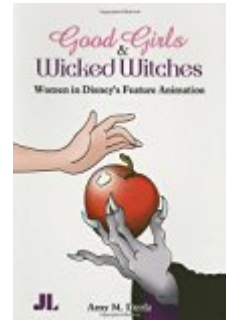


Amy M. Davis. *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. x + 274 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-86196-673-8.



Reviewed by Allison Craven

Published on H-Amstdy (July, 2008)

The Disney era of animated feature films looms like a vast reef in media history, extending through nearly the entire twentieth century. Amy Davis seeks to place Disney films--already much examined--in the wider context of American popular culture, studying female human characters in animated features from the 1930s to 2005. A daunting project in scale, it is unique in its aim to cover all female human characters, and inevitably some compromises are made. With an abundance of sources, and the enthusiasm of a confessed fan, Davis's book contains some illuminating finds from her dives on the Disney reef, albeit clouded by overzealous coverage of the more general history of Walt, the Disney company, and the early studio era. A rewarding read of this book benefits from patience with the early stages and a sense of admiration for the task Davis sets. A map with spots marked "X" (perhaps this review) will also help arrive at the treasure more directly.

Films and characters are arranged in three periods: the "classic years" (1937-67); the "middle era" (1967-88); and the "Eisner era" (1989-2005). Davis comes across more as Disney historian than

film and culture theorist (the book is the result of M.A./Ph.D. work in history at University College London, although Davis now teaches film studies), and this creates some liabilities. Overattention to chronology, and to Walt's biography and its purported influence on, particularly, female characters, hold back Davis's original insights on the Disney legacy, while the weight of secondary sources make some passages of the book seem redundant. Analysis of film texts, audiences, and production is mixed and at times unmethodical as well as charmingly unorthodox as Davis dots her commentary with ad-hoc, self-devised gender statistics of the periods: proportions of male and females characters; child and adult characters; married and unmarried; princess and non-princess, living mothers, villains, and so on. Meanwhile, three long chapters preface discussion of the good girls and wicked witches. Chapter 1, "Film as Cultural Mirror" is something of a distorting mirror. *Bridget Jones* (2001), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) are included as touchstones; while spectatorship theory is avoided because of the history of non-use of spectatorship to interpret nonhuman characters

(Davis's explanation, p. 91). Chapters 2 and 3 recount the history of animation that seems barely relevant to Disney females, human or not, with digressions about Disney's rivals, Fleischers and Warner Brothers. Heavy weather on the reef, all this preamble is given to make "later discussions ... on ... Disney ... more comprehensible" (p. 60). But while the author struggles to illuminate relevance, and separate coral from weed, what this material makes latently apparent, is the male-dominated context of the industry in which animated fairy tale heroines were devised and popularized. At times this demands more overt emphasis than is given as with the discussion of Walt's early *Alice Comedies* (blended live action and animation, dating from the 1920s and discussed in chapter 3), in which "live" Alice appeared less and less as animation and animal characters took over. This intriguing devolution of Alice is treated as background to the *Silly Symphonies* (1929-39) and Mickey Mouse, while the displacement of an adventurous little girl by a cartoon male mouse slides.

Eight features are discussed in the chapter on the classic years: *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *101 Dalmatians* (1961), and the lesser known *Melody Time* (1948) and *Adventures of Ichabod and Mr Toad* (1949). There is treasure in the attention given to these films and to some of the little-known characters within them, like Slue-foot Sue, lover of Pecos Bill in *Melody Time*. Matrimonially thwarted, Slue-foot Sue breaks the princess mold, subordinating her man with a kiss in a manner unrepeated until *Pocahontas* nearly fifty years later! The popular pre-eminence of (the minority) princesses is unsettled by the focus on lesser known heroines like Sue, and also by attention to the villainesses of the classic years (Cruella de Vil and Snow White's step mother). Rather than misogynist projections, Davis takes a postfeminist view of these "bad girl" characters, upholding them as power figures, who display agency and

control, and in spite of their (self)-destructive evilness. In Disney, she says "evil ... is not just meanness—it is a symptom of madness" (p. 109), although the implications of this view are not pursued, and nor does Davis question the explicit association in these films between femininity and insanity. As for the princesses, Disney's own role in merchandising its "Disney Princesses" to coincide with the re-release of *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) in anniversary editions, is largely overlooked, as is Disney merchandising and political economy more generally.

Strengths emerge, however, as Davis unfolds her theory of the "double-patterning" of *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, replicating, she argues, the patterning of the Hollywood "double-films," a sinister cognate of the Hollywood woman's film of comparable era. While film-theoretical rigor is lacking in the analysis, the idea is strong and opens rich potential veins for further investigation, especially the possibility that Disney films in some way parody the woman's film. This is treasure. Resonances and connections between animated features and Hollywood film noir and screwball comedy are remiss only for being brief, and lean on filmography and historical context. Davis also comments on Walt's views of women, defending him against anti-feminism and emphasizing the value he placed on women's roles in the film industry.

The "middle era" broadly spans the years of the women's movement, exposing a significant contrast to the classic years and the Eisner era. Of eight animated features, only three, *The Rescuers* (1977), *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and *The Black Cauldron* (1985) feature human female characters in key roles, albeit one, Miss Bianca (*The Rescuers*) is a mouse so "humanized" that she warrants inclusion (p. 148). The predominance of anthropomorphism is seen less as response by Disney to gender politics than an effect of decline in the Disney business, the death of Walt, and the company's move to live-action films.

Notwithstanding the protofeminism of Bianca, who struggles as a mouse in a human world, and Widow Tweed (*The Fox and the Hound*) and Eilonwy (*The Black Cauldron*), who defends herself and her rights, Davis sees these films as neutralizing of gender politics rather than allegorizing transforming femininity.

Chapter 6 on the Eisner era is perhaps the strongest section of the book, although Davis deftly avoids some of the more contentious aspects of Disney's corporate life in this period (and does not note that chairman Michael Eisner has since moved on). Three prototypes emerge in the Eisner era: a new type of princess (represented by Ariel, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Kida) who is distinct from the classic princesses; the Good Daughter (Belle, Mulan, and Jane); and the Tough Gals (Esmerelda, Meg, Audrey, and others). The ratio of villainesses to heroines has declined compared to the classic era. Lilo and Nani of *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) have a special section, "Sister Act"; and *Pretty Woman* (1990) (from Disney subsidiary Touchstone) is also discussed at length. In her conclusion Davis compares Disney narratives with Hollywood women's buddy films, and with horror film, also a rich potential vein of further inquiry.

Davis deserves praise for the breadth of the project, and the promise of the comparative studies with Hollywood film. Appendices include a filmography, cast lists, and plot summaries that are very useful. The bibliography, presented in sections, and footnotes, on the other hand, are a little confusing as works are footnoted in detail each time they appear first in a chapter, irrespective of references in earlier chapters. The book ends without comment on the passing of animation into the digital era, a passage in which Disney is swept along by the same tide as Hollywood, creating new gendered subjectivities in animation, and stimulating fierce competition that resembles the rivalries of the early studio era. Davis's exhaustive study will be valuable to those who are ob-

serving the gender patterns in this transition, and it will help to keep goggle, mask, and map handy!

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy>

Citation: Allison Craven. Review of Davis, Amy M. *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14789>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.