them, and published them for their own gain.[257] Even after just seeing the trailer, Native Hawaiian scholars Healani Sonoda-Pale and Marie Alohalani Brown condemned Disney's commodification of Hawaiians and insensitive representation of Maui, a highly respected demigod of legend.[258] As does Tēvita O. Ka'ili,

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[255]Robin Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music," 1-9.
[256] Ida Yoshinaga, "Disney's Moana, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films," *Narrative Culture* 6.2 (2019).
[257] Cristina Bacchilega and Sadhana Naithani, "10. Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Decolonization," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, ed. Pauline Greenhill et al. (Routledge, 2018), 83-90.
[258] Sonoda-Pale, "Disney's Commodification of Hawaiians."
Marie Alohalani Brown cited in Wesley Yiin, "Is Disney's Portrayal of Maui, a Polynesian Demigod, in 'Moana' Culturally Insensitive?" *The Washington Post* (Jun. 28, 2016).

who calls out the lack of a female goddess like Hina, who would balance out the story. Balance is important to Polynesian lore, yet completely missed in Disney's narrative.[259]

On the other hand, Moana is widely agreed upon as a strong independent female character. For example, her story is all about her finding her true self even if it means going against what society wants for her (philosopher William Devlin calls this *authenticity*[260]). She and Anna defy the usual romantic plotlines of Disney Princess movies: the man Anna thought was perfect for her, Hans, betrays her, and Anna even chooses Elsa over another man in the "act of true love." Instead of kissing her friend Kristoff, she pivots to save Elsa from Hans's sword, which ultimately saves the whole queendom from Elsa's icy freeze.[261]

In many ways, Elsa is a stronger and more feminist princess than all those who came before her. She and her sister Anna are the focus of their film, and they must "'sav[e] each other' rather than relying on any passing prince."[262] As musical theater scholar Sarah Whitfield argues, Elsa and Anna pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test test. Their "act of true love" is a sisterly one, not a romantic one, and the film's climax is *not* marriage, breaking the norms of conventional Disney romance storylines.[263] She also notes that Elsa uses her powers to transform herself and her environment in "Let it Go," not for romantic reasons but for her own sake.[264] Admittedly, Elsa does conform to the narrow physical expectations for Disney Princess bodies: glittery, curvy, tiny-waisted,

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[259] Ka'ili, "Goddess Hina: The Missing Heroine from Disney's *Moana*."
[260] William J. Devlin, "Knowing Who you Are: Existence Precedes Essence in Moana," in *Disney and Philosophy*, ed. Richard B. Davis (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 107-18.
[261] Jamey Heit, "18. True Love in *Frozen*," in *Disney and Philosophy,* ed. Richard B. Davis (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 191.
[262] Sarah Whitfield, "'For the First Time in Forever': Locating Frozen as a Feminist Disney Musical," In *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen,* ed. Rodosthenous (Bloomsbury, 2017), 221.
[263] Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever," 225.
[264] Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever," 229.

with light skin, big eyes, a small nose, long and luscious hair.[265] In general, I see the 21st-century Disney Princesses as quite strong in character but still quite lacking in body-type diversity, perpetuating stringent pressures for girls and women to look a certain way in order to be attractive, successful, and socially acceptable.

On the other hand, film historian Lisa Duffy interprets Elsa's transformation, and her elaborate hair, makeup, and costuming as *camp.*[266] She identifies a history of queer campy evil witches in Disney films, such as Maleficent, Ursula, and Yzma, and argues that their "transformation into another figure reveals the ultimate construction of their femininity." Elsa is then simultaneously an icon of conformative beauty and goodness, at the same time as she plays into the subversive nature of campy, powerful women. She is both the protagonist good-girl and the antagonist evil-witch at once. Coupled with queer readings of Elsa's transformation in "Let it Go," Duffy shows us how "straying from heteronormative ideals no longer needs to be marked as dangerous [...] The modern Disney witch need not be evil, but camp remains a vital element of her construction." In this way, Elsa is empowering despite—or perhaps because of—her hyperfeminine visual aesthetic.

Another film scholar, Colleen Montgomery, analyzes the lyrics and narratives of Anna's and Elsa's songs. She notes that Anna is more closely aligned to the "model of the Disney Renaissance Princess," with her desire for love, and her romantic duet with Hans—"Love is an Open Door." However, she argues that this song was a "calculated tactic for [Hans] calling forth and controlling Anna's voice."[267] We later learn that he was

[265] Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever," 227-230.
Gazda, "The (de)Evolution of the Disney Princess," 36-37.
[266] Duffy, "From the Evil Queen to Elsa."
[267] Colleen Montgomery, "From Snow White to the Snow Queen: Voicing the Disney Princess," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Hollywood Musical*, ed. Dominic Broomfield-McHugh (Oxford University Press, 2022), 112-13.

manipulating Anna all along. He and Anna seem perfect for each other at first, but they put the love-at-first-sight trope into question when he betrays her in the end.

Elsa's "Let it Go" is another disruption of established Disney Princess tropes: as Montgomery writes, it "is a radical 'rejection rather than the projection of a fantasy,'" and a "I won't" song, instead of an "I want song." Elsa rejects conforming to what everyone else wants her to be, refusing to be a perfect quiet little princess. Montgomery's framework highlights both the juxtaposition of Anna and Elsa as foils, musically and narratively, as well as the ways they both break Disney princess norms at the same time. Anna teaches us to think before we act, and Elsa teaches us to not be afraid to be ourselves.[268]

In terms of *Frozen's* relationship with indigenity, scholars generally agree that Disney failed to respectfully portray Sámi (indigenous Scandinavian) culture in *Frozen I,* but improved with the help of the *Verddet* council for its sequel, *Frozen II*.[269] For example, Tuija Huuki and Kata Kyrölä argue that Disney "mixed and matched elements from Sámi culture," including "traditional *yoik* song, with little consultation with Sámi people" in the first movie.[270] After such pushback, however, Disney partnered with the *Verddet*, a team of Sámi advisors, for *Frozen II*, and they seemed ultimately happy with the resultant product.[271] Though outside of my scope, it would be interesting to investigate why

[268] Colleen Montgomery, "From Snow White to the Snow Queen: Voicing the Disney Princess," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Hollywood Musical*, ed. Dominic Broomfield-McHugh (Oxford University Press, 2022), 112-14.
[269] Tuija Huuki and Kata Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself': Indigenous Ethics, Sámi Cosmologies and Decolonial Queer Pedagogies of Frozen 2," *Gender & Education* 35.2 (2023): 171–85.
Trine Kvidal-Røvik and Ashley Cordes, "Into the unknown [Amas Mu Vuordá]? Listening to Indigenous voices on the meanings of Disney's Frozen 2 [Jikŋon 2]," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communicatio*n 15.1 (2022): 17-35.
[270] Huuki and Kyröla, "Show Yourself," 173.
[271] Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes, "Into the Unknown," 19.

Disney's consultation with the *Verddet* was largely deemed a success, while its consultation with the Oceanic Trust for *Moana* was not.

Elsa, Anna, and Moana's songs all work within a more modern idea of princesshood, from their actions and powers to their lyrics and song forms, and their relationships with queerness and indigeneity. In this chapter, I will analyze three songs from each movie to show what modern Disney femininity looked like in the 2010s.

Methodology

In addition to the analytical lenses I have been using in previous chapters, in this chapter I include queer and indigenous perspectives on *Frozen* and *Moana*. Elsa is often read as lesbian or asexual, with her lack of love interest, and both *Frozen* and *Moana* incorporate indigenous materials, set in fantasy-Scandinavia and -Polynesia respectively. In particular, I analyze "Let it Go" as both a feminist and a coming-out anthem, including a few different ways of reading Elsa's iconic lyrics. In addition, I analyze how choral "indigenous-influenced" music establishes physical and social settings for both films while simultaneously appropriating Sámi and Polynesian culture. In both senses, I cite queer and indigenous authors, and I have noticed that most purely positive analyses come from white and male authors, so I take even the strongest female-empowerment messages with a grain of salt.

CASE STUDY: Vocal Femininity in *Frozen* (2013)

For the first time in 80 years of filmmaking, Disney wrote a duet for two female characters singing in the same physical space as each other in *Frozen*.[272] Not only does this duet pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test,[273] but Anna and Elsa are rather unique in their sisterly relationship. Most secondary female characters in Disney Princess films are cast as witches (*Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid*), evil stepmothers (*Cinderella*), or evil witchy stepmothers (*Tangled*). Sisters never seem to come up much in Disney's traditional fairy tales, but Anna and Elsa exhibit strong love for each other in *Frozen* and act as dual protagonists, each as important as the other. In this section, I will analyze "For the First Time in Forever," "Love is an Open Door," and "Let it Go," searching for ways that Anna and Elsa conform to traditional princess norms, break those archetypes, and perform femininity in new and exciting ways in *Frozen*. First I'll consider them as foils, vocally and archetypally, after which I'll zoom in on the irony of Anna's too-fast love story with Prince Hans, and finally, I'll focus on Elsa's iconic "Let it Go" as a female-empowerment and queer anthem.

See Anna and Elsa's vocal palette in **Figure 5.1**:

[272] Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever," 221-38.
[273] The Bechdel-Wallace test requires a film to have more than one named female character and they must have a conversation about something other than a man. See Sue Short's discussion of *Frozen* and the Bechdel test in *Fairy Tale and Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 159.

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 5.1, Elsa and Anna's Vocal Palette

In "For the First Time in Forever" (**Fig. 5.2**), Anna and Elsa open up their castle to a celebration for the first time in many years. Anna is bubbly, frothing with excitement, drawn to the light and commotion, while Elsa is stoic, nervous, and shrouded in darkness. These contrasts show up immediately in their voices. Where the previous song, "Do You Want a Build a Snowman?," introduced the distance between the two sisters in childhood, "For the First Time in Forever" expands upon how different they are in adulthood, and sets up their guiding desires for the rest of the film. Anna desperately wants to not be alone, dreaming of a "beautiful stranger" who is "the one," while Elsa is afraid of hurting people with her magical abilities, so she desperately tries to "conceal" and control her emotions.

“For the First Time in Forever”

Verse [ANNA] **in F**
The window is open, so's that door
I didn't know they did that anymore
Who knew we owned 8,000 salad plates?
For years, I've roamed these empty halls
Why have a ballroom with no balls?
Finally, they're opening up the gates

Prechorus
There'll be actual, real, live people
It'll be totally strange
But wow, am I so ready for this change

Chorus
'Cause for the first time in forever
There'll be music, there'll be light
For the first time in forever
I'll be dancing through the night
Don't know if I'm elated or gassy
But I'm somewhere in that zone
'Cause for the first time in forever
I won't be alone

[ANNA, spoken]
I can't wait to meet everyone
What if I meet "the one"?

Verse [ANNA] **+key change! in G** ♭
Tonight, imagine me, gown and all
Fetchingly draped against the wall
The picture of sophisticated grace
I suddenly see him standing there
A beautiful stranger, tall and fair
I wanna stuff some chocolate in my face

Prechorus
But then we laugh and talk all evening
Which is totally bizarre
Nothing like the life I've led so far

Chorus
For the first time in forever
There'll be magic, there'll be fun
For the first time in forever
I could be noticed by someone
And I know it is totally crazy
To dream I'd find romance
But for the first time in forever
At least I've got a chance

Bridge [ELSA] **+key change! in Eb**
Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel
Put on a show
Make one wrong move and everyone will know

[ELSA (& ANNA)] **modulates**
But it's only for today (It's only for today)
It's agony to wait (It's agony to wait)
Tell the guards to open up the gate (The gate)

Chorus [ANNA (& ELSA)] **+key change! in G**
For the first time in forever
(Don't let them in, don't let them see)
I'm getting what I'm dreaming of
(Be the good girl you always have to be)
A chance to change my lonely world (Conceal)
A chance to find true love
(Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know)

Coda [ANNA]
I know it all ends tomorrow
So it has to be today
'Cause for the first time in forever
For the first time in forever
Nothing's in my way (Ooh!)

Anna and Elsa’s Voices: Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix),
Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high),
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), “Legit” (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high)

Figure 5.2, “For the First Time In Forever” Color-Coded Lyrics

As previously mentioned, Anna falls in line with the "perfect princesses" of Disney history.[274] She dreams of love, and connection, and although she belts frequently (the yellow-highlighted text in **Fig. 5.2**), the actual quality of that belt is much lighter than Elsa's. Like vocal coach Kevin Michael Jones's description of Mulan's belt, Anna seems "careful not to bring up TOO much chest register," and instead sings with a healthy, "strong chest/mix (rather than pure chest register forced upward)."[275] Additionally, like Potgieter's Renaissance Princesses, she also "maintains a straighter tone with tail-end vibrato," has that "typical light belting quality of singing," and is a "sweet" soprano.[276] And Anna's vocal style matches the "bright youthfulness" that musical theater scholars Alex Bádue and Rebecca Schorsch define as "light pop scoops, controlled or vibrato-free tone, and unstressed vocal slides, as well as an easy-neutral delivery."[277]

For example, in "For the First Time in Forever," Anna's choruses are generally her strongest moments. She belts up to a C5 or a D♭5 ("for the first time"), and yet, her sound is not strained, pressed, or overly tense. At the end of each phrase, such as on the words "light," "forever," "night," and "zone" in the first chorus, she gracefully decrescendos with a light vibrato at the end of each note. She even goes into "Legit" head voice from time to time, such as on the words "that zone," (D5) and "romance" (E♭5). In contrast, Elsa never uses head voice. Instead, Elsa often ends words with a push of air, what I hear as an extraneous "wuh" sound, and no vibrato, sustaining a heavy belt sound in her choruses in "Let it Go." We can even hear how hard Idina Menzel is working to

[274] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas."
[275] Jones, "Analyzing the Singing of Five Disney Princesses."
[276] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas," 63.
[277] Bádue and Schorsch, "Animated Broadway," 220.

bring her belt up to E♭5 through artifacts like a yodel break, and scoops *up* to each note. (See **Figure 5.1** for a chart of Anna and Elsa's vocal qualities.)

More colloquially, if I were in a voice lesson, I would say that when Anna goes for a high note, she lifts her soft palate and sings it beautifully. She uses a good mix of head and chest voice (sometimes fully in head voice), singing mostly in a light belt, with some moments of Little-Girl Voice and "Legit" singing. Elsa, on the other hand, sings high notes beautifully, but with more power than grace. She quite literally never uses head voice and instead powers through everything, belting up to a C5 ("tell the guards to open up the gate"), her highest note, with plenty of vocal weight, whereas Anna lightly belts at C5 and switches to head voice around D5 ("but I'm somewhere in that zone"). At the end of this chapter, I will visually diagram these differences in belting and vocal weight with a comparison of Elsa and Anna with each other and with the other princesses.

Elsa's lines in this duet are also placed quite a bit lower than Anna's, staying in a tessitura around B♭3-F4 as opposed to Anna's F4-C5, showcasing her lower range and "money notes," as they say in the industry. In addition, when Elsa comes in, the key area noticeably changes, as well as the accompaniment. While there was a modulation up a half step between Anna's first and second cycles, this modulation down a *third* is much greater, especially when paired with open fifths to denote stillness, low brass to darken the mood, and new melodic content. "Conceal, don't feel," and "don't let them in" actually foreshadow the same lyrics and notes in "Let it Go," which Elsa will sing later on in the same key (E♭). See her first few lines in **Figure 5.3a**, and their modulations in **Figure 5.3b**.

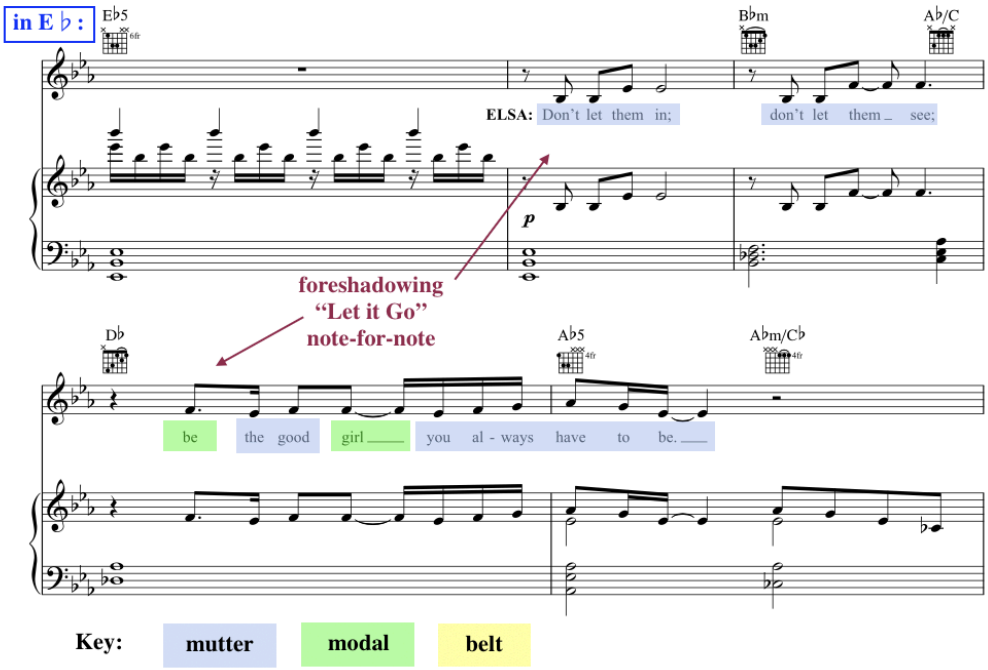


Figure 5.3a, "For the First Time in Forever," Piano/Vocal Score, Elsa's Foreshadowing

In particular, when Elsa sings the climactic phrase, "tell the guards to open up the gates," she bursts into a much more tense and chest-heavy sound. Her previous phrases in the bridge stayed in the lower tessitura around B ♭ 3-F4, but on this last line, she breaks out into a higher range: E ♭ 4 to C5. She brings her chest voice much higher, and belts with a crescendo to this moment, her strongest sound within this song. In addition, this phrase is particularly dissonant, outlining a half diminished seventh chord ("Am^{7} ♭ 5"), and stretched out with a rallentando. For a moment, she takes charge—demanding that the guards open the gates—and foreshadows the iconic Idina Menzel sound we will hear later on in "Let it Go." Anna and Elsa are therefore stratified in register and in timbre in this duet.
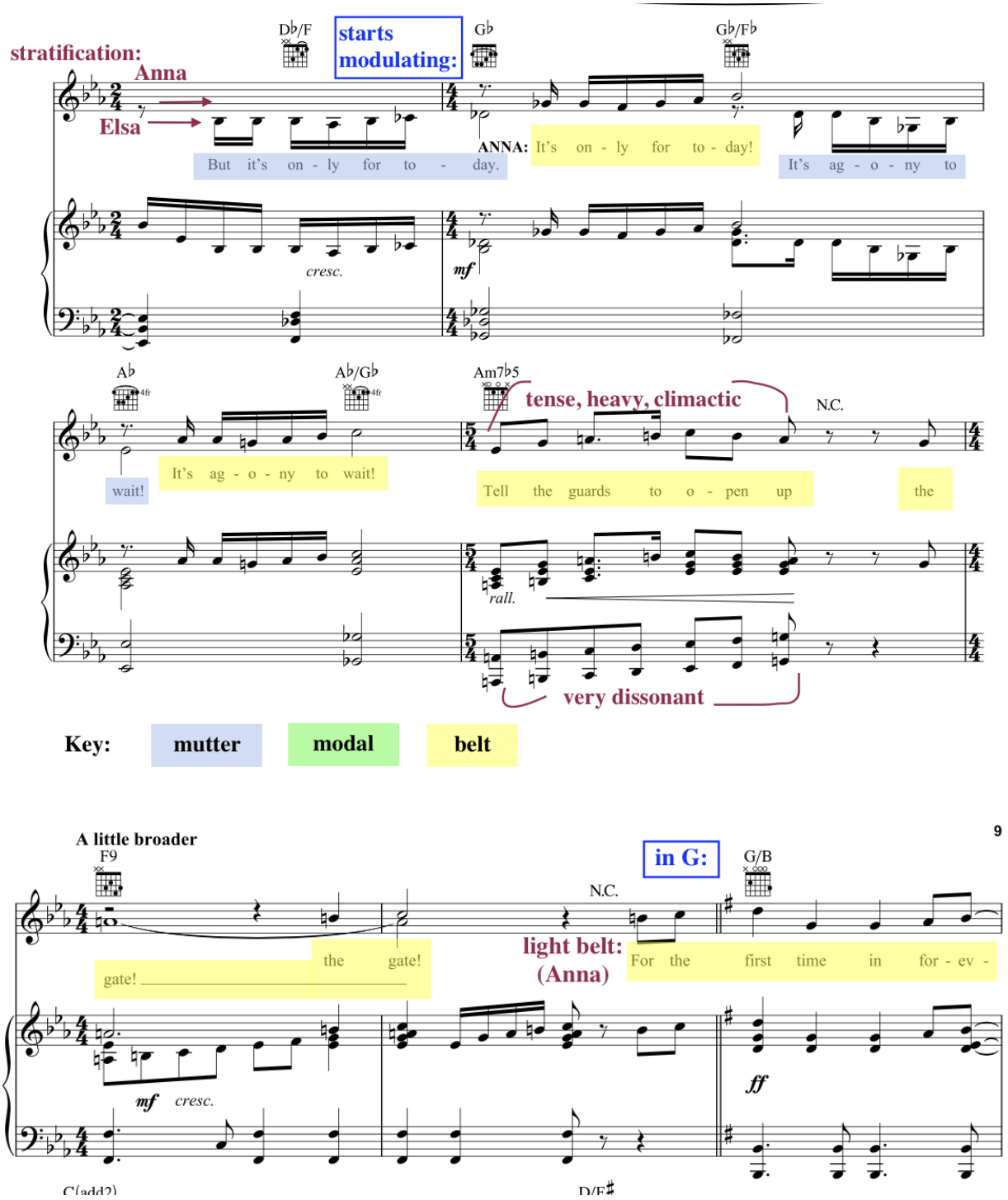


Figure 5.3b, "For the First Time in Forever," Modulatory Section

Besides these differences, although stepwise modulation is rather common in musical theater for intensification reasons, by placing Elsa down a third, the modulations in "For the First Time In Forever" reinforce the emotional distance between the two sisters.[278] Anna is assigned to brighter, higher keys like F and G♭ major, while Elsa sings in E♭ Major, and her accompaniment changes to a darker orchestration with low brass and English horn. These modulations are not built in to simply "accommodate two different voice ranges," as music theorist Michael Buchler finds in Loesser duets, but to serve a narrative purpose.[279] Contrasts in vocal timbre, vocal registers, accompaniment, melody, and key areas *all* interact to demarcate Anna and Elsa as opposites, two sisters living in two different worlds.



Figure 5.4, Images from "Love is an Open Door"

[278] Buchler, "Modulation as a Dramatic Agent," 37.
[279] Buchler, "Modulation as a Dramatic Agent," 36.

At the party, Anna meets Prince Hans, who she immediately falls in love with and wants to marry. Like earlier princesses, she's been isolated in childhood without loving relationships (her parents are dead and Elsa is locked away), and so of course she would fall trap to this trope in her desperation for love.[280] Yet, unlike Cinderella, who fell in love with her Prince Charming at a ball in mere minutes, Anna presents us with a humorous, self-aware take on the love-at-first-sight trope in "Love Is an Open Door."

Anna and Hans both mention that they are "crazy" in the song, and the second verse, which describes finishing each other's sandwiches, is silly and childish, rather than romantic. Even when the setting *is* traditionally romantic, walking over a bridge in the moonlight, they shout "jinx!" when they speak at the same time, and link pinky fingers—as if they're making a pinky promise, a child's gesture of affection (**Fig. 5.4**). This is not to say that silliness or youthful energy are necessarily bad characteristics in a relationship, but in this case, they highlight how dangerously naïve Anna is.

These childish lyrics (see **Fig. 5.5**) are taken further by their cheesy background material and Anna's cutesy vocal quality. Not only is she accompanied by a four-chord loop, but three of those four chords are really just altered versions of I: D, Dsus4/F♯, D/G, and then V: A^7sus4 (which still has the note D in it). This type of loop with a moving bass and static upper voices is common in musical theater styles. Anna's closely related harmonies project a sense of not really going anywhere, and are simplistic and sparse. Sure, repetition and chord loops are common in popular styles, but this chord loop in particular is quite sus (pun intended).

[280] Heit, "True Love in *Frozen*," 187.

“Love is an Open Door”

[Okay, can I just say something crazy?] [spoken]
I love crazy [Hans, spoken]

Verse
All my life has been a series of doors in my face
and then suddenly I bump into you
I was thinking the same thing! ‘Cause like
I’ve been searchin’ my whole life to find my own place
And maybe it’s the party talkin’ or the chocolate fondue

Prechorus
But with you...
I see your face
And it's nothing like I've ever known before*

Chorus
Love is an open door
Love is an open door
Love is an open door
With you!
With you!
Love is an open door...

Verse-ish +key change!
I mean it's crazy
[What?] [spoken]
We finish each other's—
[Sandwiches!] [spoken]
That's what I was gonna say!

I've never met someone
Who thinks so much like me!
Jinx! Jinx again! [spoken]

Our mental synch-ro-ni-zation
Can have but one explanation:
You- And I- Were- Just meant to be!

Prechorus
Say goodbye...
To the pain of the past
We don't have to feel it anymore

Chorus
Love is an open door
Love is an open door
Life can be so much more
With you!
With you!
Love is an open door…

Outro
Can I say something crazy?
Will you marry me?
[Can I say something even crazier? Yes!]
[spoken]

Anna’s Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 5.5, “Love is an Open Door,” Color-Coded Lyrics

Additionally, Anna sings with a ton of twang in this song, making her sound young and girlish. The most extreme example of this is at the very end of the last chorus, when she adds a little embellishment to "door," and her sound gets smaller and smaller, sweeter and sweeter. Like past love songs we've seen—for example, "I See the Light" from *Tangled*—Anna is portrayed as cute, young, and feminine in the gaze of her love interest. We even get that classic lovestruck shot at the beginning of the song (**Fig. 5.6**). The camera looks down at her from above, and Anna looks up, blushing, with big eyes. Though Anna's body language is not as exaggerated as Rapunzel's, these princesses' falling-in-love look is much the same:



Figure 5.6, Anna in "Love is an Open Door" and Rapunzel in "I See the Light"

We later learn that Hans preyed upon Anna's naïveté. He made her think they were meant to be, but he turns out to be a terrible person. When the situation looks most dire, Anna is in need of an act of true love to save the day, and she believes it might be a true love's kiss from Hans. But Hans denigrates her, saying "Oh Anna. If only there was someone out there who loved you," in her moment of vulnerability (**Fig. 5.7**). He locks

her in the room, freezing and helpless, and hatches a plot to kill Elsa, “saving” Arendelle and becoming its king.



Figure 5.7, Hans Leaning in to Kiss Anna, before he Turns Coat and Betrays Her Instead

Through this subplot, Disney critiques its own love story model for the first time in many years of animated film. Hans and Anna’s relationship teaches us that love at first sight has risks, and trusting too soon or too blindly can put a girl into some real trouble. What started as small adjustments, like no longer requiring a wedding scene to end the movie (*Tangled*, 2010), has become an outright negative take (if a bit humorous) in Anna and Hans’s story. And *Frozen* goes even further by replacing the act of romantic love with an act of heroism between two sisters. It turns out that the “act of true love” was fulfilled by Anna saving Elsa’s life in the end, saving all of Arendelle as a result.

In many ways, Anna conforms to the “perfect princess” archetype, with an “I Want” Song that dreams of love, her cutesy, twangy, light-belt vocal quality, and her trope-ful relationship with Hans. Ultimately, however, her character arc breaks away from said tropes. *Frozen* is the first film where I see Disney critiquing itself, and the first one I could potentially call feminist, for this reason. It is hardly progressive feminism for

its time—after all, passing the Bechdel-Wallace test was hardly praise-worthy in 2013, intersectional feminism had been around for a couple decades, and Disney was still criticized for their culturally insensitive incorporation of Sámi elements in *Frozen*. However, considered in the context of the Disney Princess genre, *Frozen* did make huge strides ahead in its strong female characters, their relationships with each other, and their (lack of) relationships with men. Elsa's "Let it Go" sequence, in particular, was and still is iconic for her empowering message and underlying queer themes.

"Let it Go"

I will start here by returning to my surprise that "Let it Go," so far as I am aware, has not yet been analyzed in music theory scholarship. Musicologists Liske and Zelda Potgieter's do write about Elsa as a "deconstructed diva,"[281] and film music scholar Robynn Stilwell does write about Elsa reclaiming "her power, her voice, and her space"[282] in "Let it Go." However, as of yet, no one on our side of things has published an analysis of "Let it Go," despite the song's pervasiveness. It peaked at number 5 on the Billboard Top 100 Chart and spent 33 *weeks* on that chart in 2014.[283] The track also currently has almost a billion streams on Spotify (932 million at the present moment), and *Frozen* itself was ranked the fifth-highest- grossing film *of all time* at its theatrical release.[284] *Frozen* and Elsa's song "Let it Go" was immensely popular, and remains in the cultural zeitgeist even today.

[281] L. and Z. Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's divas."
[282] Stilwell, "Girl's Voices," 158-59.
[283] Rania Aniftos, "'Frozen' Hit 'Let It Go' Reaches RIAA Diamond Status," *billboard,* Aug. 14, 2024. https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/frozen-let-it-go-riaa-diamond-status-1235753217/.
[284] "Frozen becomes fifth-biggest film in box office history," *BBC,* May 27, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27585310.

There are many elements of "Let it Go" that fit with tried-and-true musical theater and popular song conventions. The melody progresses upwards to showcase Menzel's strong high belting abilities, like "Almost There" (*The Princess and the Frog,* 2009). Her vocal quality moves from breathy to belty with the teleology of each cycle (verse to chorus) as well as across cycles (from beginning to end), like "When Will My Life Begin?" (*Tangled,* 2010). And the bass drops out of the accompaniment, leaving just light treble chords in the earlier choruses, making the final chorus that much more climactic, like "Defying Gravity" (*Wicked,* original cast recording 2003). From a pop song perspective, too, the Axis progression (I V vi IV) and the four repetitions of the titular lyric "let it go" make for a catchy chorus.

But some other musical characteristics make this song stand out, showing off Menzel's monumental vocal ability and really making that final chorus feel like a huge weight has been pulled off of her (Elsa's) shoulders. Let's begin with a color-coded lyrics chart—**Figure 5.8**.

First, Elsa's introductory verse is set low in her range, between F3 and F4, using a tone color and accessing notes we don't often hear from Disney Princesses. It's dark, it's warm, and perhaps most importantly, it's not at all girly: she's fully in chest register, the twang is present but not extreme, and she even uses some vocal fry on "<u>not</u> a footprint to be seen." Her voice is breathy, for sure, but only in the sense of low register huskiness that is natural in the adult female voice, not Little-Girl Voice or Whispering.

Idina Menzel as Elsa, "Let it Go," *Frozen*, 2013.

Verse
The snow glows white on the mountain tonight
Not a footprint to be seen
A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like
I'm the Queen
The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried

Prechorus
Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
Can't hold it back anymore!
Let it go! Let it go!
Turn away and slam the door!
I don't care what they're going to say!
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway

Verse-ish?
It's funny how some distance makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
can't get to me at all!

Prechorus
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
I'm one with the wind and sky
Let it go! Let it go!
You'll never see me cry
Here I stand, and here I stay!
Let the storm rage on

Cycle 3
My power flurries through the air into the ground
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around!
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast!
I'm never going back, the past is in the past!

Let it go! Let it go!
And I'll rise like the break of dawn
Let it go! Let it go!
That perfect girl is gone!
Here I stand in the light of day!
Let the storm rage on!

The cold never bothered me anyway

Elsa's Voices: Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid)

Figure 5.8, "Let it Go," Color-Coded Lyrics

In the prechorus (see **Fig. 5.9**), the melody moves a little higher in her register and her vocal quality shifts to a fully phonating (less breathy) sound. Each melodic

snippet—from B ♭ 3 to E ♭ 4, then B ♭ 3 to F4, then E ♭ to A ♭ 4—rises upwards towards freedom, and she takes her chest voice up with it. In this section she sings with her full voice, starting in a relatively neutral modal voice and then adding more and more weight as she gradually shifts into a belt and crescendos through to "well, now they know!" I can even hear the physical effort it takes for her to sing so powerfully already: sometimes, the very ends of her notes scoop downwards as if it is difficult to sustain such a strong chest voice even in the F-A ♭ 4 range. See, for example, "don't let them in, don't let them see, be the good girl," "conceal, don't feel," and "well, now they know." Even before she gets to the first chorus, Idina Menzel is working hard vocally.

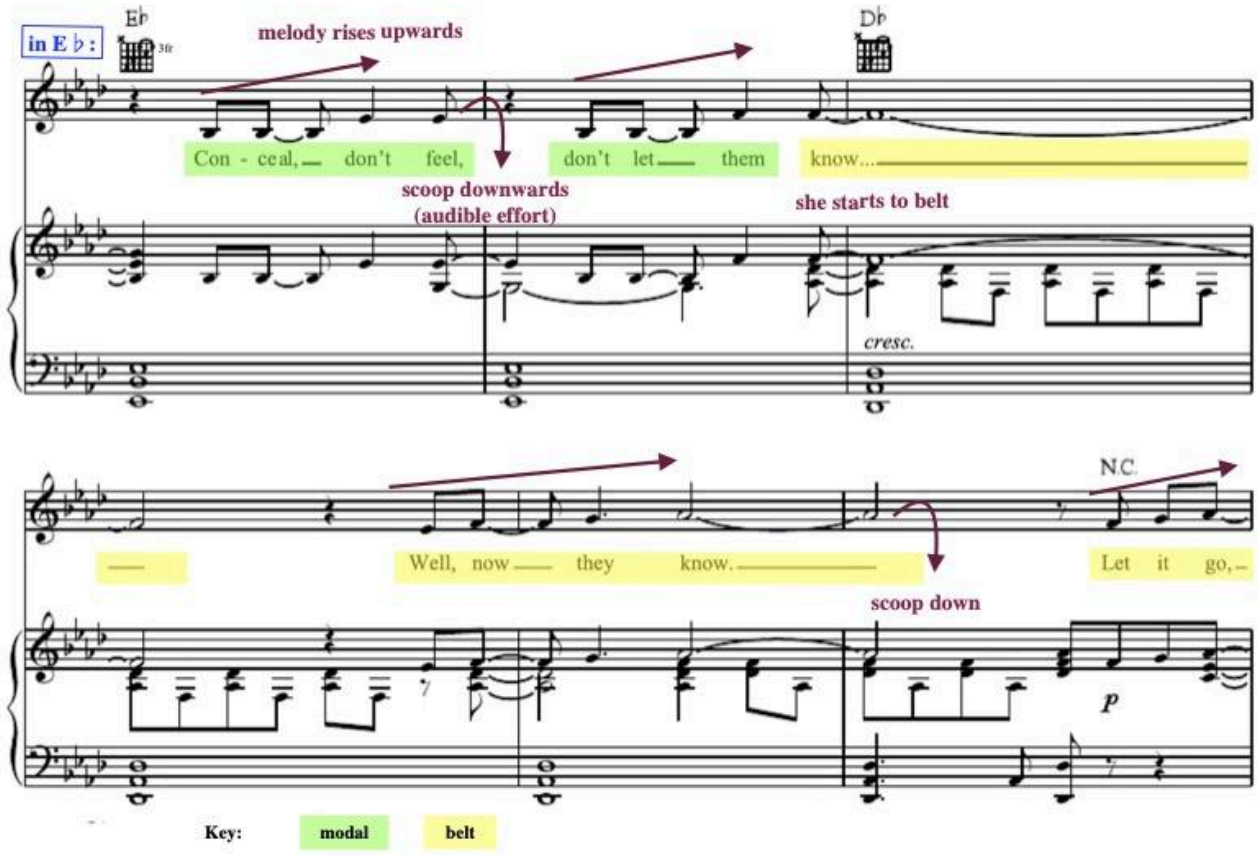


Figure 5.9, "Let it Go," Score, End of the Prechorus

At the chorus, then, Menzel brings her chest voice up to an even higher register (B♭4–E♭5) when she sings the titular lyric "let it go!" She uses her heaviest vocal quality yet, venturing into pressed phonation, and belts higher and higher. To create even more emphasis, she also adds a slight, but voiced, extra syllable at the ends of some of her words, like "go-wuh," "anymore-uh," "go-wuh," "door-uh," and "say-uh." As a result, she emphasizes the ends of words that end in vowels or the American "r" sound (IPA: [ɹ]), pushing her belt all the way through to the ends of phrases. This un-speechlike technique is particularly interesting in the era of modern technology and microphones, when Menzel does not *have* to emphasize her diction to be understood. Such exaggerated phonemes would be more common in live musical-theater singing. By belting, pressing, and emphasizing her words like this, Menzel (and therefore Elsa) gives it her all in the chorus.

In contrast to her vocal performance, however, the accompaniment lowers in energy during the first chorus. Instead of a grand climax after the rising action of the prechorus, it drops to a lighter and sparser sound. Thick piano textures give way to light, treble chord patterns, and the percussive layer remains minimal and high-pitched with just a tambourine and potentially a shaker. This sudden pulling back sets up the teleology for the entire song: internally, each cycle builds up energy towards the chorus, but the choruses themselves are each one step higher than each other. The first chorus is strong in voice but quiet in accompaniment; the second is strong in both; and the last breaks free even more climactically.

Part of what makes the final chorus so satisfying is the tension built up in the bridge before it (**Fig. 5.10**). Elsa drops down to a lower register of her voice, and her melodic phrases once again work their way upward toward freedom:

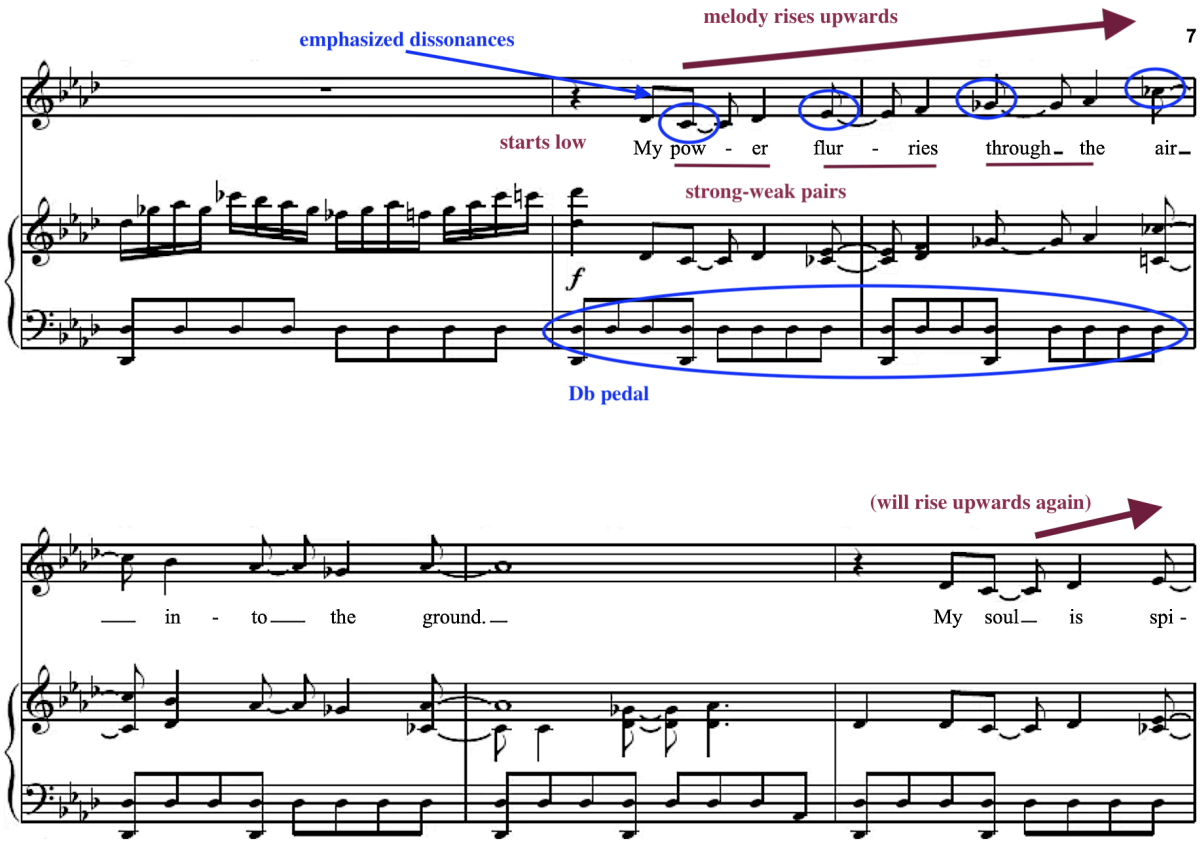


Figure 5.10, "Let it Go," Bridge

She also uses a new type of vocal delivery, with repeated weak-strong alternations (iambs) that emphasize the dissonant pitches in the line: C, E♭, G♭, and C♭ over the sustained D♭ pedal. And, on the last line of the bridge, "I'm never going back," her voice breaks on the word "go." While not exactly the yodel breaks of Alanis Morissette or Dolores O'Riordan—these singers break up from chest voice into head voice, while

Menzel breaks up *and back down immediately*—this vocal phenomenon has a similar effect. Music theorist Drew Nobile interprets Morisette's yodel breaks to "sound like bottled-up air bursting out of her vocal tract, giving the impression of an unintentional outpouring of raw emotion."[285] After pushing and pressing and singing in chest voice for so long, Menzel similarly sounds like she loses a tiny bit of control, just for a moment, because she is so overcome by emotion.

Then add in the extended IV, and then V, chord, as well as an increase in surface rhythm and in texture, in the accompaniment. All of these elements together contribute to the biggest increase in energy yet, making the final chorus just that much more climactic. I've mapped the rises and falls of energy through "Let it Go," in the following diagram, **Figure 5.11**. By following along with vocal pitch and quality, accompaniment textures and dynamics, or visual imagery, you can see how each cycle has a different shape, but they all lead towards the final "Let it Go!"

Zooming out, it is astonishing how Menzel belts all the way up to an E♭5 multiple times in this song, on the words "I don't care" (what they're going to say), and "here I stand." To compare with previous princesses, all the way from Belle to Tiana and Rapunzel, none of them belt above a C5. Elphaba, on the other hand, played by Menzel in the original Broadway cast of *Wicked*, belts up to an astonishing F♯5 in "Defying Gravity." Even on Broadway, though, this two-octave range is impressive, as is the sheer strength of Idina Menzel's belt. As far as I can tell, Menzel isn't even using mixed voice or what some musical theater specialists call "mix-belt"[286] in "Let it Go." *That* is pure chest voice.

[285] See Nobile, "Morisette's Voices," [3:16].
[286] Bádue and Schorsch, "Animated Broadway," 221.

(In fact, she sings entirely in chest voice for the entire song, and perhaps even all of her songs in *Frozen*.)

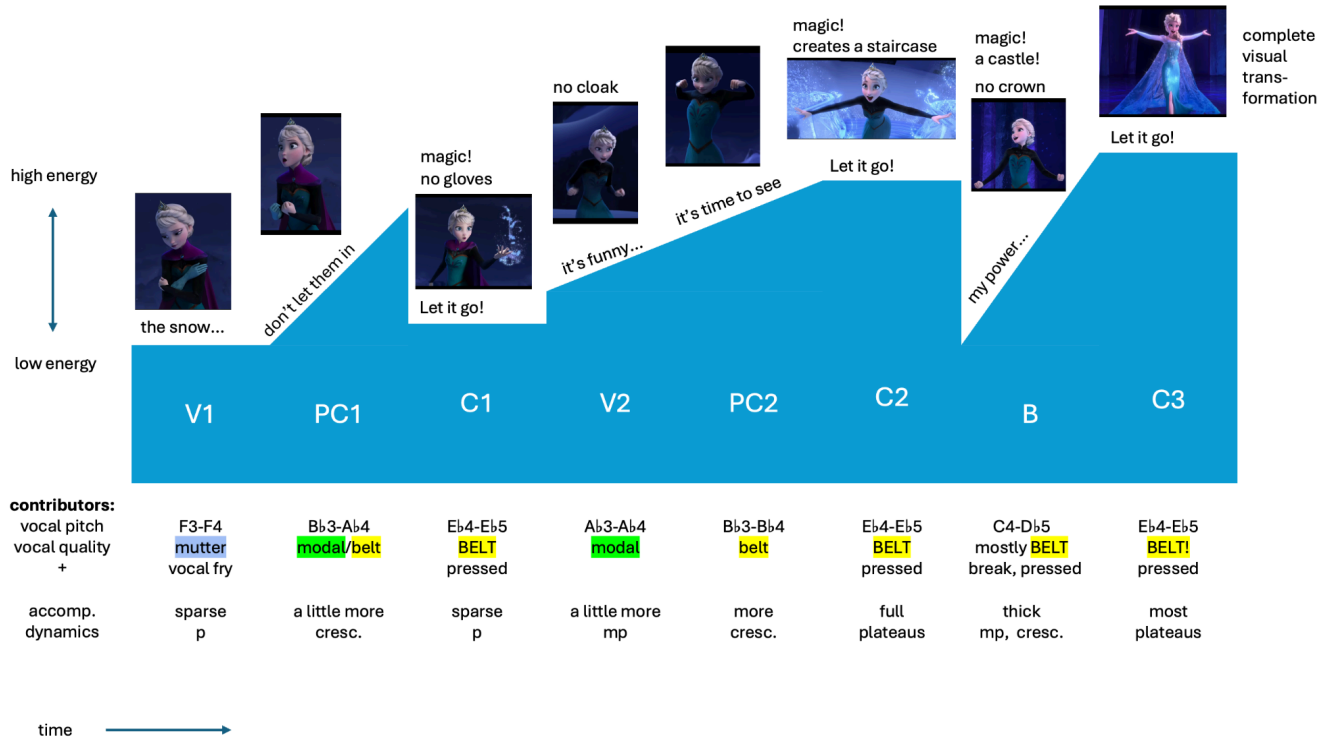


Figure 5.11, "Let it Go" Energy Chart

The intertextuality here is strong, too, especially because many viewers likely recognize Menzel's voice from *Wicked*—something theater scholar Marvin Carlson calls "ghosting," or the influence of an actor's past roles affecting the present.[287] Just as Elsa is a strong, female character singing about empowerment and going her own way, so too does Elphaba sing about embracing her own powers. In addition, Elsa and Elphaba are both the epitome of a belter, bringing up that chest voice to E ♭ 5-F♯5. Even more tellingly, Elphaba and Elsa are ostracized, "wicked" witches, so powerful that they scare their classmates, friends, and family. But in "Defying Gravity" and "Let it Go," they decide not

[287] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), 8.

to let others pull them down, and to accept themselves as who they are. Elsa and Elphaba both send the message that women don't have to be the "perfect girl" of princesses (or good witches) past any longer.

Additionally, musical theater scholar Sarah Whitfield identifies an even stronger connection between "Defying Gravity" and "Let it Go."[288] They both function as what feminist theater scholar Stacy Wolf calls "act-1-finale-of-female-self-assertion" songs, a common musical theater convention.[289] Both "Defying Gravity" and "Let it Go" take place after the audience has become acquainted with Elphaba and Elsa, having "witnessed the forces that conspire against [them] which [they] must defy."[290] Both songs are spectacularly staged, with Elphaba flying high above the rest of the cast and Elsa creating a castle out of ice that rises high (as in **Fig. 5.12**). And both are vocal showstoppers, sung by Idina Menzel, showcasing her range, belting capabilities, and endurance.

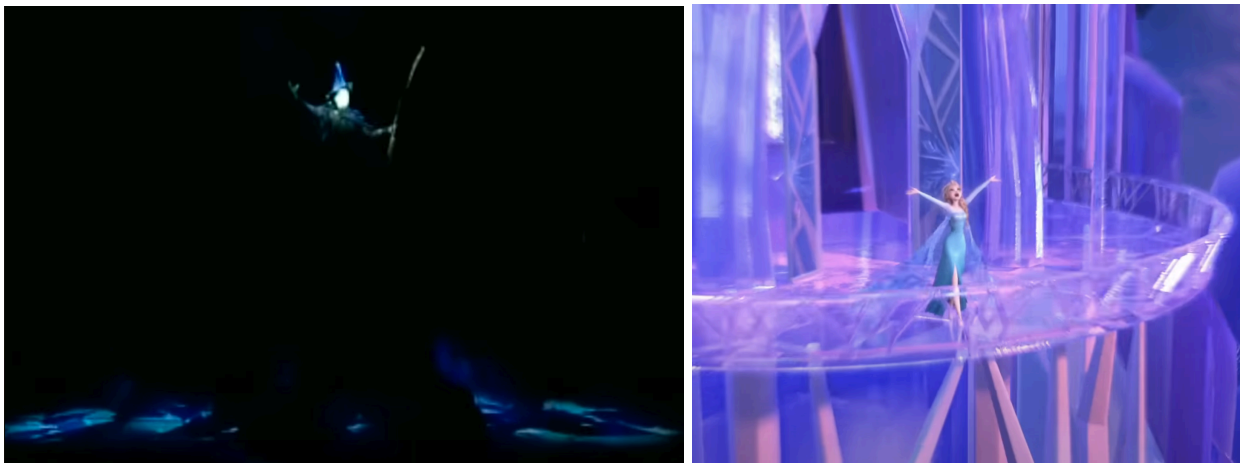


Figure 5.12, Idina Menzel as Elphaba in "Defying Gravity"[291] and as Elsa in "Let it Go"

[288] Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever," 231.
[289] Wolf, *Changed for Good,* 4.
[290] Wolf, *Changed for Good,* 4.
[291] legallywicked, "Idina Menzel - Defying Gravity (HQ Proshot)," Youtube, posted Mar. 24, 2024, https://youtu.be/WEL1UonApAw?si=TUf1XkzDtwuf-EA2.

Just as Idina Menzel is the epitome of a Broadway belter, so too is Elsa the strongest Disney Princess yet. “Let it Go” explicitly rejects everything a “perfect princess” should have to be. It’s about female empowerment, liberation, self-acceptance, and (as many read it) coming out. In this section, I will consider first how Elsa breaks the glass ceiling for Disney women, and secondly how her iconic song came to be a queer anthem—even the *potential* of being queer makes Elsa groundbreaking for Disney Princesses. First, let’s return to the lyrics (**Fig. 5.13**):

“Let it Go”

Verse
The snow glows white on the mountain tonight
Not a footprint to be seen
A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like
I'm the Queen
The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried

Prechorus
Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
Can't hold it back anymore!
Let it go! Let it go!
Turn away and slam the door!
I don't care what they're going to say!
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway

Verse-ish?
It's funny how some distance makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
can't get to me at all!

Prechorus
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
I'm one with the wind and sky
Let it go! Let it go!
You'll never see me cry
Here I stand, and here I stay!
Let the storm rage on

Bridge
My power flurries through the air into the ground
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around!
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast!
I'm never going back, the past is in the past!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
And I'll rise like the break of dawn
Let it go! Let it go!
That perfect girl is gone!
Here I stand in the light of day!
Let the storm rage on!
The cold never bothered me anyway

Figure 5.13, “Let it Go” and Empowerment

Three main textual themes stand out to me in "Let it Go." First, Elsa lets go of the pressure to be a "good girl," or a "perfect girl." It's easy to imagine the "good girl" Elsa feels stifled by—the traditional *Disney damsel*, a weak, submissive victim who needs to be rescued.[292] Instead, she shows herself to be physically powerful, asserting her will over the landscape—"my power flurries through the air"—and she refuses to be saved by Anna and Kristoff shortly after this scene.[293] Second, Elsa lets go of what people might say: "no right, no wrong, no rules for me/I'm free!" This might specifically refer to the rules her parents set when she and Anna were very young, causing both to feel isolated. But more broadly, she encourages young women in the audience to free themselves from the weight of social norms, and other people's opinions.

Third, Elsa uses aggressive terminology to describe her own powers, such as "let the storm rage on" and her "icy blast," embracing the harsh edges of herself. Besides Mulan, who was pretending to be a man in "I'll Make a Man Out of You," I can hardly imagine another princess speaking positively about raging or blasting, or even singing something like "you'll never see me cry" when crying is such a common damsel characteristic for these princesses. In these lyrics, Elsa liberates herself from her controlled, restrained persona of the "perfect girl" and metaphorically from the patriarchy itself. She is imperfect, she is strong, she is powerful, she is angry, and she is most importantly free to be herself.

The theme of freedom to be one's authentic self has resonated strongly with queer audiences since *Frozen*'s release.[294] Some say the "absence [of a hetero-marriage] is

[292] England et al., "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princess," 559-60.
[293] This happens during "For the First Time in Forever (Reprise)," when Anna ventures to Elsa's ice castle to try to convince her to come back to Arendelle.
[294] Huuki and Kyrölä, "Show Yourself," 171–85.
Elle Rose, "Elsa from Frozen is Aromantic and Asexual," *Medium* (Jul. 29, 2020).
Angelica Frey, "'Let it Go' and "Defying Gravity': Queer Anthems in Lockstep," *JSTOR Daily* (Jan. 26, 2025).

enough to queer Elsa,"[295] but even more so, the lyrics to "Let it Go" are outstandingly clear in their coming-out metaphors (see **Fig. 5.14**).

First, Elsa sings about how she is supposed to "conceal" who she really is, but she "couldn't keep it in," and "can't hold it back anymore." For anyone who's spent their entire life trying to pass as straight, this feeling is familiar. Queer advocate Elle Rose writes, "the parents decide that in order to protect Anna, they have to lie to not just her, but everyone, about who she [Elsa] is. This, to me, is a great metaphor for experiencing homophobia at the hands of your own family. [...] It's a very traumatic thing to be told over and over that who you are could harm other people by the very people who also tell you that they love you."[296] Additionally, when she sings "turn away and slam the door," it is almost as if Elsa is coming out of the closet. In a thesis all about Frozen's queer codes, Molly Farris identifies this door, her magical powers, her gloves, ice castle, and snow monster all as object metaphors for queerness.[297]

Taking the chorus and the next prechorus under a coming-out lens, then, Elsa "lets go" of the social pressures of heteronormativity in this song. She rejects the rights, wrongs, and rules of straight culture; and she exclaims in joy that she is free—queer euphoria at its finest. She also shouts "here I stand" and "here I stay," a familiar sentiment for those whose very existence is threatened: anecdotally, many of my friends have said something similar when they came out, like "here I am. I am ____, and no one can stop me from being myself!" And finally, Elsa sings "I'll rise like the break of dawn," emphasizing the theme of transformation also seen in her costume, hair, and makeup.

[295] Huuki and Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself,'" 172.
[296] Rose, "Elsa from Frozen."
[297] Farris, "A Queer Analysis of the Metaphors in Disney's *Frozen* Franchise," 35-42.

"Let it Go"

Verse
The snow glows white on the mountain tonight
Not a footprint to be seen
A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like
I'm the Queen
The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried

Prechorus
Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
Can't hold it back anymore!
Let it go! Let it go!
Turn away and slam the door!
I don't care what they're going to say!
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway

Verse-ish?
It's funny how some distance makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
can't get to me at all!

Prechorus
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
I'm one with the wind and sky
Let it go! Let it go!
You'll never see me cry
Here I stand, and here I stay!
Let the storm rage on

Bridge
My power flurries through the air into the ground
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around!
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast!
I'm never going back, the past is in the past!

Chorus
Let it go! Let it go!
And I'll rise like the break of dawn
Let it go! Let it go!
That perfect girl is gone!
Here I stand in the light of day!
Let the storm rage on!
The cold never bothered me anyway

Figure 5.14, "Let it Go," Coming Out, and Empowerment

For all of these reasons, and probably more, queer audiences see themselves in Elsa and as a result, "Let it Go" has become a queer anthem. Some say she is lesbian, while others argue she is asexual/aromantic.[298] Either way, the hetero-romance trope has been so normalized by decades of Disney Princesses that her lack of partner, male or female, *is* enough to queer Elsa.[299]

[298] Rose, "Elsa from Frozen."
[299] Huuki and Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself,'" 172.

Finally, film scholars Robynn Stilwell and Jennifer Fleeger both point to the last line of "Let it Go" as an abrupt, unresolved ending.[300] "The cold never bothered me anyway" lands on a chord that "gives unusual strength to the subdominant," Stilwell writes, and "subverts the usual strength of 'home." While Elsa's melody ends on the tonic, the accompaniment does not resolve IV-I, and "the chord that ought to have shifted with Elsa's exit lingers in the icy upper register of the strings," suggesting, as Fleeger says, that "her immunity to the elements [may be] indicative of a physical or psychic malady." Given the wide variety of possible interpretations of "Let it Go" as a queer anthem or, separately, as a song indicative of madness, something Fleeger goes into more deeply in her article, I hear this subdominant "home" as *queering* or *disabling* our expectations of tonal resolution. "Let it Go" is all about Elsa freeing herself from the oppressive constraints of patriarchy and its unfair standards for all of us.

Anna and Elsa are each a new type of princess in their tongue-in-cheek irony and queer witchy affirmation respectively. Although Anna on the surface is much like previous princesses, obsessed with romance and singing with that bright mix-belt, Disney subverts their own traditional narrative through humor and betrayal. And although Elsa is in many ways like the campy evil witches of Ursula's ilk,[301] too powerful and too strong, Disney presents her as the ultimate star of the show, and someone capable of love and being loved. The final "act of true love" in *Frozen* happens between the two sisters when Anna saves Elsa's life.

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[300] Stilwell, "Girls' Voices," 158.
Jennifer Fleeger, "Frozen and the Disney Princess Song," *OUP Blog,* Oxford University Press, Dec. 11, 2014, https://blog.oup.com/2014/12/frozen-disney-princess-song/.
[301] Duffy, "From the Evil Queen to Elsa."

CASE STUDY: Vocal Femininity and Indigeneity in *Moana* (2016)

"Tulou Tagaloa" and "Vuelie": Indigenous perspectives

Both films begin and end with music written in part by Indigenous composers Frode Fjellheim (South Sámi) and Opetaia Foa'i (Tokelau, Tuvalu). I could write an entire chapter on Disney's relationship with the Sámi people of northern Scandinavia, represented in *Frozen,* and the Polynesian people represented in *Moana.* Broadly speaking, though, scholars tend to agree that Disney failed to responsibly portray Sámi cultural materials in *Frozen* (2013); that Disney showed better effort by consulting with the Oceanic Trust in *Moana* (2016), but still fell short; and that Disney significantly improved with the help of the Verddet working group for *Frozen II* (2019).[302] Despite increased visibility for the Indigenous groups in question and better diversity within their princess brand, the distribution of power meant that Disney, a U.S.-American corporation, was still taking Indigenous cultural materials for its own capitalist benefit.[303]

Musicologist Robin Armstrong argues that, despite consulting with Foa'i and the Oceanic Trust, Disney still "carefully controls the musical image of Polynesia that it markets to the world. Through this control, it appropriates and colonizes the music of Polynesia [in *Moana*]."[304] With regard to "Tulou Tagaloa," the introductory song written by Opetaia Foa'i and sung by his daughter Olivia Foa'i, Armstrong points out how

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[302] Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music," 3.
Huuki and Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself.'"
Ka'ili, "Goddess Hina."
Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes, "Into the unknown [Amas Mu Vuordá]?," 17-35.
Sonoda-Pale, "Disney's Commodification of Hawaiians."
Yiin, "Is Disney's Portrayal of Maui Culturally Insensitive?"
[303] Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana," 230.
Yoshinaga, "Disney's Moana," 188-215.
[304] Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music," 2.

Polynesian sounds are framed and accompanied by Western sounds, therefore Othering them. In particular, she notes that the long-held notes in the cellos and basses are more Hollywood than Polynesian, and when "their note dips down briefly [*to sol*] and returns to the original note [*do*]," they conform to Eurocentric music formulas. "At the end of the opening song, [...] the audience is literally hearing Polynesian voices becoming westernized," she says, and this westernization is a common theme throughout the *Moana* soundtrack.[305]

Without disregarding Armstrong's criticism, I'd like to offer a few brief comments on Olivia Foa'i's voice in "Tulou Tagaloa." It is important, I think, that the first thing we hear, in the first five seconds of the film, is a woman's voice. And that woman is Olivia Foa'i, an Indigenous singer, singing Samoan lyrics that her father wrote for her. She is joined by a choir of many voices, treble and bass. Like "Belle," from *Beauty and the Beast,* Moana is shown to be an integral part of her community right from the first song. And Olivia's voice stands out above all the rest.

Opetaia writes on his website that in this piece, the ocean is speaking to Moana.[306] I originally interpreted Olivia's initial exclamation to be in Moana's voice, and perhaps this can still be a valid hearing; however, based on Opetaia's description, I think it is more likely that ocean is calling out to Moana—her call to action, as it were. In either case, this mysterious female call is bright, starting with no vibrato, and somewhat strained as if shouting over a great distance. Additionally, each word, "Tulou, Tulou, Tagaloa," ends with a vocal break and an upward swoop, somewhat like the "cooee" calls

[305] Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music," 4-5.
[306] Foa'i, "Disney's Moana - A beyond-the-Soundtrack EXCLUSIVE," accessed Feb. 11, 2026, https://www.opetaiafoai.com/moana.html.

still used today in Australia and New Zealand (from the Aboriginal *guwi*).[307] With a vocal quality so unlike what we have heard before from Disney's leading women—bright, strained, not breathy, and with an intentional lack of vibrato—Olivia's call signals to the audience something new and different. We are not in Europe anymore; in particular, we are somewhere so remote that the characters must shout from afar to communicate; and, at least in my first impression, her prominence suggests that one or more women will be leading voices in this movie. Certainly Moana, her Gramma Tala, and the gendered-female Ocean are all foregrounded.)

In fact, I'd like to push back against Armstrong's emphasis on the westernizing bass notes in the strings. Olivia's call is so prominent that I hardly attend to the bass at all. Near the end, I also had to listen multiple times to perceive the sol-do motion she points to in those basses. This is not to say that all of her other arguments are untrue; however, by focusing on how the western "frames" the Polynesian, I believe her analysis privileges instrumental sounds and leaves out the powerful impact of a single woman's voice.[308]

Interestingly, there is less pushback regarding "Vuelie" from *Frozen,* although the film was subject to more criticism from indigenous perspectives overall. For example, Tuija Huuki & Kata Kyrölä and other media scholars criticize Disney for its "non-Indigenous filmmakers yet again appropriating, twisting, and profiting [from] Indigenous culture."[309] They argue that Disney "mixed and matched" elements of Sámi

[307] "cooee," In *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary*, ed. Tony Deverson and Graeme Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 2005).
[308] In doing so, her analysis of "Tulou" privileges the structural (bass, harmony) over the surface (voice, melody). For an interesting discussion of how structural analysis is often hierarchical and coded-masculine, while the foreground is coded-feminine and swept over, see Jeffrey Swinkin, "5. Musical Structure as Subtext," in *Performative Analysis: Reimagining Music Theory for Performance* (University of Rochester Press, 2016), 167-218.
[309] Quoted from Huuki and Kyrölä, "'Show Yourself,'" 173. See also Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes, "Into the unknown," and Yoshinaga, "Disney's Moana."

culture[310] and whitewashed[311] them—for example, Anna's friend Kristoff wears traditional Sámi reindeer-herding garb but is very blond and blue-eyed. These scholars do mention the traditional Sámi style of singing, *yoik*, which occurs in "Vuelie," as one of the "mixed and matched" elements, but otherwise no specific criticism of the music is made.

Interestingly, Sámi composer Frode Fjellheim reported feeling quite happy with his collaboration with Disney's in-house composer Christopher Beck on the production of "Vuelie."[312] It was also Fjellheim's own idea to bring together the traditional Sámi style of singing—the "deep 'chant-like' yoik"—and a Danish hymn tune—*Deilig er jorden*. Although he says that Disney asked him to remove the hymn tune, anyone familiar with the English-language version "Beautiful Savior" can still hear a great resemblance in the final version of "Vuelie."

Along the same vein as Robin Armstrong's criticism of *Moana's* opening, I could argue that the Danish hymn tune "westernizes" the Sámi yoik element. Certainly Norway has a history of erasing and forcing assimilation on its Indigenous peoples, just as we have in North America.[313] In addition, Christopher Beck and Frode Fjellheim working together on this piece could either be seen as an extractive labor practice OR a respectful cultural exchange. Without specific criticisms of the music from Sámi voices, or videographic evidence of how Beck and Fjellheim collaborated, I cannot say where exactly this song falls on that spectrum. Fjellheim even tactfully avoids saying whether Disney's music to *Frozen* was "authentic" or not. (Plus, it must be said that *of course* Fjellheim would speak positively about Disney to the public, as he was the one getting

[310] Huuki and Kyröla, "Show Yourself," 173.
[311] Radheyan Simonpillai, "Disney signed a contract with Indigenous people before making Frozen II," *Now Toronto,* Nov. 19, 2019, https://nowtoronto.com/movies/disney-frozen-2-indigenous-culture-sami/.
[312] Fjellheim, "Composer Frode Fjellheim on Frozen 's native spirit."
[313] Simonpillai, "Disney signed a contract with Indigenous people before making Frozen II."

paid by Disney and perhaps even signed an NDA. Opetaia Foa'i was even more effusive in his praise of Disney with *Moana*'s premiere.[314]) All I can conclude, from the limited evidence I have, is that there is a pattern here of Disney using Indigenous-*influenced* music to open a movie and transport us into that time and place, and that they do so by consulting with musicians from that Indigenous group. Whether that is "authentic" or not is not mine to say, but I think in any interpretation, Disney is still the one benefiting most from *Frozen* and *Moana.*

Like "Tulou Tagaloa," the first sound we hear in "Vuelie" is a woman's voice. In fact, the song is sung by *Cantus*, an all-women choir based in Trondheim, Norway. Yet again, this placement foregrounds women's voices, and it is women that are the focus of its film. Let us return to the main-character women who sing, and in particular, Auli'i Cravalho.

Auli'i Cravalho and "How Far I'll Go"

Moana was Disney's first Pacific Islander princess, and her voice actor Auli'i Cravalho was the first of Native Hawaiian descent.[315] She also, like Elsa, needs no love interest, and she goes on a hero's quest for herself and her community. What's more, she also has magical powers in her relationship to the ocean, like Elsa's ice magic and Rapunzel's healing magic. Moana takes on the traditionally male vocation of wayfinding, and when she returns home successfully, she becomes chief (with no need nor mention of marriage as a prerequisite). As mentioned prior, Disney consulted with the Oceanic Trust for their portrayal of Polynesian culture, a step above what they did in Frozen, though

[314] Foa'i, "Opetaia Foa'i Interview Moana Premiere."
[315] Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "The Next Disney Princess is Native Hawaiian Auli'i Cravalho," *NBC News,* Oct 7, 2015, www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/next-disney-princess-native-hawaiian-aulii-cravalho.

their portrayal of Maui in particular was still met with criticism.[316] And, uniquely, Auli'i Cravalho is the first princess voice actor to be actually a teenager: she was 14 at the time of her casting and 16 at *Moana's* release.

Vocally, Cravalho's tone quality is perhaps most like Anna's from *Frozen*: she belts often, but relatively lightly. Although she is a younger singer, she doesn't sound overly infantilized, like Moore's Rapunzel or Benson's Ariel. As a result, her Little-Girl Voice is not near as extreme as her predecessors', even though she is authentically 14-15 years old. In fact, I think it's safe to assume Cravalho worked less hard to sound young than her previous counterparts.[317]

What we do hear in *Moana*, though, is the growing up of a young woman as she finds herself and her voice. Like Rapunzel, we see scenes from Moana's childhood in the first 10 minutes of the film, followed by her leaving home on a coming-of-age adventure. And also like Rapunzel and Elsa, her voice moves from breathy to belty timbres across a song and across the soundtrack, vocalizing her transition from uncertain child to confident leader. For example, in Elsa's "Let it Go," Idina Menzel used a breathy Mutter in the first verse, transitioning to Modal Voice and then Belt in the prechorus, and, of course, each chorus was more powerful than the last. In "How Far I'll Go," Auli'i Cravalho also begins with a breathy voice—this time Little-Girl Voice—and transitions to Modal Voice in the prechorus, followed by increasingly strong belted choruses. Despite their own unique voices, both songs follow similar trajectories vocally and energetically. In the following analyses of Moana's "How Far I'll Go" and its reprises, I will show how her

[316] See Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana;" Armstrong, "Time to Face the Music;" Ka'ili, "Goddess Hina;" Sonoda-Pale, "Disney's Commodification of Hawaiians;" Yiin, "Is Disney's Portrayal of Maui Culturally Insensitive?;" and Yoshinaga, "Disney's Moana."
[317] Mandy Moore was 25, Jodi Benson 28, Kristen Bell 33, and Idina Menzel 42 at the time of their movies' release dates, for example.

vocal timbre (**Fig. 5.15**) works together with harmony and form to reinforce Moana's growth over the course of the movie.

Vocal style	Chest or head voice	Breathy, neutral, or tense* phonation	Twang (constricted) or open vocal tract	Pitch range
Mutter	Chest	Breathy	Twang	Low/Mid
Soft Voice	Chest/mix	Breathy	Open	Mid
Modal	Chest/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid
Belt	Chest/mix	Neutral*	Twang	High
Little Girl Voice	Mix	Breathy	Twang	Mid
"Legit"	Head/mix	Neutral	Twang	Mid/High
Whisper	Head	Breathy	Twang	High

Figure 5.16, Moana's Vocal Palette

When compared to her immediate predecessors (Elsa, Anna, and Rapunzel), Moana's vocal shifts are generally subtler. Though she moves from breathy to belty timbres, sometimes weaker and sometimes stronger, she is neither as heavy and pressed as Elsa's belt, nor as cutesy and twangy as Anna or Rapunzel's Little-Girl Voice. She does switch between chest, mixed, and head voice, and uses some breathier tones at times. If anything, her Belt is most like Anna's: strong and confident, but light and always a bit contained within the realm of pretty singing. Of course, we have to remember that Cravalho is uniquely young, at 14-15 years old, and so she should not be expected to belt like Idina Menzel. Her voice is simply not matured fully yet. Although her timbral bandwidth is narrower than her contemporaries, subtle changes in vocal quality are no less meaningful.

"How Far I'll Go," first cycle

Verse
I've been staring at the edge of the water
Long as I can remember
Never really knowing why
I wish I could be the perfect daughter
But I come back to the water
No matter how hard I try

Prechorus
Every turn I take, every trail I track
Every path I make, every road leads back
To the place I know where I cannot go
Where I long to be

Chorus
See the line where the sky meets the sea
It calls me
And no one knows
How far it goes
If the wind in my sail on the sea
Stays behind me
One day, I'll know
If I go, there's just no telling how far I'll go

Moana's Voices:
Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 5.17, "How Far I'll Go," First Cycle, Lyrics Chart

As we've seen before, Moana's vocal quality moves from breathy to belty over the course of "How Far I'll Go," her "I Want" song (**Fig. 5.17**). Accompanied only by sparse guitar strums, she sings quietly, breathily, with some twang, in the middle of her range for the first verse. Her Little-Girl Voice gradually shifts to Modal Voice during the prechorus. Even though these first two sections are pitch-wise very similar (see below, in **figure 5.18**), her vocal quality is quite different, becoming less breathy and more fully in chest voice. This shows that timbral shifts are not just a function of range; rather, a singer can approach the same pitch in many different ways. Between B3 and G♯4, Moana sounds at first breathy and uncertain, twangy and girly; and she gains confidence on those same pitches, transitioning to Modal Voice in the prechorus and then Belt in the chorus, as the form develops.
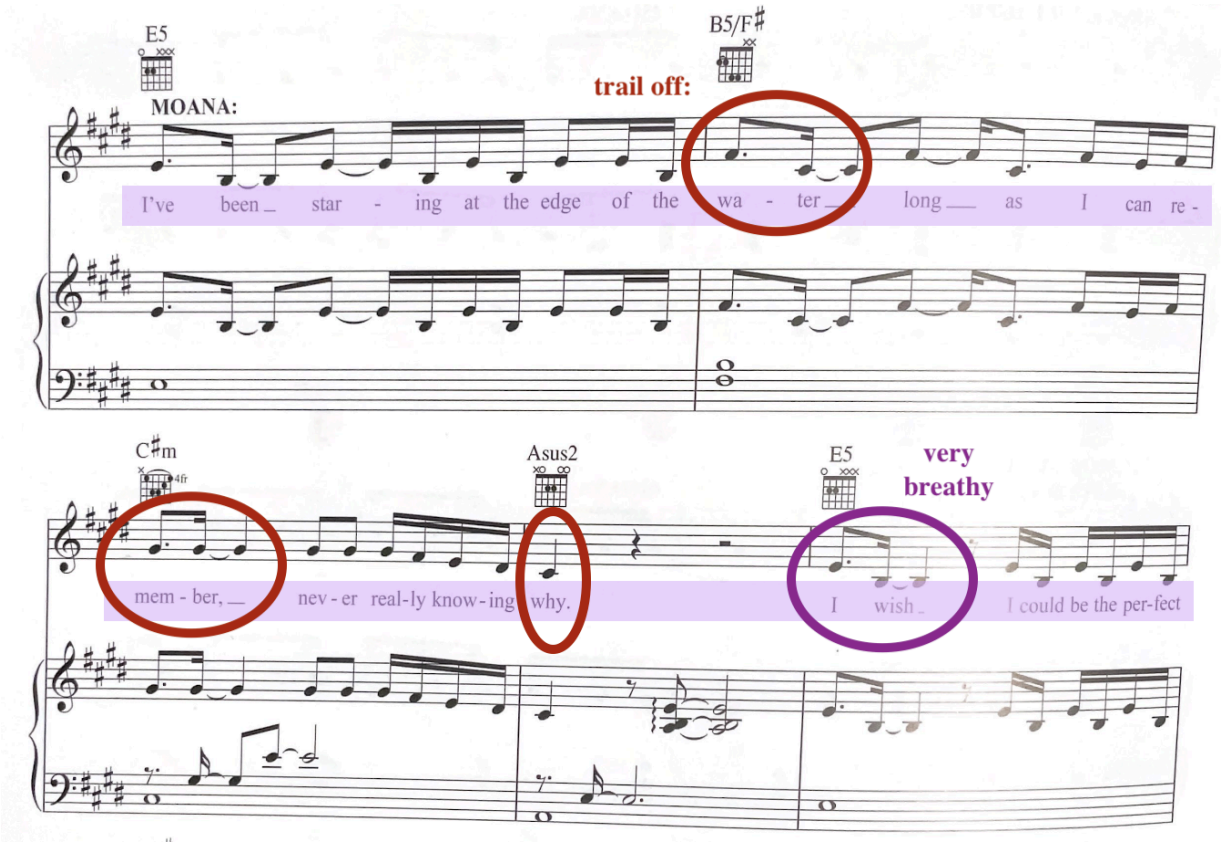


Figure 5.18, "How Far I'll Go," Piano/Vocal Score, Verse 1

For example, at the ends of longer held-out words like "water," "remember," and "why," Moana trails off gently into a more breathy sound (see **Fig. 5.18**). In addition, the word "I wish" is particularly breathy, almost as if she adds an aspirated [h] at its onset, and her vocal folds are barely vibrating. By highlighting this single word, through an exaggerated timbral quality—it is much more breathy than any of its neighbors—Moana emphasizes the wishing nature of this song. Like the other princesses' "I Want" songs, she is dreaming of a better future for herself while still sincerely wishing that she can be a "perfect daughter." This wording also resonates with two specific earlier "I Want" songs: Mulan's and Elsa's. Mulan, Elsa, and Moana all share a sadness for the "perfect

daughter" they cannot be, but they all leave that pressure behind as they go on their journey to find themselves and save their people.

When comparing the two prechoruses (see **Figs. 5.19** and **5.20**), all but the last line are the same in melody, harmony, and accompaniment. Moana is a little stronger in the second prechorus, moving to Modal Voice sooner and leaving behind Little-Girl Voice for the rest of the song. In addition, the line, "Where I long to be/What is wrong with me?" is set higher and more dissonantly, emphasizing the G4 over the A minor chord. Moana belts up to the C5 on "what is wrong with me?," increasing in energy where in the first prechorus, the melody moved downwards and she lost energy, returning to Little-Girl Voice. In fact, the accompaniment also furthers this upwards and onwards trend, with ascending arpeggios, a sweeping crescendo in the strings, and some percussion instrument lending four eighth notes in preparation for the chorus. All elements point towards more certainty and self-determination in the second prechorus, while the first prechorus had none.

Prechorus 1
Every turn I take, every trail I track
Every path I make, every road leads back
To the place I know where I cannot go
Where I long to be

Prechorus 2
I can lead with pride, I can make us strong
I'll be satisfied if I play along
But the voice inside sings a different song
What is wrong with me?

Key: Little-Girl Voice Modal Belt

Figure 5.19, "How Far I'll Go," Comparing the Prechoruses (Lyrics)
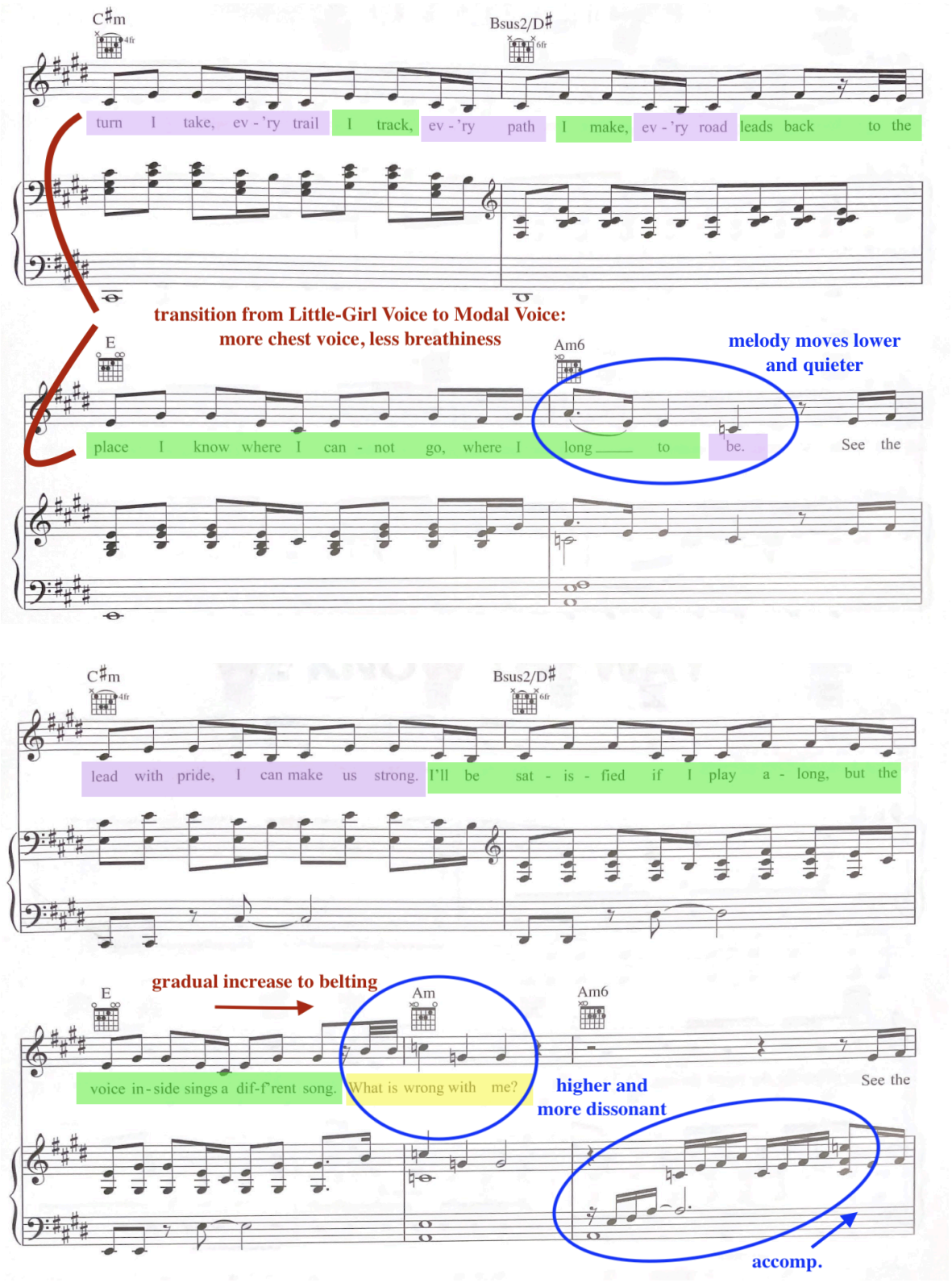


Figure 5.20, "How Far I'll Go," Comparing the Prechoruses (Score)

Moana performs the choruses almost entirely in Belt, bringing her chest voice up a bit higher in her range. Like the prechoruses, each chorus additionally ramps up in excitement. In the first chorus, she has moments of breathiness, and therefore uncertainty. In the second chorus, she loses this breathiness and sings in Belt throughout. And in the final chorus, which moves up a half step from E to F Major, she sings even stronger than before, finishing with the strongest note of the song, her most belty C for the last "how far I'll goooooo." See **Figure 5.21** to compare her vocality in these three choruses:

"How Far I'll Go," second cycle

Chorus 1 (in E)	**Chorus 2 (in E)**	**Chorus 3 (in F)** **+key change!**
See the line where the sky	See the light as it shines on	The line where the sky
meets the sea	the sea	meets the sea
It calls me	It's blinding	It calls me
And no one knows	But no one knows	And no one knows
How far it goes	How deep it goes	How far it goes
If the wind in my sail	And it seems like it's calling	If the wind in my sail
on the sea	out to me	on the sea
Stays behind me	So come find me	Stays behind me
One day, I'll know	And let me know	One day, I'll know
If I go, there's just no telling	What's beyond that line?	How far I'll go
how far I'll go	Will I cross that line?	

Moana's Voices: Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid),
Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 5.21, "How Far I'll Go," Comparing Choruses (Lyrics Chart)

Like Elsa and Anna's songs in *Frozen*, Moana's songs use the same formal sections found in popular music.[318] Her verses communicate the most information through her story-telling lyrics: the ocean calls to her and she longs to venture out away from home,

[318] See Temperley, "Form," 150-82; and Nobile, "Verse–Prechorus–Chorus," 199-234.

even though she has a role to play at home (chief's daughter). The prechoruses start off-tonic (vi) and finish on a highly chromatic ($ii^{ø6}{}_5$ or iv^7) chord, prolonging anticipation and tension when she sings about not knowing which path to take. She even asks, "what is wrong with me?" in the second cycle, on a strikingly dissonant pitch, because she doesn't fit in with that role of perfect daughter.[319] And, finally, the choruses use the Axis progression (I V vi IV) as a chord loop, simply transposed a half step up for the final chorus. All of these vocal and formal elements push us towards the last chorus, and especially the last line. She even delays the title lyric to a quiet afterthought in the first chorus, making it that much more emphatic in the final one.

The Reprise

In the first reprise of "How Far I'll Go," Moana repeats the chorus, the prechorus, and the chorus again from the original (see **Fig. 5.22**). Some notable differences include frequent and surprising modulations, playing on that familiar stepwise keychange motion; the lack of verses, of course, giving it a simple ABA form in its own bubble; and small changes to the text revealing that she has now made her decision. Instead of looking out at the ocean with longing as in the original "How Far I'll Go," in this scene, Moana packs her bags, finds her grandmother's boat, and sets sail away from home.

[319] Sound familiar? See Mulan's "Reflection."

“How Far I’ll Go - Reprise”

Chorus (in E) +key change!
There's a line where the sky meets the sea
And it calls me
But no one knows
How far it goes

All the time wondering where I need to be
Is behind me
I'm on my own
To worlds unknown

Prechorus (in D♯m) +key change!
Every turn I take, every trail I track
Is a choice I make, now I can't turn back
From the great unknown where I go alone
Where I long to be

Chorus (in F) +key change!
See her lie with the night in the sea
She calls me
And yes I know that I can go
There's a moon in the sky and the wind is behind me
Soon I'll know how far I'll go

Moana’s Voices: Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid),
Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid)

Figure 5.22, “How Far I’ll Go - Reprise,” Color-Coded Lyrics

The reprise goes through four wildly different tonalities in just 90 seconds. The orchestra begins in E♭ major, stepping up into E major in a direct modulation when Moana comes in with the chorus. Then, the prechorus moves to D♯ *minor*, another direct modulation, this time downwards. At the local level, too, the two chords in question are a tritone away, A major and D♯ minor, suggesting great distance. (In the original song’s prechorus, the tonal center moved from E major to C♯ minor, simply going to the relative minor rather than an entirely new key area.) See **Figure 5.23** to compare the harmonic shifts in the original “How Far I’ll Go” prechorus and its Reprise.

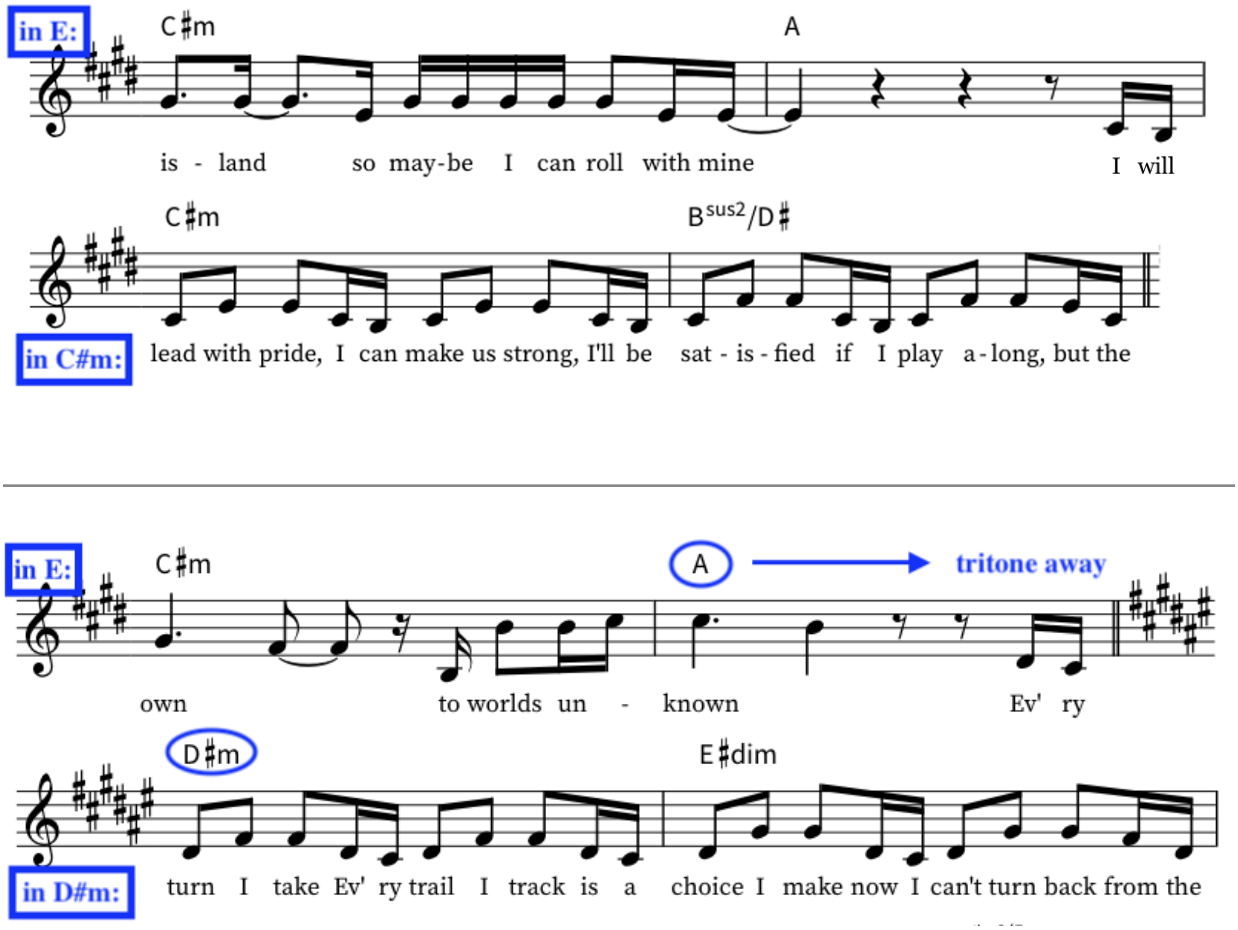


Figure 5.23, Comparing Prechoruses, "How Far I'll Go" (top) and its "Reprise" (bottom)

Finally, at the end of the prechorus (**Fig. 5.24**), the music halts on that very dissonant chord again, in this case a G♯half-diminished $^{4}_{2}$ chord, before doing another surprising modulation to F major. Once again, to move between D♯m and F major could only require a stepwise motion up a step, or they could have used a pivot chord. However, this G♯ half-diminished seventh chord shares no pitches in common with the upcoming F major pitch collection, nor does it function as some sort of secondary diminished, resolving to an A major or A minor chord. Instead, Moana's voice comes in with no preparation, in F major, and the harmonies are quick to follow.
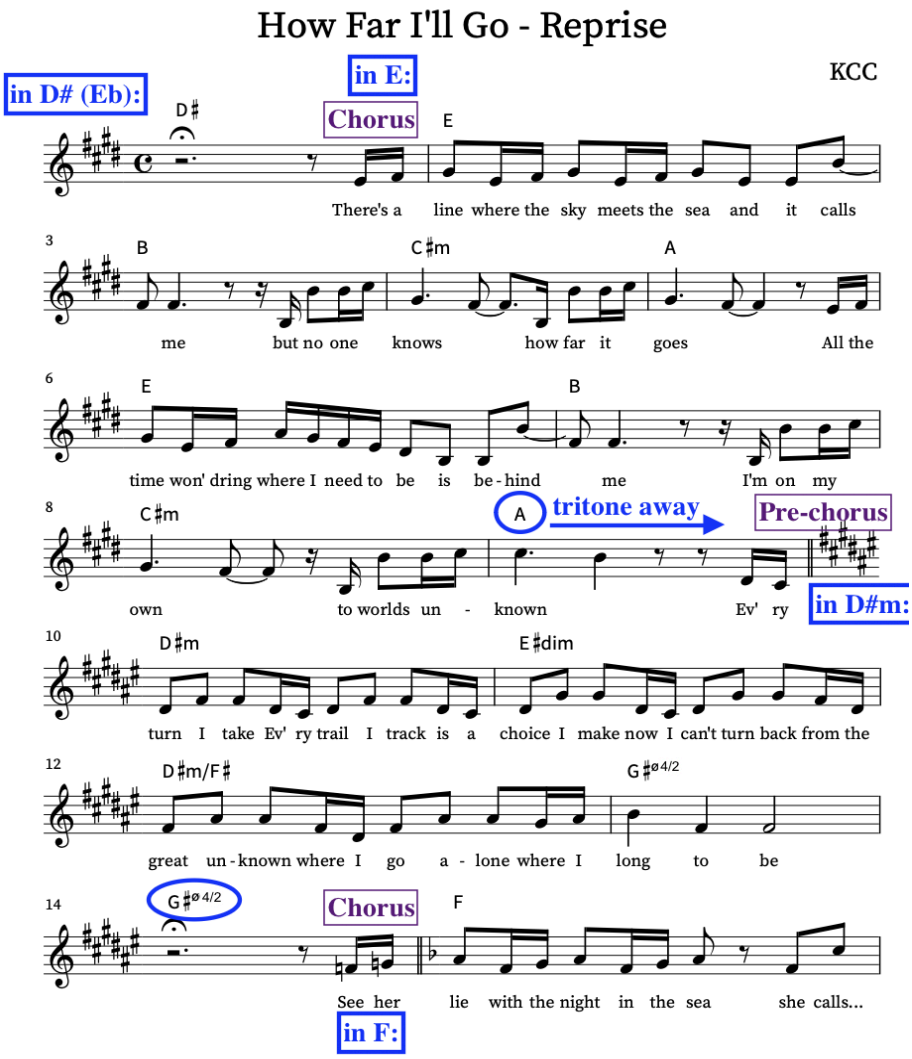


Figure 5.24, "How Far I'll Go - Reprise," [0:00-0:58]

Such surprising, distant, immediate modulations add to the dramatic tension of this song. Not only do we get that increase of energy into the final chorus, like we did in the original "How Far I'll Go" (modulating from E to F), but we also go through a bit of a tonal wormhole beforehand. From E ♭ major to E major to D♯ minor to F major, we experience flat and sharp keys, major and minor keys, tritone relationships, and stepwise modulations. We never know where we are going next; in E ♭ major, Moana

decides to take again and runs away from her village; in E major, she packs her supplies; and in D♯ minor, she prepares the boat for travel (**Fig. 5.25**). This prechorus feel especially unstable due to the unexpected key change and the brassy bass note ascending from D♯ to E♯ to F♯. Finally, with the return of F major, as it was in the original "How Far I'll Go," Moana casts off and leaves the island, alone in her grandmother's boat but accompanied by her grandmother's spirit, the shining ray beneath her sails. Once again, everything is pushing towards that final chorus, intensifying the feeling of instability as Moana makes this huge decision, and emphasizing the feeling of "home" when she ends up in F major and sets sail.



Figure 5.25, Moana Runs, Packs her Supplies, Prepares the Boat, and then Casts Off in "How Far I'll Go - Reprise"

In terms of the reprise's lyrics, this time, she sings that she is on her own, that she is alone, and she is going "to worlds unknown." (Like Rapunzel and Elsa, she has no idea what is out there, and shows a great deal of bravery venturing "into the unknown," a foreshadowing to *Frozen II*.) She has made her choice, and she can't turn back. Though her grandmother is not physically with her, Moana can see her spirit in the magical manta ray that follows her into the ocean, a reference to *taotao mo'na,* or the ancestral

spirits of the Chamorro people.[320] And finally, it's *soon* that she'll know how far she'll go. Though the sounds we hear are largely a repetition of the first, these lyrical changes suggest a turning point. Moana's grandmother has given her the call to action, and now she must act.

If we are tracking how much Moana belts as a reflection of her strength, in this Reprise, there is hardly a moment where she does *not* belt. Unlike the original "How Far I'll Go," which included verses sung in Little-Girl Voice and prechoruses transitioning from Little-Girl Voice to Modal Voice to Belt, the Reprise only features two choruses and one prechorus. She begins immediately in full chest voice, belting in the first chorus. Then she retreats a bit in the prechorus with Modal Voice, in her lower range centered around C♯4, before going back up (literally and qualitatively). And, of course, the last chorus is sung fully in belt. What is more, she belts even a bit more strongly than we heard in "How Far I'll Go" at the end of each chorus. In the original, the pitch moved down at the end of the first and second choruses, and as a result, the energy was held back in anticipation. In this reprise, on the line, "to worlds unknown," Cravalho adds an upper neighbor to belt up to a C♯5. This increases her vocal and physical energy, as it takes strength to belt that high. And at the very end, although the pitches are the same, I hear a bit stronger of a belt as well, due to stronger glottal attacks on "I'll" and "go."

In sum, the second iteration of "How Far I'll Go" is shorter but stronger, depicting Moana's newfound confidence as she sets sail into the unknown. It moves through increasingly tense tonal areas before reaching the familiar F major of the final chorus. In

[320] "Guam Legends," *Guam Visitors Bureau*, accessed Oct. 26, 2025, https://www.visitguam.com/chamorro-culture/history/legends/.

this song, harmony, lyrics, and timbre all work together to communicate Moana's complex feelings and intense decision at this turning point in her life.

"I Am Moana"

After some adventuring, Moana experiences her darkest moment when her friend Maui abandons her. She gives up, stops sailing, and asks the sea to choose someone else. But her ancestor, Gramma Tala, visits her as a spirit and comforts her. After these affirmations—Tala's verses—Moana gradually becomes more and more self-assured. She sings a new song (which transitions back into the chorus of "How Far I'll Go") and declares her own identity, confident in who she is for the first time. Notably, it is once again her grandmother who convinces Moana of her self-worth and calls her to action. Not only does *Moana* have a female heroine, but she has a strong role model whom she highly respects in Gramma Tala.

Moana's first two stanzas in "I am Moana" are sung in a new voice for her: Mutter, a soft, breathy, twang-y chest voice low in her range. (For a lyrics-and-timbre chart, see **Fig. 5.26)**. She even sings down to an F♯3 on "voyagers," approaching the kind of range that Idina Menzel has even though Cravalho was only 14 or 15 at the time (for the score image, see **Fig. 5.27**). This section is also in F♯ minor, a completely new key for her. Although the first iteration of "How Far I'll Go" did begin with quieter and lower verses before moving up to the choruses, "I am Moana" features a much greater overall crescendo. This is the first time Moana has sung so low, so quietly, or so sadly.

"I Am Moana"

[grandmother]
I know a girl from an island
She stands apart from the crowd
She loves the sea and her people
She makes her whole family proud
Sometimes the world seems against you
The journey may leave a scar
But scars can heal and reveal just
Where you are

The people you love will change you
The things you have learned will guide you
And nothing on Earth can silence
The quiet voice still inside you
And when that voice starts to whisper
"Moana, you've come so far
Moana, listen
Do you know who you are?"

[Moana] **Verse (in F♯m)**
Who am I? [spoken]
I am the girl who loves my island
I'm the girl who loves the sea
It calls me

I am the daughter of the village chief
We are descended from voyagers
Who found their way across the world
They call me

Prechorus (in G)
I've delivered us to where we are
I have journeyed farther
I am everything I've learned and more
Still, it calls me

Chorus (in F)
And the call isn't out there at all
It's inside me
It's like the tide, always falling and rising
I will carry you here in my heart
You'll remind me
Come what may, I know the way
I am Moana!

Moana's Voices:
Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix), Little-Girl Voice (mix, breathy, twang, mid), Modal (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), Belt (chest/mix, neutral, twang, high), Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)

Figure 5.26, "I am Moana" Lyrics Chart

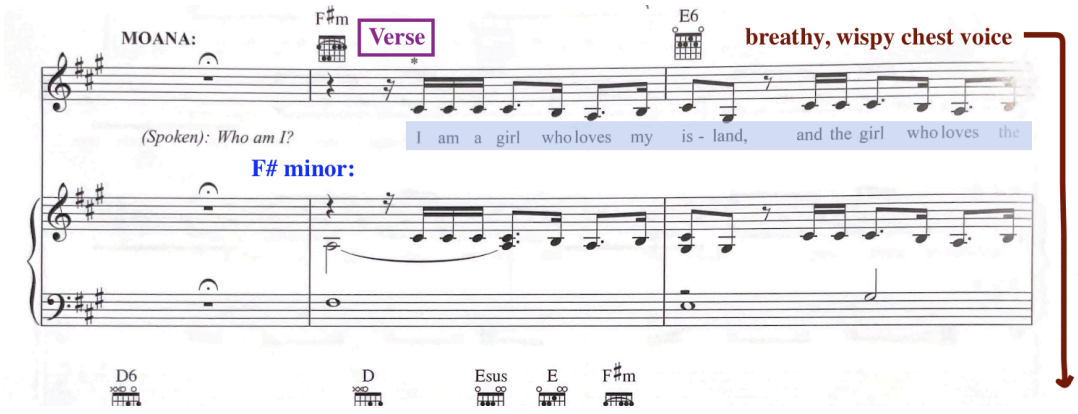


Figure 5.27a, "I am Moana," Beginning of her Verse

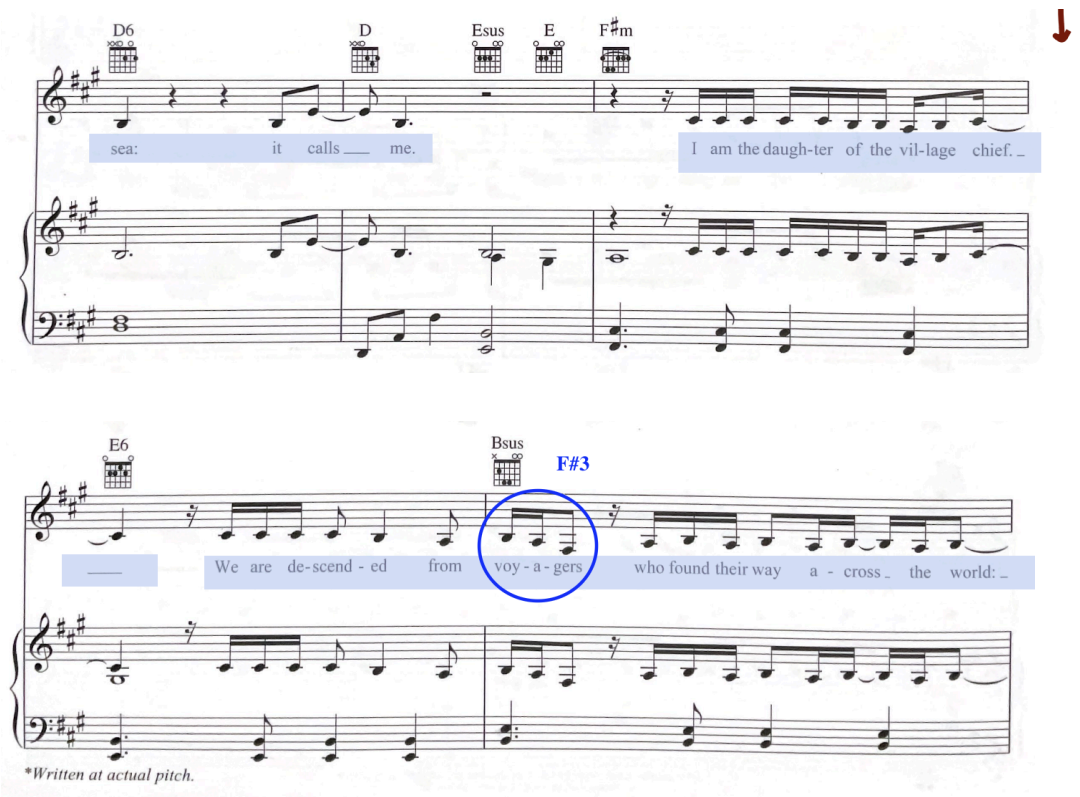


Figure 5.27b, "I am Moana," Beginning of her Verse

Suddenly, by way of a stepwise ascending modulation from a B major to a C major chord, her third stanza (the prechorus, see **Fig. 5.28**) moves up to another new key, and a major one at that: G major! In addition, now that she is approximately a fifth higher (C4-G4), Cravalho's vocal quality is much more in modal voice, still chest-dominant, but without the breathiness and wispiness of her lower F♯3-C♯4. Notice also how she has left that Little-Girl Voice behind in the first iteration: there is no purple to be seen in the reprise nor "I am Moana." Moana, then, is no longer a little girl.

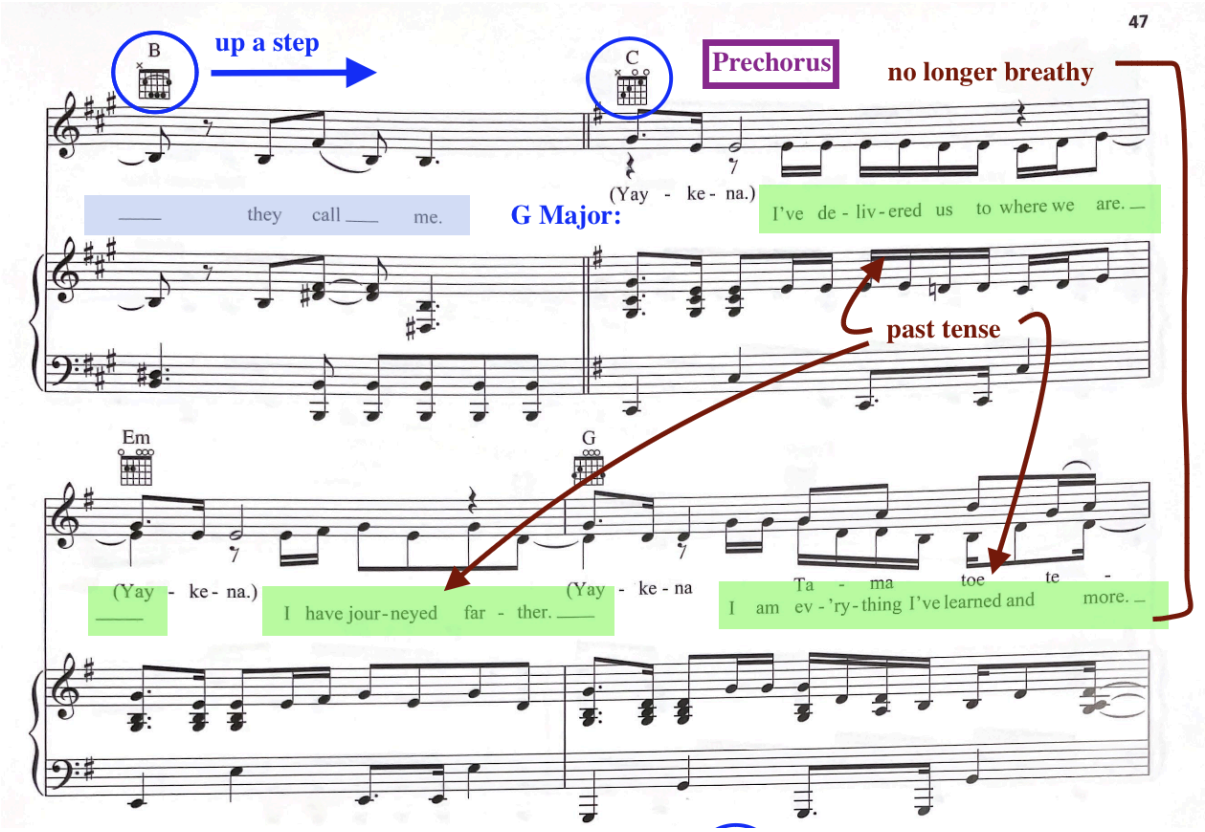


Figure 5.28, "I am Moana," Prechorus

She also switches to past tense to describe her own actions here: she has delivered us and she has journeyed farther. No longer is she speaking in future tense of what she will do and how far she will go, but she is describing who she *is* in the present, and what she has done already. These verbs strike me as very affirmatory: she declares "I am" and "I have," confident in her identity and her accomplishments.

Additionally, Moana has one final modulation before the familiar chorus returns (**Fig. 5.29**). She moves from the dark, low-in-her-range F♯ minor to the bright, comfortable G major via stepwise motion (B→C), and then through a very different type of modulation to the familiar, triumphant F major. Instead of setting up F major with its dominant (a C major chord), using a pivot chord, or moving directly up a step like we

have seen so many times with Disney and other musical theater songs, it is approached by a chromatic mediant, D major. There are many easier ways to get from G to F, but instead, the section ends on a D chord, leading us to expect a resolution to G... but then D leaps up to F by third! Moving from G to F is itself not remarkable, but we get there via a twisty-turny modulation, making it seem as though the distance is much farther and the end result is never certain.

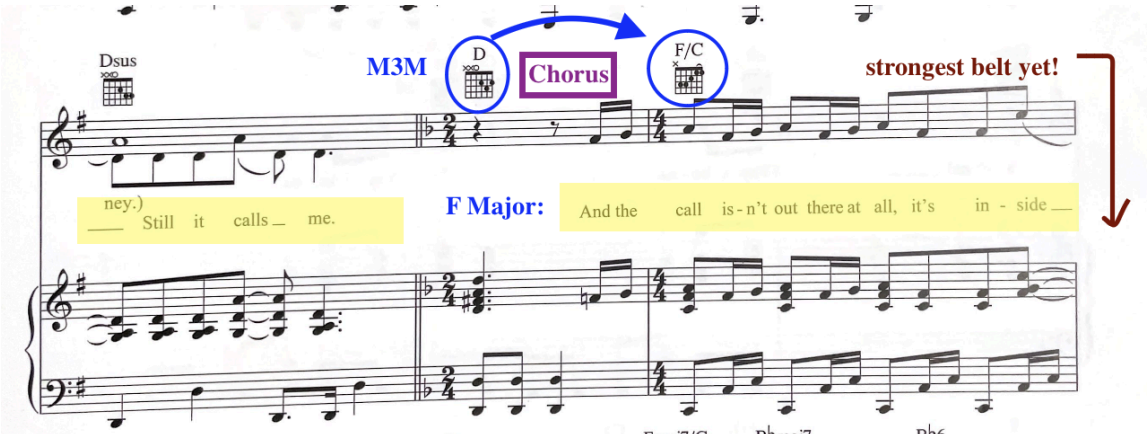


Figure 5.29, "I am Moana," Modulation from Prechorus to Chorus

In **Figure 5.30,** see how F Major is approached by a chromatic mediant, a common film music (*not* popular music) move:

I've delivered us to where we are	I have journeyed farther	I am everything I've learned and more
C	Em	G
Still, it calls me	[hold]	[arrival]
Dsus4	D	F

Figure 5.30, Chromatic Mediant Modulation in "I am Moana"

Scott Murphy would call this an M3M move from D to F, since both chords are major, and their roots are three semitones apart. He identifies the M3M as little-used, but

recognizable from Howard Shore's "Fellowship" theme. Without greater documentation of M3Ms in film music, I cannot say what associations this modulation might have more broadly, however I think it certainly "suits a blockbuster movie" as Murphy puts it.[321] If anything, it may evoke heroic and epic qualities like the "Fellowship" theme. The distance between the two keys (not just a third-relationship, but a chromatic one), the blockbuster-heroic quality, as well as the sudden return of the "How Far I'll Go" chorus makes this modulation an important turning point. Here, Moana decides to keep going. She knows who she is, and she is strong!

Finally, in the chorus (**Fig. 5.31)**, Cravalho sings in her strongest belt yet, even though these are more or less the same notes as we've heard before in her F Major choruses. She also belts up to a structural D5 on the final note of "I am Moana!" Though C♯5 was an upper neighbor tone in an earlier iteration, this D5 is higher, held out for longer, and it is even beltier. It sounds slightly strained, so we can hear the physical effort Cravalho is putting into the vocal climax. This strain is perhaps more audible due to her lack of vibrato, but on the other hand, that very same lack of vibrato reminds me of Olivia Foa'i's initial cries in "Tulou Tagaloa" at the very beginning of the film. Fittingly, Moana realizes here that the call is coming from inside of her, and so she calls across the ocean, "I am Moana!" The camera zooms out; we can see that familiar "megaphone mouth configuration"[322] in the animation; and she is surrounded by her ancestors in this important moment. She claims her name, discovers herself, and is affirmed by their presence.

[321] Murphy, "Transformational Theory and the Analysis of Film Music," 486.
[322] Titze et al., "Source-Vocal Tract Interaction," 561-72.

Chorus (in F)
And the call isn't out there at all / It's inside me
It's like the tide, always falling and rising
I will carry you here in my heart / You'll remind me
Come what may, I know the way / I am Moana!



Figure 5.31, Chorus Lyrics, and Moana Singing "I am Moana" as the Camera Zooms Out

Overall, "I am Moana" has a much stronger melodic, timbral, harmonic, and lyrical trajectory than either of its precursors. Cravalho moves from the lowest part of her range, F♯3, to the top of her belting range, D5. She also moves from breathy to belty in timbre, with even more extreme contrasts than in the past, thanks to her delving into her "mutter" register and giving it her all at the very end. This track is very modulatory, moving from F♯ minor to C Major to F Major, emphasizing the uncertainty Moana feels and the journey she has experienced. Finally, at the end, she declares her identity, surrounded by her ancestors, ready to finish her voyage on her own and restore the heart of Te Fiti (her end goal).

Like Rapunzel, Moana sings the same material three times across the course of her movie. Unlike Rapunzel, however, the song that tells the biggest story is her third,

when Moana moves from despair to determination. If we zoom out to look at all three at once, we might see a familiar pattern from the cycles of a popular song:

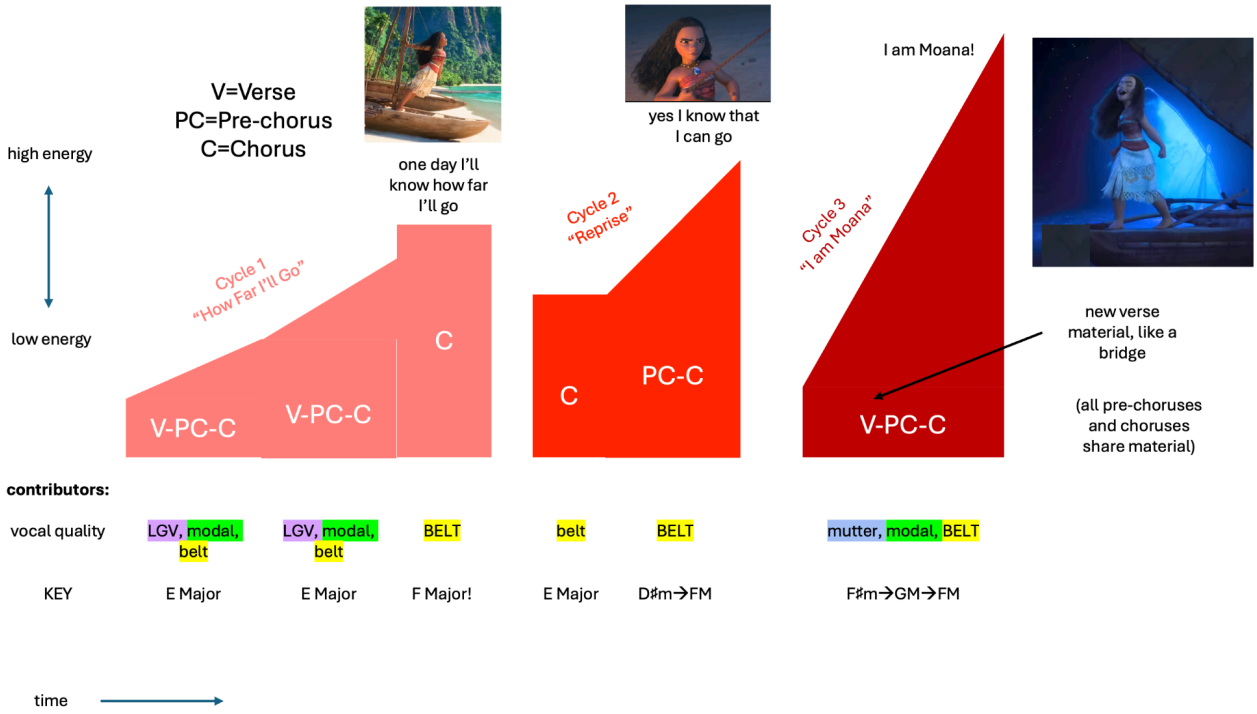


Figure 5.32, Musical and Narrative Trajectory across all Three Songs in *Moana*

In the beginning of the film [ca. 16:00], Moana's "How Far I'll Go" is powerful, and has its own growth from beginning to end. However, Moana had not yet experienced hardship, and so her confidence is optimistic, a bit more youthful, and full of future-tense verbs like "I'll know" and "I'll go." She is ready to depart for her journey, but she doesn't yet know the full significance of who she is or what she'll do. Her voice spans just over an octave in range (B3-D5), and doesn't break free or soar as much as it does later. But she is still confident, and she is hardly a damsel: she is called to an adventure, like male heroes of legend, and she is committed to venturing out on her own.

A few scenes later [ca. 30:00], we hear a shortened but slightly more powerful reprise of "How Far I'll Go." This second song includes slightly more tonal fluctuation, adding a modulation just before she comes in, as well as the upper neighbor figure to C♯5 and slightly more belting throughout. It does not significantly depart from the first, but the "Reprise" does elevate in energy from the original, and now Moana is actively leaving on her journey, not just dreaming of it. She is called to action by her grandmother, and assisted by her mother, before she goes out on her own.

Finally, in "I am Moana," the energy drops down when Moana is at her lowest point in the entire movie [ca. 1:21:00], then makes a grand crescendo in many parameters towards the climax where she calls out, "I am Moana!" This third song modulates a lot, has a stronger trajectory in the melodic and timbral domains, and Moana's lyrics are most changed here: she says "I am" and "I have" [done] instead of "I will" and "I wish." By using the same material three times over an hour of content, the creators attach Moana's "How Far I'll Go" chorus with her confidence, and her actions when she takes off and sets sail. Additionally, through alterations of range, harmony, and melody, as well as Cravalho's vocal performance (timbre), these three songs tell us a story of Moana's development into a grown woman. At the beginning, she was standing at the cusp of adulthood but had not yet left the comfort and safety of her childhood home. She sang in Little-Girl Voice, Modal voice, and a light Belt. By the end, she finds herself through navigating the open ocean, overcoming obstacles with Maui, and convening with her ancestors. By the time she sings so strongly in "I am Moana," she has found her role, her strength, and her identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Elsa and Moana are both on a journey towards finding themselves, and it is within themselves that they find the power to save their communities. They have strong relationships with other women in their lives, and do not even hint at romantic relationships. Anna's suitor Hans even disrupts the typical Disney love-at-first-sight trope by betraying her in the end.

Elsa and Moana sing in an era of belting, strong, independent women. Idina Menzel is an icon in and of herself, and Auli'i Cravalho is uniquely authentic to her character, as a 14-15 year old, and as a Native Hawaiian. In Elsa and Moana's songs, we see that same breathy-to-belty trajectory we have seen in previous princesses, but it is made that much grander thanks to the vocal prowess of Menzel and Cravalho respectively. They use their lower, F3-C4 range, much more than previous singers do; they sing primarily in chest voice across multiple songs; and of course Menzel belts up to that famous E♭5 in "Let it Go." Elsa is also a queer icon, and both she and Moana are the first to completely lack a love interest.

In their songs, verse-prechorus-chorus cycles, as well as chord loops, reveal a greater influence from popular music than we have seen before as well. Stepwise and tertian modulations remain common, as in past musical theater conventions, but "Let it Go" and "I am Moana" in particular use increasingly complex modulations to connote turmoil and character development. Anna (in *Frozen*) and Gramma Tala (in *Moana*) also have important singing roles, meaning that Elsa and Moana are not the only important female characters in their stories. Elsa and Anna's sisterly love saves the day, and

Gramma Tala is the one pushing Moana to succeed. And both animated films begin with women's voices: Cantus in "Vuelie" (*Frozen*) and Olivia Foa'i in "Tulou Tagaloa" (*Moana*).

All in all, Elsa's and Moana's songs tell stories of growing up and finding the hero within themselves, rather than a man. Their vocal timbres communicate a trajectory from weak to strong within and across songs. Their lyrics are empowering in their self-acceptance, from letting go of societal pressures to declaring "here I am" and from leaving behind assigned roles at birth to declaring "I am Moana!" And these female self-assertions became incredibly popular, topping charts worldwide in 2013 and 2016 respectively. I still hear "Let it Go" on the radio every winter season, some ten years later. The common move in music theory would be to say that vocal/timbral shifts "reinforce" harmonic/tonal shifts in songs, however, in this case, it is the other way around. All elements point towards these princesses breaking free, but it is their voices that most strongly drive us to that conclusion. See **Figure 5.33** for a final ordering of princess voices from Ariel (1989) to Elsa (2013) on a spectrum from least to most belting:

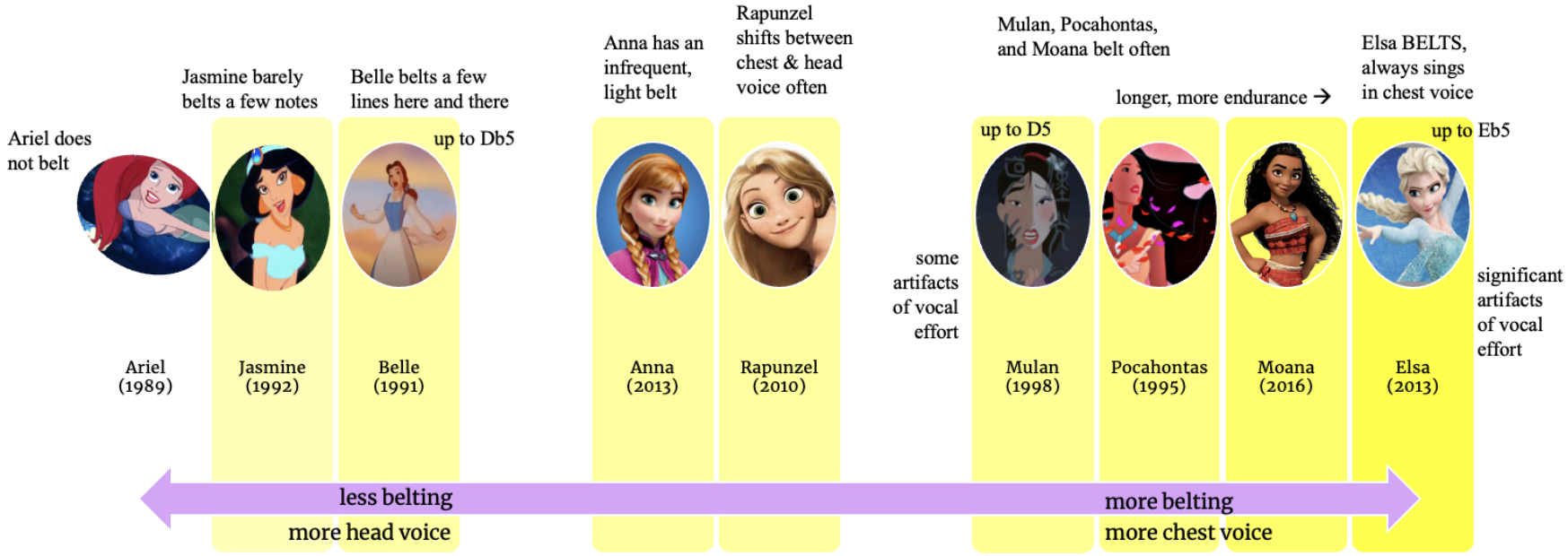


Figure 5.33, Belting Spectrum from Ariel (1989) to Elsa (2013)

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Over the course of this dissertation, I have examined several different expressions of femininity through voice. Just as gender is a performative, social construct, so too is the voice a performed aspect of one's identity. I've traced changes in the performance of femininity across decades of Disney film (particularly 1989-2016) in tandem with changes in vocal performance, using timbre and lyrics as the primary foci of my analysis. Broadly speaking, over the course of these 27 years, the Disney Princess archetype developed into more than just a damsel in distress, and even into an icon of queer girlhood in Elsa (*Frozen,* 2013). With these stronger female characters came stronger vocal timbres: they belted more often, and more powerfully, as they became more complex, more powerful women.

To visualize these developments, I've placed ten princesses on a spectrum from Ariel (no belting) to Elsa (most belting), as in **Figure 6.1**.

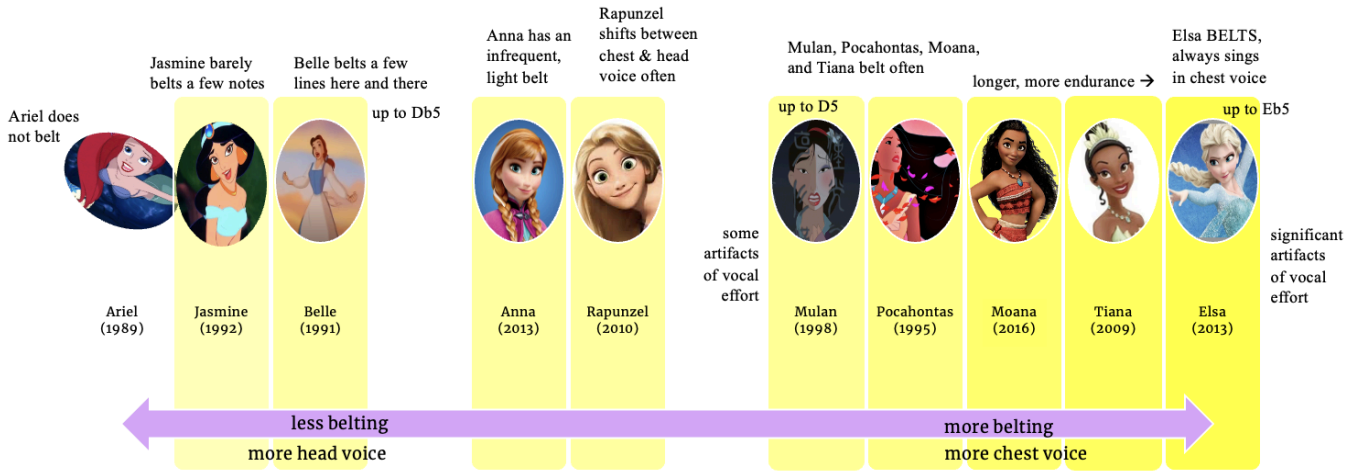


Figure 6.1, Belting Spectrum from Ariel (1989) to Elsa (2013)

However, as mentioned previously, this development was hardly linear. Anna, one of the latest princesses, has a lighter belt, and is characterized as a naïve little girl in *Frozen* (2013). Rapunzel, too, sang with much more of a cute Little-Girl Voice, including audible breaks and flips into head voice in 2010. Mulan and Pocahontas of the 1990s were both stronger vocally than Anna and Rapunzel of the 2010s. Tiana was a strong belter as early as 2009, more in line with Elsa's (2013) vocality than Rapunzel (2010), her nearest contemporary. And Mulan questioned the gender binary as early as 1998, letting go of society's expectations almost two decades before Elsa sang "Let it Go" (2013).

In general, though, the princess voices can be split into three distinct time periods: the traditional, operatic voices of Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella; the Broadway-influenced Renaissance voices of Ariel through Mulan, with a light belt; and the modern, more pop-influenced voices of Tiana through Moana. Some look forward beyond their "era," like Mulan's relationship with queerness, while others look backwards, like Anna's tongue-in-cheek parody of *Disney damselhood*.

These female characters' lyrics reveal themes of being "true" to themselves, not being tied down by what society thinks of them (Belle, Mulan, Elsa); wanting something more, such as freedom or adventure (Ariel, Belle, Rapunzel); and their duty to their communities (Pocahontas, Moana). Some princesses still fall in love with their men at first sight (Ariel, Anna) but others take time (Belle, Mulan, Rapunzel) and a few even reject a man or men altogether (Belle, Moana, Elsa, Merida.)[323] The love-at-first-sight, and marriage-as-resolution tropes are falling out of fashion for Disney Princesses, and

[323] I have not written about Merida in this dissertation, as she does not sing, but she is a princess whose parents pressure her to marry in order to be queen, and she pushes back, refusing to be married.

Elsa and Moana in particular stand alone as leaders of their communities without even a love interest in sight.

Other changes I've observed in these princess songs include evolving song forms and increasing harmonic complexity. Stemming from the Tin Pan Alley tradition, the original princess songs were short and sweet, and simple; they also were rather singly focused on dreaming of a man to sweep them off their feet, save them from a difficult situation, and to marry them. In the Renaissance era, princess songs became longer, with more variety of musical materials, and their lyrics were not always so prince-obsessed. This, along with more variety in vocal timbres, allowed us to get to know the princess characters better as more complex, multi-faceted humans, not just flat objects of the prince's affections. Finally, after the year 2000, the princess songs interacted more with verse-prechorus-chorus form, stemming from popular music, and teleologies related to those forms: increasing in energy and excitement within each cycle and from cycle to cycle. We also see some very interesting modulations in the 2010s, relating to character identity (juxtaposing Anna and Elsa in *Frozen*) and emotional growth (as Moana finds herself).

Regardless of the exact form of these songs, however, two formal schemas apply across all of the songs from 1989-2016: quiet, breathy introductions and strong, belted choruses. Pocahontas, for example, sings her introductory "you think I'm an ignorant savage…" in "Colors of the Wind" in Mutter, a low, breathy, chest voice, just as Elsa uses Mutter for her opening lines, "the snow glows white on the mountain tonight…" in "Let it Go." Mulan switches to a strong, high chest voice Belt for her chorus of "Reflection" just as Moana moves from Little-Girl Voice to Modal Voice to Belt in "How Far I'll Go." In

general, this trajectory from a light, mixed, breathy Little-Girl Voice to a full Modal Voice to a powerful Belt is a common pattern in many of these songs.

If I were to zoom out, I would describe the following vocal trajectories in many Disney Princess songs since 1989, diagrammed in **Figure 6.2**. The Princesses typically Mutter in the introduction, use Little-Girl Voice (L.G.V.) in the verses, Modal Voice in the prechoruses, if applicable, and Belt in the choruses. Each cycle grows towards the chorus, and each cycle is stronger than the previous. Of course, **Figure 6.2** is a broad overgeneralization; rarely do princesses these days stay in one single vocal color for an entire section, and not all songs have all 10 of these components. The princesses also sometimes surprise us with a subversion of these expected formal teleologies, such as when Ariel started her first chorus uncertainly in a Whisper in "Part of Your World," and when Elsa belted her first chorus, but the accompaniment pulled back to a light tinkly piano texture in "Let it Go." However, I have found that these vocal trajectories, or the concept of *timbral crescendo*, to be one of the most useful theoretical findings of my dissertation.

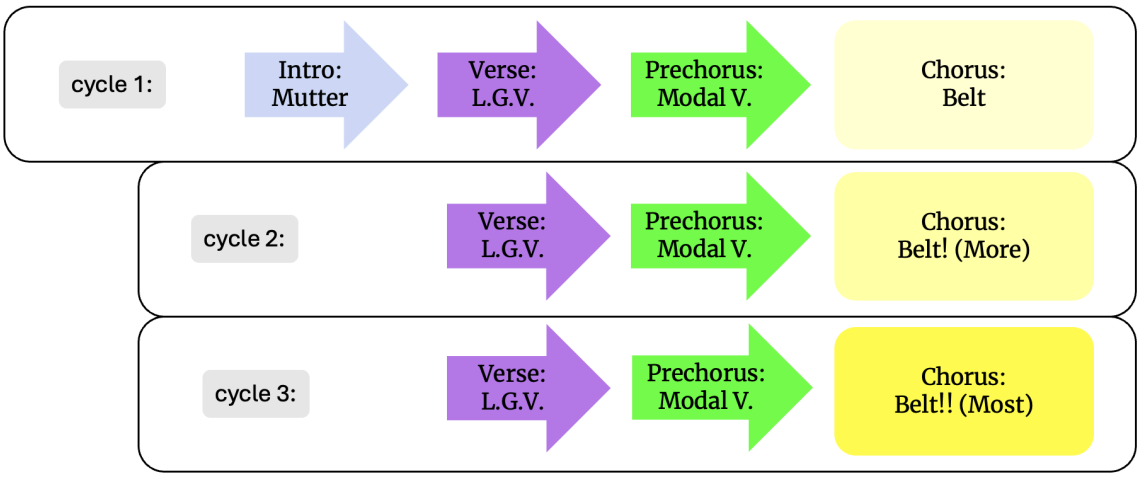


Figure 6.2, Common Vocal Trajectories and Formal Cycles in later Disney Princess songs

Overall, I have shown how vocal timbre plays a central role in storytelling through all of these different iterations of Disney Princesses. Moving forward, this project lays the groundwork for other similar explorations of voice and identity. Because this is just one dissertation, I've addressed these questions of identity through seven Disney Princesses, but I can imagine similar work to be done on any number of different source material.

In the future, I plan to turn this dissertation into a book, which devotes a chapter to each princess from Snow White to Moana. It would be fruitful to provide a deeper analysis of the early Disney songs, such as "I'm Wishing," (Snow White, 1937) "A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes," (Cinderella, 1950) and "Once Upon A Dream" (Aurora, 1959), before delving into the Renaissance era. Additionally, I'd like to devote more time to Tiana's singing, as she is the first (and only) Black princess, and her vocal styles are heavily influenced by New Orleans jazz and gospel music.

Outside of the princesses, my approach could be applied to a wide variety of other voices: female villains, like Ursula; male heroes, like Hercules; or other performances of the Disney Princesses, like Elisha Ainsley in *Tangled: The Musical*. In other projects, I've also touched on the live-action versions of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), *Aladdin* (2019), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023); the studio production of these princess voices, including auto-tune, would additionally be a fruitful venue for musical analysis in the late 20th and recent 21st century. Even outside of Disney, my approach to vocal analysis could be applied to other film, video game, or musical theater characters who sing, taking storytelling, archetypes, and/or problematic stereotypes into account.

Although I've engaged with scholarship on Indigeneity, multiculturalism in the 1990s, and the steps Disney has made in the 2010s towards cultural respect and responsibility, I feel that there is still more yet to be said. Building more upon Nina Eidsheim's work[324] on race, identity, and voice, I could imagine an entirely new, significant project based on the question of "sounding" Indigenous, or Black, or Chinese (ex. for Pocahontas, Moana, Tiana, and Mulan). Here, I argued that Pocahontas and Mulan's voices were assimilated into the white American Disney Princess sound, but I'm sure that more in-depth analysis along those lines would find more nuanced answers, and answers for the later princesses (Tiana and Moana), too.

Lastly, I should like to remind the reader that belting as a vocal technique comes from the Black American blues tradition, earlier than Disney Princesses even existed (pre-1937).[325] By the 1990s, it was simply known as "Broadway belting," and of course Broadway singers were largely white, just as the Disney Princesses were. This is just another example of how Black musical components have been taken and assimilated into white musical culture, as with Elvis and rock 'n roll. Paired with an analysis of Tiana's singing, or on its own, a discussion of Blackness and belting within the Disney context would be quite interesting.

If there is anything I have learned over the course of this project, it is that there are always more layers to uncover when it comes to music as well as our identities. I've looked at lyrics, rhymes, breaths; specific chords, modulations, key areas; repetition of material, foreshadowing, formal cycles; and vocal timbre from tiny wavers to noticeable breaks. As I've done so, I've gotten to know these characters even better. I've described

[324] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.
[325] Masi Asare, "Vocal Colour in Blue: Early Twentieth-Century Black Women Singers as Broadway's Voice Teachers," *Performance Matters* 6.2 (2020): 52-66.

the princesses as nurturers, as dreamers, as wishful thinkers; as smart, active, and resourceful young women; and as queer, independent, occasionally-subversive role models. Often, they are many of these things at once!

It would do us all a disservice to focus only on one or two definitions of "strong," of "female," or even of "feminine" characters. Yes, the Disney Princess damsel archetype still persists even today. But the stories they tell are gradually changing, beginning to show different ways of being feminine on a huge scale. (They are so very mainstream, after all, so change will be slow.) I would never claim that all of these princesses are great, or wonderful, or perfect 21st-century models of womanhood. However, I hope I have given pause for all of us to consider which models of femininity we pass on to the next generation, and which ones we leave in the past. As times change, so should we.

Appendix A: Original Princess Songs, 1937-1959

Adriana Caselotti as Snow White, "I'm Wishing," *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* 1937.

Introduction
[Wanna know a secret?
Promise not to tell?] [*spoken*]
We are standing by a wishing well
Make a wish into the well
That's all you have to do
And if you hear it echoing
Your wish will soon come true

A
I'm wishing (I'm wishing)
For the one I love
To find me (to find me)
Today (today)

A
I'm hoping (I'm hoping)
And I'm dreaming of
The nice things (the nice things)
He'll say (he'll say)

B
Ah-hahahaha (ah-hahahaha)
Ah-hahahaha (ah-hahahaha)
Ah-hahahaha (ah-hahahaha)
Ah-hahahahahahaha

A'
I'm wishing (I'm wishing)
For the one I love
To find me (to find me)
Today
[Today! …] [The prince takes over.]

Snow White's Voices:
Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high) and "Legit" (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high)

Ilene Woods as Cinderella, "A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes," *Cinderella,* 1950.

[Long Instrumental Introduction]

A
A dream is a wish your heart makes
When you're fast asleep
A
In dreams you will lose your heartaches
Whatever you wish for, you keep

A'
Have faith in your dreams and someday
Your rainbow will come smiling through
B
No matter how your heart is grieving
If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true

[Oh that clock
Old killjoy
I hear you, come on
Get up you say
Time to start another day] [spoken]

Even he orders me around
Well, there's one thing
They can't order me to stop dreaming
And perhaps, someday] [spoken]

The dreams that I wish will come true
AAA'B
[la da da da…]
AAA'B
[la da da da…] [with birds and mice]

B
No matter how your heart is grieving
If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true

Cinderella's Voices:
Soft Voice (chest/mix, breathy, open, mid), Modal Voice (chest/mix, neutral, twang, mid), and Mutter (chest, breathy, twang, low/mix)

Mary Costa as Aurora, "Once Upon a Dream," *Sleeping Beauty,* 1959.

A
I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream
I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam
B
Yet I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem
But if I know you, I know what you'll do
You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream

B [repeated]
[humming]
But if I know you, I know what you do
You love me at once
The way you did once upon a dream [prince takes over]

[A: prince]
[B: chorus]

Aurora's Voices:
"Legit" (head/mix, neutral, twang, mid/high) and Whisper (head, breathy, twang, high)

Appendix B: Mother Gothel's Songs

Voices: Mother Gothel 1, Mother Gothel 2, Mother Gothel 0, Fake Little-Girl Voice, and Mutter

MG1 (chest, neutral, open, low/mid), MG 2 (mix, neutral, open, mid/high); *~portamento, #growl*
MG0 (overly dark), FLGV (mix, neutral, twang, mid), Mutter (chest, breathy, open, low)

Donna Murphy as Mother Gothel, "Mother Knows Best" *Tangled*, 2010.

[MOTHER GOTHEL, spoken]
You want to go outside? Why, Rapunzel...
Look at you, as fragile as a flower
Still a little sapling, just a sprout

(sung)
You know why we stay up in this ~tower

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
I know, but—

[MOTHER GOTHEL]
That's right, to keep you~ safe and sound, dear
Guess I always knew this day was coming
Knew that soon you'd want to leave the nest
Soon~, but not yet~

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
But—

[MOTHER GOTHEL]
Shh!
Trust me, pet
Mother knows best

Mother knows best, listen to your mother
It's #a #scary world out there
Mother knows best, one way or another
Something will go wrong, I swear
#Ruffians, thugs, poison ivy, quicksand
Cannibals and snakes
The plague

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
No!

[MOTHER GOTHEL]
Yes!

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
But—

[MOTHER GOTHEL]
Also large bugs
Men with pointy teeth, #and
Stop, no more~, you'll just upset me
Mother's right here, Mother will protect you
Darling, here's what I~ suggest
Skip the ~drama, stay~ with mama~
Mother~ knows best

Go ahead, get trampled by a rhino
Go ahead, get mugged and left for dead
Me, I'm just your mother, what do I know?
I only bathed and changed and nursed you
Go ahead and leave me, I deserve it
Let me die alone here, be my guest
When it's too late, you'll see, just wait
Mo#~ther knows best

Mother knows best, take it from your mumsy
On your own, you won't survive
Sloppy, underdressed, immature, clumsy
Please, they'll eat you up alive

Gullible, naïve, positively grubby
Ditzy and a bit, well, hmm, vague
Plus, I believe, gettin' kinda chubby
I'm just saying ~'cause I wuv you
Mother understands, Mother's here to help you
All I have is one request

(spoken)
Rapunzel?

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
Yes?

[MOTHER GOTHEL, spoken]
Don't ever ask to leave this tower again

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
Yes, Mother

[MOTHER GOTHEL, spoken]
I love you very much, dear

[RAPUNZEL, spoken]
I love you more

[MOTHER GOTHEL, spoken]
I love you most

(sung)
Don't forget it, you'll regret it
Mother knows best

MG1 (chest, neutral, open, low/mid), MG 2 (mix, neutral, open, mid/high); *~portamento, #growl*
MG0 (overly dark), FLGV (mix, neutral, twang, mid), Mutter (chest, breathy, open, low)

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