

**When Reflection Breaks Tradition:
Gender Performativity in Disney's *Mulan* (1998)**

Gavriel Dylan Jauwena¹, Clarisse Nicholtrayne Kasenda², Shinelle Rose Gani³, Nia Pranajaya⁴,
Brigitta Esther Aprilya Siringoringo⁵

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Email: gavriel.dylan.jauwena@sekolahmakarios.id, shinelle.rose.gani@sekolahmakarios.id,
clarisse.nicholtrayne.kasenda@sekolahmakarios.id,
nia.pranajaya.pranajaya@sekolahmakarios.id, brigitta.aprilya.siringoringo@sekolahmakarios.id

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there
male and female, for you are all one in Christ.”

— **Galatians 3:28 (NIV)**

ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction and subversion of traditional gender roles in Disney's *Mulan* (1998) through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Using a qualitative literary approach, the film was analyzed through close readings of key scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements, supported by scholarly critiques and feminist theory. The findings reveal three main results. **1)** the film reinforces traditional stereotypes by presenting femininity as obedience, domesticity, and marriage, particularly through the “Honor to Us All” sequence. **2)** *Mulan*'s acts of disguise and performance destabilize the gender binary, illustrating Butler's claim that gender is not innate but performed through repetition and cultural expectation. **3)** while the narrative challenges conventional roles, it simultaneously reinscribes heteronormative closure by the film's conclusion, reflecting Butler's insight that performances of resistance can still be reabsorbed into existing norms. This study concludes that *Mulan* functions as both a critique and reinforcement of gender roles, highlighting the instability of gender identity and its potential for reinterpretation. The analysis contributes to broader feminist discussions on how literature and media negotiate cultural norms, offering new insights into the performative nature of gender in animated narratives.

Keywords: *Mulan, gender performativity, Judith Butler, traditional gender roles, feminist literary criticism*

INTRODUCTION

Literature or fairy tales may be fictional, but they contain an internal logic that reflects real-world truth in a simplified form. Even Disney movies we've seen today, mirror the world we live in today, where many people still experience gender inequality. Gender roles are not biologically determined but rather socially constructed. And it is very unfortunate how people are starting to normalize gender inequality in our society without realizing it. According to a new World Bank report, women enjoy only two-thirds of the legal rights that men have globally. This

highlights a significant gap that restricts women's opportunities and protections in various areas. The report emphasizes that no country provides equal legal rights for women, illustrating the pervasive nature of gender inequality. Throughout history and across various cultures, gender roles have evolved and changed significantly, and it is a significant aspect of feminism theory.

Mulan (1998), directed by Barry Cook, shows how women are restricted from such opportunities. Gender roles have shaped the way we interact with one another, influencing the paths we choose in life. While offering a sense of structure and guidance, it can also give rise to complex issues that challenge our understanding of equality, fairness, and personal growth. Cultural norms, where traditional cultural beliefs and practices may favor one gender over another, reinforcing gender inequalities. There is a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles in some cultures, where men are expected to work as the breadwinners, while women are responsible for household chores and childcare. This division of labor often limits women's opportunities for education, career advancement and financial independence. Mulan is a 1998 animated film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation for Walt Disney Pictures. Based on the legend of Hua Mulan, the film was directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, produced by Pam Coats and a story by Robert D. San Souci. Mulan premiered at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles on June 5, 1998, and was released in the United States on June 19. The film was well received by critics and the public, who praised the animation, plot, characters (particularly the title character), and musical score, and grossed over \$304 million. It earned a Golden Globe and Academy Award nomination and won several Annie Awards, including Best Animation Pictures. It was then followed by a direct-to-video sequel, Mulan II in 2004.

Judith Butler's gender role theory, explained in her book *Gender Trouble*, questions the idea that gender is a fixed and natural part of who we are. Instead, Butler posits that gender is performative, meaning it is constructed through repeated actions, behaviors, and societal norms rather than being an inherent quality. This performativity suggests that individuals "perform" their gender roles based on cultural expectations, and makes people think of gender as strictly male or female. Butler also argues that the idea of one shared "female" identity ignores the different experiences of women based on race, class, and sexuality. She believes gender is not stable but is shaped by society and can change, which allows people to challenge traditional gender roles. Her theory is important for feminist and queer studies, as it promotes a broader, more flexible way of understanding gender.

Previous research by Salsabila Bazighoh Zahron, titled *The Main Character's Struggle in Fighting for Gender Inequality in Disney Mulan Movie*, analyzes Mulan's efforts to promote gender equality in her environment using a feminist theory. It highlights how Mulan's courage and hard work challenge traditional gender roles, illustrating her struggle against societal

expectations that limit women's freedom and capabilities. Though this research only emphasizes the fluidity of identity and the subversive potential of gender performance as depicted in *Mulan*, our paper concludes with a broader discussion on gender equality and societal implications. There are two categories in gender roles, such as traditionally those that adhere to the widely accepted norms and expectations for each gender, such as men being the primary breadwinners and women being responsible for household chores and childcare. Non-traditional gender roles challenge these norms and may involve individuals taking on tasks or responsibilities that are typically associated with the opposite gender. According to Judith Butler, a prominent feminist philosopher and gender theorist, gender is not an inherent quality or biological fact but rather a socially constructed performance. She argues that individuals enact and perform gender through a series of repeated actions, behaviors, and gestures that conform to societal expectations. This performance is regulated by cultural norms and power structures, which in turn creates the illusion of a stable, binary gender system. Feminist theory encompasses various aspects and perspectives that analyze and critique the social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

By using Judith Butler's gender role theory, we can understand that gender equality also refers to equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of all individuals regardless of their gender. Ensuring that both men and women enjoy the same social, political, economic, cultural, educational opportunities, stereotypes, or discrimination based on their gender. As men in this movie are portrayed as a strong and masculine figure, holding an important role in the community as they are providing and protecting their families. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be obedient, modest, focused on domestic responsibilities and are generally restricted from such opportunities, like learning martial arts. Gender equality seeks to create a society where people are not limited or advantaged by their gender, allowing them to reach their full potential and contribute to the betterment of society. According to the book 'Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders', "Despite advances, women remain underrepresented in decision-making roles, which influences how issues that impact them are prioritized and addressed" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 110). Women continue to be underrepresented and unappreciated in roles where critical decisions are made in our society. The lack of representation affects women in how they are addressed and decision-making in life.

Binary Opposition

Masculine	Feminine
The film shows masculinity as being all about strength, bravery, and honor, creating strict expectations for men. This is seen in Captain	The movie also illustrates how femininity is associated with conformity and domesticity. <i>Mulan</i> is pressured to conform to traditional

Li Shang's song "I'll Make a Man Out of You", where he emphasizes the need for toughness and skill in battle. "Let's get down to business, to defeat the Huns. Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?" This highlights the belief that only men are suited for fighting, supporting the idea that masculinity is better and needed for being a hero. It shows how men are expected to be strong and brave, while anything seen as feminine is considered a weakness.

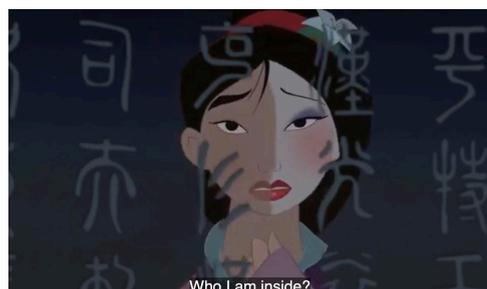
gender roles, stating that her main goal is to marry well and bring honor to her family. This expectation limits women's roles in society and undermines their capabilities. "A girl can bring her family great honor in one way, by striking a good match." This line from the song "Honor to Us All" shows the belief that a woman's worth is mostly based on getting married, pointing out the restrictions on women and their roles. It suggests that a woman's greatest success is finding a husband, reinforcing old-fashioned gender expectations.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative literary approach, using close textual analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) as the primary text. The analysis is guided by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which examines how gender roles are socially constructed and enacted through repeated cultural practices. The film was viewed multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, character development, and visual-symbolic elements. Particular attention was given to recurring scenes, dialogues, and cinematographic choices that reflect or subvert traditional gender expectations. These were then interpreted through Butler's framework, situating Mulan's disguise, actions, and transformation within the discourse of gender performativity. To strengthen the interpretation, the study also engaged with scholarly critiques and prior research on gender representation in *Mulan*. This intertextual dialogue provided comparative insights and helped situate the film within broader discussions of feminism and gender studies. The methodology emphasizes literary-critical practices such as close reading, thematic analysis, and symbolic interpretation rather than quantitative or empirical data. By using Butler's theoretical lens, the paper interrogates how the film negotiates traditional and non-traditional gender roles, while also considering the cultural context of its late 1990s production and reception.

DISCUSSION

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) offers a powerful site for analyzing how gender roles are constructed, performed, and contested. Judith Butler's concept of *gender performativity* that gender is not innate but constituted through repeated acts and social



expectations, provides the critical lens for interpreting Mulan's journey. From the beginning, the film depicts femininity within rigid norms of obedience, domesticity, and marriage. The song "*Honor to Us All*" encapsulates these expectations by presenting a woman's worth as dependent on securing a husband, a reflection of the cultural scripts that regulate female behavior. In Butler's terms, this illustrates how gender norms function as *disciplinary repetitions*, producing the illusion of a stable "*female*" identity.

Mulan's resistance to these roles is staged most vividly through acts of *performance and imitation*. Her decision to cut her hair, don armor, and assume the identity of "Ping" aligns with Butler's claim that gender is *not a natural essence but a stylized repetition of acts*. By successfully "*passing*" as a man, Mulan exposes the constructedness of masculinity: her strength, bravery, and intelligence, traits coded as masculine are revealed as qualities not tied to biology but to performance. This aligns with Butler's notion of drag and parody, which destabilize the naturalized categories of male and female by revealing their imitative basis.

The "*Reflection*" sequence deepens this critique by dramatizing Mulan's internal conflict between social expectation and authentic selfhood. The mirror becomes a metaphor for Butler's argument that gender identity is an *external imposition*, a mask sustained by repetition—rather than an inner truth. Mulan's desire for her reflection to match her inner identity reflects the tension between imposed performativity and self-determination. The film further complicates gender binaries through moments of recognition. When Shang discovers Mulan's true identity, his earlier trust in "Ping" collapses, underscoring how competence and trust are mediated by gendered assumptions. This scene critiques the arbitrary nature of gender distinctions: Mulan is the same individual, yet the shift in social perception reveals the instability of gender as a category.

Yet, *Mulan* also reveals the *contradictory power of performativity*. While the film destabilizes traditional binaries by presenting a female character who embodies masculine-coded virtues, it simultaneously reinscribes conventional expectations by returning to heteronormative closure at the end. This paradox resonates with Butler's insight that while gender performances can subvert norms, they also risk being reabsorbed into the very structures they challenge.

Symbolic elements such as clothing, hairstyles, and domestic objects (e.g., Mulan leaving behind her comb) function as *cultural markers of performativity*. When Mulan discards the comb, she symbolically rejects the repetition of feminine domesticity in favor of a new role that defies cultural expectation. Butler's framework helps us see this not as a mere narrative device, but as a deliberate interruption of gender's regulated performance.

"*When will my reflection show, who I am inside*" - Lyrics from Mulan's ballad "reflection" This scene where Mulan gazes into the water near her ancestors' temple is symbolic of her inner

conflict and struggle for identity. The close shots of her face highlight her weakness while the water reflects the dichotomy between social expectation and her actual self. The gentle light heightens the whole mood into something rather somber. Such a refined combining of filming techniques puts across the idea of Mulan's mighty inner tragedy and self-acceptance in a point that has become emblematic in the whole Disney animated canon.

It is a powerful expression and movie scene of Mulan's internal struggle with identity and societal expectations. The lyrics "When will my reflection show who I am inside" expresses Mulan's desire to reveal her true self, which she feels is hidden beneath the facade she presents to meet the traditional roles imposed on her as a woman. Mulan's reflection in the mirror is a metaphor for the role she is expected to play, and her yearning for her external appearance to match her internal sense of self. The song has been interpreted as a message of self-acceptance and the courage to defy gender norms.

"The female stereotype is a normative social construct that functions to regulate and discipline women's bodies and behaviors. It is a set of expectations that are imposed upon women in order to maintain the status quo of gender relations. The female stereotype is a product of patriarchy, and it serves as a means of social control over women's bodies and identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 143)



This explains that women are often defined in relation to men, rather than being recognized as autonomous beings with their own identities and values. In the context of "Mulan," Mulan's decision to disguise herself as a man to join the army can be seen as an attempt to break free from the societal expectation that women should remain passive and submissive. By doing so, she challenges the notion of "Woman as Other" by demonstrating that women can also be agents of change and contribute to society in significant ways, it highlights the challenges women face when trying to break free from societal expectations and emphasizes the importance of self-discovery and autonomy for women.

The theory also portrays the deconstruction and reformation of identity and subjectivity in the context of gender performance and societal expectations. This act of defiance questions the stability of her identity as a woman and invites viewers to reconsider the construction of identity and subjectivity in relation to societal norms and expectations. Throughout Mulan's journey, she navigates between different identities and subject positions, ultimately revealing the performative nature of gender and the fluidity of identity.

Dealing with the cutting of her hair, symbolizes her acceptance of taking her father's position in the army and of her true self. The cinematography shows her determination through

close-ups and moves of the camera, simultaneously stressing her physical and emotional release with bright yet soft lighting to accentuate the significance of this act. This scene is a symbol that carries significant meaning. It represents her decision to defy traditional gender roles and take her father's place in the army, which requires her to present as a man. This act of cutting her hair is a visual and decisive moment that signifies her commitment to her family and her willingness to challenge societal expectations. The scene has also been interpreted as a moment of transformation, where Mulan sheds her assigned feminine identity to adopt a more masculine appearance, aligning with the duties she is about to undertake. It is not only the inessential in relation to the essential man, but she is also the inessential in herself; she is not identified by a true autonomy of her own, but by a relation of negativity to the male. (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 28) *"Feminism, in this sense, must be understood as a critique of the very notions of identity and subjectivity that have been historically mobilized to oppress women."* (Butler, 1990, p. 20)



The movie "Mulan" portrays a young woman who disguises herself as a man to take her father's place in the army, breaking the societal norms and expectations of her time. This act of defiance challenges the traditional gender roles and questions the imposed norms of femininity and masculinity. Mulan's journey demonstrates the subversive potential of gender performance and identity, which is in line with Butler's ideas on questioning and deconstructing gender norms.

This argues that the subversive power of gender imitation and drag in challenging societal expectations and norms. Through Mulan's performance as a man, the movie highlights the subversive potential of gender imitation and drag in challenging the binary constructs of gender and the societal norms that uphold them. Mulan's subversive act of gender imitation through her disguise as a man, and the subsequent invitation for viewers to reconsider the stability and power dynamics of gender categories and norms.

The moment when Mulan puts down her comb signifies her decision to leave behind her life as the daughter of the Fa family and step into a role that defies societal expectations. The cinematography captures the emotional weight of this decision through a close-up of her hand placing the comb down, emphasizing its significance as a symbol of femininity, followed by a medium shot that highlights her resolute expression. Enhanced by soft lighting and a crescendoing score, this moment powerfully underscores the themes of identity and sacrifice, marking a pivotal step in Mulan's journey toward self-discovery and empowerment. The comb,

adorned with magnolias, is symbolic of her femininity and the traditional role she is expected to fulfill. By leaving it behind, Mulan is making a powerful statement of self-sacrifice and commitment to her family's honor, choosing to take her father's place in the army. *"Feminism must question the very norms of gender that have been historically imposed on women, and it must do so in a way that does not reiterate those norms."* (Butler, 1990, p. 149). Mulan challenges the gender systems that define her as a woman and restrict her from participating in the war to protect her family and country. By disguising herself as a man, Mulan uncovers the artificiality and societal impositions of gender roles and binaries. This act of defiance encourages viewers to question the coherence of sexual distinction and the assumed stability of male and female subject positions. *"The subversive potential of drag, then, derives from its exposure of the imitative structure of gender itself - in other words, the very possibility that gender is defined through an imitation of the natural."* (Butler, 1990, p. 139)

The movie Mulan presents a society with rigid gender roles and expectations. The film illustrates how these societal constructs shape individuals' lives and limit their choices, particularly for women. The quote connects to the movie "Mulan" as it demonstrates how societal constructs and expectations surrounding gender shape individuals' lives and limit their choices. Mulan's struggle to conform to the expectations placed on her as a woman in her culture reflects the normative pressures and expectations that Butler discusses in her work. The movie illustrates how these societal expectations can be restrictive and how individuals may challenge or subvert them to find their own path.

"You said you'd trust Ping. Why is Mulan any different?" - Mulan. Themes of identity and discrimination evolve, some close-up shots expose rather exquisitely to Mulan's vulnerability, imposing low-angle shots project the authority of Shang, here emphasizing Mulan's already highly precarious position in her struggle for equality within a male-controlled setting. The dramatic lighting and rising score also heighten this moment's emotional weight as Mulan's struggle for acceptance is portrayed most powerfully, marking a great turning point in Mulan's journey of self-discovery and liberation.

This scene addresses the stereotype of gender roles and trustworthiness. Mulan, having revealed her true identity, challenges the notion that her abilities and trustworthiness should be judged differently because she is a woman. This moment in the film highlights the discrimination based on gender, as Shang initially trusted Mulan when he believed she was a male soldier named Ping. The scene highlights the idea that competence and trust should not be contingent on gender, and it questions the societal norms that dictate different expectations for men and women. Furthermore, this exchange between Mulan and Shang can be seen as a critique of the rigid gender binaries that often define how individuals are perceived and valued in society. It's a

pivotal moment that encapsulates the film's broader themes of challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for equality and recognition of one's true self.

The profound analysis of Disney's 1998 animation *Mulan* demonstrates a complex interrelationship between the traditional view of gender roles, not only mirroring the conventional expectations of society at that time but also critiquing them. Our in-depth look at the complex plot, character development, and innovative cinematography of this film will reveal how such carefully thought-out elements create a rich, contemplative, and bold storyline that challenges tradition in the meaning of femininity and masculinity.

The plot of *Mulan* centers around a young woman named Mulan who disguises herself as a man to take her ailing father's place in the army in ancient China during a time of war. This central conflict serves as the primary driving force behind the narrative, thereby allowing for a nuanced and thought provoking exploration of gender identity and the societal expectations that shape our understanding of it. The story arc follows Mulan's remarkable transformation from a dutiful daughter constrained by traditional gender roles and societal expectations to a courageous and powerful warrior who ultimately saves China from the invading Huns. This journey serves as a catalyst for personal growth, while simultaneously offering a scathing critique of the rigid gender norms that dictate behavior, identity, and societal expectations.

The art of cinematography plays a crucial role in effectively conveying the underlying themes and emotions of the film. The vibrant animation style effectively enhances emotional engagement and skillfully highlights key moments of profound transformation. The action sequences are dynamically animated, effectively emphasizing Mulan's remarkable strength and agility, which further challenges the traditional and outdated portrayals of femininity commonly seen in animation.

The results indicate several notable trends and patterns regarding the representation of gender in the Disney movie *Mulan*. The film presents a multifaceted relationship between gender roles, suggesting that strength, vulnerability, and a range of emotions can coexist and intersect within individuals, regardless of their gender identity or societal expectations. This discussion aligns with contemporary conversations about gender fluidity and the breaking down of binary classifications. However, it is important to note that while *Mulan* challenges certain stereotypes, it still operates within a framework that ultimately reinforces some traditional roles particularly through the character arcs that return to conventional norms, such as the expectation of women conforming to societal expectations, by the film's conclusion.

Our research findings demonstrate a dual pattern, both aligning with and diverging from the existing body of literature on gender representation in animated films. Previous studies have consistently highlighted how Disney films frequently reinforce traditional and stereotypical

gender roles. However, *Mulan* stands out as a notable exception due to its more progressive and nuanced portrayal of female agency, empowerment, and self-discovery. While earlier films like *Snow White* and *Cinderella* primarily depict women in passive roles, passively awaiting rescue by a male hero, *Mulan*, on the other hand, actively engages with themes of self-determination, resilience, and independence, showcasing a strong female protagonist.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Disney's *Mulan* (1998) illustrates both the reinforcement and subversion of traditional gender roles. Through Butler's concept of gender performativity, the film reveals how femininity is regulated by cultural expectations yet can be disrupted through acts of performance and resistance. *Mulan*'s journey demonstrates that strength, leadership, and courage are not inherently masculine traits but can be embodied by individuals regardless of gender.

At the same time, the film's return to conventional closure highlights the contradictions of performativity, while norms may be challenged, they are also continuously reinscribed. This tension reflects broader societal debates on gender identity, empowerment, and equality. By dramatizing the instability of gender categories, *Mulan* contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusivity and the need for more diverse representations of women in literature and media.

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