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Be A Man: Gender and Identity in *Mulan*¹



“Films are the common language of people around the world; we share our cultures through film; we share our perceptions of what it is to be human, our trials and our transformations.”

—Whitehead Film Festival²

“I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and one finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan or project, larger than one’s own knowing. Something takes hold, but is this something coming from the self, from the outside, or from some region where the difference between the two is indeterminable? What is it that claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?”

—Judith Butler³

¹ *Mulan*, Walt Disney Studios, 1998. iTunes edition.

² <http://whiteheadfilmfestival.org/about/why-whitehead/>

³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 18.

The first question I feel I must answer is why have I chosen a film intended for children to use in looking at the work of Judith Butler and Alfred North Whitehead in a Unitarian Universalist context? As a UU, I approach holy scripture, from all religions, as the stories from a culture that have withstood the test of time in providing an understanding of cosmology, sociology, familial dynamics – indeed, everything about what it means to be human in that particular community. We take the same approach to “secular” literature and other art forms besides the written word. Everything is holy and inspirational to us in how it can be used to inform and enlighten our lives, with both understanding and with joy. In addition, the seventh principle of our congregational covenant is “the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.”⁴ It has become clear to me, over the last few years, that we lay claim to a Whiteheadian-inspired common philosophy/theology across our denomination without truly being aware of it.

Additionally, the last few years have also seen a number of studies expressing a rise in the population of the “nones” – those who claim no religious affiliation and often declare themselves to the “spiritual but not religious”⁵. This is accompanied by editorials about the end of religion as we know it⁶, leading to panicked sessions in religious institutions wondering how to bring these people into the fold of conversion. I would propose the wrong question is being asked – it should not be, “How can we bring these people in?” but rather, “Why are our institutions not offering something they value and can connect to?” I believe the answer lies in many religious communities' rejection of pop culture, specifically stories like *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who*, that

⁴ “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources,” UUA.org (18 November 2013). <<http://uua.org/beliefs/principles/index.shtml>> .

⁵ For example: “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project (9 October 2012) <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>> .

⁶ Gary Laderman, “The Rise of Religious ‘Nones’ Indicates the End of Religion As We Know It,” HuffPost Religion (20 March 2013) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-laderman/the-rise-of-religious-non_b_2913000.html> .

have proven to bring people together in strong, fulfilling communities that support their members, and in many cases promote social justice outreach. These are the stories that are providing meaningful emotional and sociological development of the self in our rising generations.

Some argue that pop culture and religious institutions (reduced to “church” from here on in to shorthand for my purposes) are in competition with each other, that church is meant to do something other than what pop culture does but somehow have the same effect. Robert Johnston responds in *Reel Spirituality* that “If the theatre and the church are simply in competition, or if movies represent the 'classic degeneration,' then why bother watching movies at all? The question is nonsensical to many, particularly those under thirty. Movies are simply part of contemporary life.”⁷ Religion, and church, should speak to us about the lives we are already living, not the lives other people were living 100 years ago. Johnston continues to insist on the inclusion of movies as an aspect of spiritual life and formation, because as an art form like literature (or scripture), they broaden our exposure to life and provide alternative readings of life's meaning and significance. Values and images are formed in response to life's experiences, with movies providing the data of countless new stories. In fact, as society's major means of telling its stories, movies “are more than mere entertainment and diversion. Rather, they are life stories that both interpret us and are being interpreted by us.”⁸

If Whitehead were around today, I believe he would agree. In *The Aims of Education*, he maintains that “[n]o more deadly harm can be done to young minds than by depreciation of the

⁷ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000) 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

present. The present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the future.”⁹ Fostering not only the lives of the youth in our care, but also the future of our churches, requires us to identify and acknowledge what constitutes the present for those youth. Most of the time, it will be some form of pop culture that speaks to them and their state of mind, such as movies, video games, and television shows. And it is our responsibility to experience for ourselves what the youth see in their choices, because otherwise, we have failed to make a connection to them. We must take their ideas and relate them to what Whitehead calls “that stream compounded of sense perception, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life.”¹⁰ Once we fully comprehend that children will be watching these movies, that it is a given of our modern culture, then we see how important it is to address films watched by children and youth during early formation, for “the mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus.”¹¹ Most, if not all, of our embedded routines, default theologies, and fundamental identities are constructed when we are children. Therefore, teaching Process—and the hows and whys of troubling or undoing gender á la Judith Butler—must begin long before one is capable of even reading the source material, much less understanding it. Ergo, we have an obligation to think carefully about what films, television, and video games our youth encounter, and with which ones they choose to develop relationships, in order to use them as teaching moments the way previous generations used stories from the Bible and other scripture. Going to what the children like is also teaching them about examining themselves and the world around them, instead of

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

merely assimilating what they are told, and Whitehead argued that this was the essence of education: “education must pass beyond the passive reception of the ideas of others. Powers of initiative must be strengthened.”¹² This is, he says, a “task worth of the highest genius. It is the training of human souls.”¹³

So why, of all the options available in films made for children, did I choose the Walt Disney Company’s adaptation of the ancient Chinese poem *Ballad of Mulan*? There were three particular reasons: (1) the ancient and repeated nature of the story and its subversion of gender norms and expected performativity, and the powerful fact that it has maintained a multiplicity of presence in the consciousness of the culture in which it survived for so many centuries; (2) the addition of it to the Disney mythological canon as a force for formation and identity construction in Western culture, which Disney currently dominates; and (3) what it says about self-reflection and relationships in a world where doing the right thing is more important than believing the right thing—linking Whitehead and Butler together into a UU context. *Mulan* teaches young children that “[t]he world is a web of changing individuals interacting with, affecting, and changing each other. The body is the locus of changing life. Not to be embodied, not to change, is not to be alive.”¹⁴

I found myself, the mother of two young children, relating to many of Butler’s concerns that are also part of the larger feminist examination of Princess culture. I am also a member of what Dorene Koehler describes as “the Disney temple cult” in her Ph.D. dissertation. She

¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴ Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) 45.

suggests that “in the context of America’s artistic milieu [...] Hollywood’s entertainment industry has developed a platform for mythic ritual. It argues that Disneyland is a product of this tradition, utilizing the entertainment industry’s attributes to reinterpret traditional temple culture in the context of contemporary secular culture.”¹⁵ My use of *Mulan* for the purposes of this final paper takes Koehler’s examination of both pop culture in general and Disney in particular at face value, based on my personal experiences of her dissertation being true. Koehler also shares my sentiments about the study of pop culture as an academic discipline, claiming that

“a thorough understanding of popular culture is indispensable to intellectual and psychological vitality. Studying, digesting, and integrating the dynamics that intertwine myth and ritual are more than just an academic pursuit [...] From this perspective, it is experience that constitutes the authenticity of a life lived, and truly understanding the myths and rituals of a culture means holding in balance story and ritual no matter where they reside.”¹⁶

I believe that examining the problems identified by Judith Butler with regard to gender, identity, performativity, and giving accounts of oneself while being in relationships with others can be done by acknowledging that “Satisfying true mythic hunger means engaging with the material in front of us, not only with what Religious Studies scholar Wendy Doniger calls *Other People’s Myths*. ”¹⁷

Koehler says that “Walt Disney [...] helped a generation of America’s youth find their own way of telling story and, through his unique brand of family entertainment, brought together the conservative and liberal facets of 1950s society.”¹⁸ And while his particular brand of

¹⁵ Dorene Sue Koehler, “Here In This Land of Enchantment: Disneyland and the Poetics of Ritual,” (PhD diss., Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2012) iii-iv.

¹⁶ Koehler 18.

¹⁷ Koehler 19.

¹⁸ Koehler 20.

storytelling, with the first generation of princess, was limited to most social mores of his time, the lesson he taught children about the magic of storytelling and how it relates to our core humanity means that our youth are moving beyond the limits of the early Princesses. Koehler continues that the Disney model of story creation “developed a mythology that focused on the individual’s freedom of choice and the transformative love that grows out of romance, family, and community.”¹⁹ So how does the presence of Mulan, the gender-bending Princess, fit in to this milieu of Whitehead, Butler, and the dominating presence of the Disney mythology in Western culture?

Act I

The film opens with an immediate threat—the Huns, led by the primary antagonist named Shan-Yu, have invaded China. Upon hearing the news, the Emperor orders the conscription of additional troops, saying that “A single grain of rice can tip the scale. One man may be the difference between victory and defeat.”²⁰ While this acknowledges that a single entity is just as important to function and survival of larger-scale entities, the language is gendered to exclude entities sexed as female or gendered as women. This will be a recurring theme throughout the film—women are *taught* that they have value to the political empire of which they are a part, but only in how many sons they can bear to serve the body politic. There is no acknowledgement of the daughters needed to be born in order to maintain this status quo for the next generation. After the Emperor’s declaration about the single grain of male rice, the film cuts to Mulan describing the desired characteristics of an honorable woman who is worthy of being married (I use the

¹⁹ Koehler 21.

²⁰ *Mulan* 2:58.

passive voice deliberately): “Quiet and demure. Graceful. Polite. Delicate. Refined. Poised. Punctual.”²¹ Of course, it is revealed that she is already late for her appointment with the town matchmaker, which is established as her only means of upholding the family honor.²² As this fact is reiterated in song, however, on the screen Mulan solves a difficult move in a board game that has stumped the two elderly men playing it before she is whisked back off to her “makeover” into a suitable bride.²³

Despite the superficiality of the presentation, there are lines here and there that speak to how, exactly, the Law of this culture was formed and repeated up to this point—survival. We have already seen the viciousness of the Huns as experienced by these characters, and why they have reason to be afraid. In the same song that makes flippant, parodical (more on that later) statements like “With good fortune and a great hairdo, you’ll bring honor to us all”, there are much more serious lines that speak to the constant threat under which these people live and construct themselves: “Boys will gladly go to war for you”²⁴; “We all must serve our Emperor who guards us from the Huns; the men by bearing arms, a girl by bearing sons.”²⁵ This focus on the Emperor is very important, as it establishes the political body of the nation as inextricably linked to the gender construction of its citizens and the performative routine of the society. This is an example of what Butler describes as “The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity

²¹ *Mulan* 3:05.

²² *Mulan* 4:20.

²³ *Mulan* 7:01.

²⁴ *Mulan* 6:51.

²⁵ *Mulan* 7:26.

is articulated.”²⁶ Even as Mulan’s decisions and subsequent actions threaten how and why gender functions in this fictional China, The Law as defined by serving the Emperor’s needs is never questioned by Mulan herself. This scene is also important because it establishes the repetitive nature of the gender construction in this culture, and Butler argues that “It is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated.”²⁷ Mulan’s attempt to be married and her failure are only significant if she is failing at something that the other women and girls around her have successfully perpetuated for centuries before her. The meeting with the matchmaker is a disaster, and it ends with the admonishment to Mulan that she “may look like a bride, but [she] will never bring [her] family honor!”²⁸ She learned all the right words, dressed in the right clothes, performed the right rituals, and yet her performance is subverted by her own inability to be passive. She is sexed as female, but cannot perform gender as woman in this context. She is foiled and fallen.²⁹

This leads to her signature song, “Reflection”³⁰:

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. 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?

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 203.

²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 199.

²⁸ *Mulan* 11:22.

²⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 18.

³⁰ *Mulan* 12:00.

This song is essential to Mulan's account not only of herself, but also her part in the relationships she has with those around her: her parents and grandmother, the townspeople, the Emperor. It is clear from her words that it is not her self-identity that is in question—she knows who she is—but rather how to perform that identity for others without causing pain or disruption. Butler describes it thusly:

When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. The reason for this is that the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms.³¹

Mulan's struggle comes not from a lack of identity, or an inability to construct herself, but rather her willingness to be in relationship with her family and to participate in the body politic of being a Chinese citizen under the will of the Emperor. Her inability to perform being a woman risks cutting her off from a Whiteheadian understanding of what it means to exist—being in relationship with other entities. When she asks, “When will my reflection show who I am inside,” she is asking about herself as reflected back to her by others. Butler argues that “Even if morality supplies a set of norms that produce a subject in his or her intelligibility , it also remains a set of norms and rules that a subject must negotiate in a living and reflective way.”³² These gendered restrictions are the social norms within which she has constructed herself, and she wishes to be known within those norms, not to remake them in her own image.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 7-8.

³² Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 10.

It is that same day the message comes from the Emperor demanding that one man from each family must serve in the army during the current conflict with the Huns.³³ Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, has already served with distinction and has a permanent injury from that experience, but as the only man in the Fa family he is required to obey the summons. When Mulan publicly objects, the Imperial official declares that Fa Zhou "would do well to teach [his] daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence."³⁴ Mulan's father declares that she has dishonored him with her public defense. Later that night, the conflict intensifies, as Mulan argues that he shouldn't have to give more of himself than he already has. Fa Zhou responds angrily that he "will die doing what's right!" and that he "knows [his] place, it is time [she] learned [hers]."³⁵ The scene is painful for everyone involved, and it is important to remember here that the threat of invasion and the loss of existing stability of civilization is the undercurrent of the narrative as presented to us. Butler says that "The self-justification of a repressive or subordinating law almost always grounds itself in a story about what it was like *before* the advent of the law, and how it came about that the law emerged in its present and necessary form."³⁶ The Law here is grounded in what life was like before the protection of the Emperor, and what must be sacrificed in order to maintain that protection and stability. Women must inspire men to go to war and breed; men must give over their bodies to war regardless of their devotion to the women who inspire them and the children they sire, or even if their bodies are capable of going to war at all. It is in this context Mulan decides that if she cannot perform as a dutiful daughter, then she will perform as a

³³ *Mulan* 14:47.

³⁴ *Mulan* 15:29

³⁵ *Mulan* 17:11.

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 48.

dutiful son. In the middle of the night, after the household is asleep, she cuts her hair, takes her father's uniform and sword and the conscription notice, and leaves for the training camp.³⁷ Upon discovering what Mulan has done, Fa Zhou reveals the double threat that Mulan has taken on—not only is she at risk of death from the Hun attack, but if she is discovered gendering as a man while sexed as a female, she will be put to death by the Law of the Emperor she risks her life to serve.³⁸

Act II

Act II is when the film uses exaggerated gender stereotypes, exceptions to those stereotypes, and microaggressions to comment on the social norms and proscribed gender performativity as presented in Act I; it is an excellent example of Butler's argument that

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were. [...] there is subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.³⁹

At this point, the “guardian” sent by the Fa family ancestors—a small red dragon named Mushu—has made contact with Mulan and is attempting to teach her how to perform as a man, leading to her comedic entrance into the camp with the other men staring at her in confusion.⁴⁰ The stereotype continues as she observes men picking noses and cleaning between their toes with chopsticks. She calls this behavior “disgusting”, and while Mushu declares it to be standard

³⁷ *Mulan* 19:00.

³⁸ *Mulan* 20:10,

³⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 200.

⁴⁰ *Mulan* 27:00.

behavior of men.⁴¹ Later, when she sneaks to the river to bathe, she says that “Just because I look like a man doesn’t mean I have to smell like one,”⁴² and yet much to her chagrin, she is almost ousted when the rest of the men in the camp show up to bathe as well.

Under Mushu’s “tutelage” and the combined force of their understanding of gender performance and uninterrogated stereotypes, her first social interaction with her fellow soldiers is couched in aggression. “Men say hello by punching.” “They like to be slapped on the behind.”⁴³ And yet, one of the first men we meet (Chien-Po) actively calms another man’s temper (Yao) by engaging in physical touch and meditative chanting. It is Mushu’s refusal to let the stereotype go, and continuing to shout insults at Yao, that turns this introductory encounter into a camp-wide brawl. When Mulan is asked to explain herself, she reaches for what she believes is a “manly” response: “But you know how it is when you get those manly urges and you just gotta kill somethin’. Fix things, cook outdoors—⁴⁴ The addition of the non-sequitur aspects of gender construction serve to amplify the parodic nature of the encounter.

Then begins their actual training, and the other signature song from the film: “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” sung by Captain Li Shang.⁴⁵ While “Honor to Us All” and the accompanying visuals, from Act I, establish the foundations upon which women construct themselves in this fictional China, and point out the ways in which Mulan cannot meet those requirements, Johnson Cheu argues that “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” defines what it means to be a man while at the

⁴¹ *Mulan* 29:30.

⁴² *Mulan* 41:18.

⁴³ *Mulan* 29:30.

⁴⁴ *Mulan* 33:26.

⁴⁵ *Mulan* 38:15.

same time it "juxtaposes and makes explicit the contention that gender is a cultural product."⁴⁶

Captain Li Shang sings the song, asking "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?"

When declaring that each soldier must "be a man," he defines manhood as: "Tranquil as a forest but on fire within [...] We must be swift as a coursing river, with all the force of a great typhoon, with all the strength of a raging fire, mysterious as the dark side of the moon." When placed over and against the traits of women's gender construction listed by Mulan in Act I—"Quiet and demure. Graceful. Polite. Delicate. Refined. Poised. Punctual."⁴⁷—we see how in this fictional society, one can be sexed as male or female or some variation therein, and have a gender construction independent of that sexing. It is only by "buying into" the Law established by the need to serve the Emperor that gender become inextricably linked to sex without disruption of stability (for Whitehead, civilization) or relationships.

The training montage continues throughout the song, and by the end it is Mulan, the female-performing-as-a-man, who first completes the task set for the soldiers by Shang and inspires the others to follow her example. This is very important, because not only does it subvert the idea that only male-sexed entities can effectively gender-perform as men, but it also represents a point in time when Mulan could have chosen to return home without her man-performance coming out. After a number of failures, Shang tries to send her away from the camp, with her ruse still intact.⁴⁸ However, in contrast to her giving up after the failure with the matchmaker, Mulan spends the rest of the night trying to climb a pole with two heavy weights

⁴⁶ Johnson Cheu, *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability* (McFarland, 2013) 119.

⁴⁷ *Mulan* 3:05.

⁴⁸ *Mulan* 40:00.

tied to her arms—one represents discipline, the other strength. Like the traits in the two gendered songs, these, too, are elements of identity construction that can be placed on entities of any sex despite their cultural association with particular sexes. Chien-Po's identity as a man is never questioned, yet he repeatedly performs the “female” traits of being quiet and polite. When the camp comes out at sunrise to see Mulan sitting on top of the pole, she becomes an inspiration to the rest of them to recommit to their training and their service to the Emperor. She has, in effect, convinced the boys to go to war for her—she has accomplished the ultimate need of the Law by subverting how it has traditionally reified itself.

Act III

But fulfilling the Law, for Mulan, is not enough. She continues her performance as a man, and eventually the small band of soldiers confronts the Huns, hopelessly outnumbered. Mulan uses one of their remaining cannons to set off an avalanche that buries the horde, saving both her fellow soldiers and the rest of China. The men call her “the bravest of us all” and name her “king of the mountain.”⁴⁹ But in the attack, she is injured, and faints. While she is unconscious, her female sex is revealed, and everything she has accomplished in her persona as a man loses all significance in the eyes of Shang and the Emperor’s advisor. Her fellow soldiers try to save her from the required execution, but they are unable to stop it. It is only Shang’s belief in the power of life debt, and that Mulan saves his life during the avalanche, that saves her life. She is exiled into the snowy mountains while Shang and the others ride back to the Imperial city to report the end of the Hun invasion. It is in this state of exile that she begins to reflect on her motives for the first time since leaving home. This entire time, she had been operating under the

⁴⁹ *Mulan* 59:20.

belief that she had acted to save her father's life, and to prevent the dishonor of him having to fight with his disability. Upon deeper reflection, however, in the displaced environment in which she finds herself, she comes to realize that "Maybe I didn't go for my father. Maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right... so when I looked in the mirror, I'd see someone worthwhile."⁵⁰ Up to this point, she *had* been seeing someone worthwhile in the mirror held up to her by Shang, Yao, Chien-Po, and Ling. To return to Butler:

[...] to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology; in other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality, including language, work, and desire, that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing.⁵¹

It is their rejection of her claim to performative traits that they believe are the sole propriety of men that changes the reflection she sees in the mirror, and not any action on the part of Mulan herself. Nevertheless, because of how identity is formed within relationships, this change in how they see her, how they relate to her, has the effect of violence on her embodied self. She is prevented, by her exposure, from persisting and flourishing.

Further contemplation on what performance her identity must now take is interrupted when she sees that a small group of the Huns, including Shan-Yu, survived the avalanche and are heading for the Imperial city. Once again, the stability of her family, her town, her country, and lives of her fellow soldiers are in jeopardy, and she reacts just as she did to the threat of harm to her father: "I have to do something."⁵² This is important because it reiterates that while Mulan's performance changes throughout the film as she attempts to make herself known to others in a

⁵⁰ *Mulan* 1:02:40.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, "On This Occasion," in *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion*, ed. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Deena M. Lin (Lexington Books, 2012) 11.

⁵² *Mulan* 1:05:39.

way that will reflect who she thinks she is back at herself, the core of who she thinks she is, the purpose of the actions she takes, *has not changed*. Butler explains that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.”⁵³ At each step of the way, she has been trying to prove that she is a human being, worthy of being heard, worthy of being in relationship, worthy of being trusted with the responsibility of others. The deed remains the same, but the doer changes construction based on the needs of the situation: Mulan-as-bride, Mulan-as-boy-soldier, Mulan-as-exile.

Of course, as a woman, when she reaches the city, no one will listen to her warnings about the impending Hun attack. When she confronts Shang, she throws his sexism/genderism right in his face, reminding him that he trusted her when he thought she was a man—why is different now that she is a woman?⁵⁴ She tries to raise the alarm in the crowd, to no avail. When she asks why no one is listening, Mushu reminds her, “Hey, you’re a girl again, remember?”⁵⁵ When the Huns capture the Emperor, she finds Shang, Yao, Chien-Po, and Ling trying to break down the doors to the palace, and tells them she has another idea. All but Shang immediately drop the battering ram and follow her, without question.⁵⁶ Just as Mulan was able to see how she had stereotyped them as men in Act II, they are able to reflect her actions as a soldier back to her, and choose the chance to save the Emperor over orders from Shang, their commanding officer.

⁵³ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 195.

⁵⁴ *Mulan* 1:07:01.

⁵⁵ *Mulan* 1:08:29.

⁵⁶ *Mulan* 1:09:40.

Her plan, it turns out, is to use the society's insistence on ignoring women, and refusing to see them, much less reflect them, in order to get past the Hun guards.⁵⁷ She is already performing as a woman, wearing a dress. Without argument, Yao, Chien-Po, and Ling are shown donning outfits and makeup as extensive as that which Mulan had to wear to perform as a bride in Act I. This montage is underscored by a reprise of "Be A Man," which simultaneous underscores the constructed, performative, almost costume-like nature of gender as presented in the film, while at the same time hinting that being a man is therefore the preferred universal default. The latter implication is amplified by the appearance of Shang, who joins them without the dress or makeup, thereby re-establishing his relationship with Mulan as he knew her before, but without taking on the gender construction subversion as performed by the other three men. As Mulan has found a performance that is balanced between the two she had been performing before—bride and soldier—and Shang is set up as the primary relationship of this particular narrative, it appears to signify a mutual understanding between the two of equal power. Nevertheless, the larger implications of how gender is linked to power, performance, and relationships in the larger context created by the film cannot be ignored. There is the implication that, while it is acceptable for Shang to acknowledge Mulan's multi-gender performance, as a male-sexed and man-gendered entity who is the love interest as opposed to a secondary character or comic relief, showing him (1) in drag and (2) seducing the male Huns is too much.

To no surprise, their gender-bending plan works, and Mulan not only saves the Emperor but it is implied she also kills Shan-Yu. The ensuing discussion over what to do with reiterates the problem: by her actions, as stated by Shang, "She's a hero." According to the Emperor's

⁵⁷ *Mulan* 1:09:56.

advisor, however, “‘Tis a woman. She’ll never be worth anything.”⁵⁸ Note how in the latter statement, Mulan is described as an “it”, with all the connotations that carries with it about the objectification and dehumanization of women. It is not for them to decide, however, as they are in the presence of the Emperor—the personification of the Law, and the reason for its current form and performative proscriptions throughout this fictional China. The Law is built around the needs of the Emperor to fulfill his divine command of protecting the nation and the culture. He lists all the laws she has broken, all the property of the state that she has destroyed in his rescue, and then, in an echo of the soldiers on the mountain, declares that she “has saved us all.”⁵⁹ This is how “the divine command functions in ways other than as law, such that an encounter with the divine command functions to undo the binds of law. [...] Divine violence, enacted through an encounter within the divine command, becomes a violence against the violence of law and thereby frees the subject to a possibility for life beyond the law.”⁶⁰ The Emperor, as the divine command, enacts divine violence against the gendered performance restrictions that have kept Mulan from her full, embodied, divine humanity and her process of becoming. He accepts her multi-gender performance, and thereby re-instates her ability to both have relationships, and to see her account of herself reflected back by those with whom she is in those relationships. At the symbolic level, he presents her with his medallion, to represent her service to him as the divine command, and the sword of Shan-Yu, to represent her service to her community. When he asks her to serve on his council, she refuses—for her, this was never about power within the larger

⁵⁸ *Mulan* 1:15:36.

⁵⁹ *Mulan* 1:16:20.

⁶⁰ Alan R. Van Wyck, “Divine Possibilities: Becoming an Order without Law,” in *Secrets of Becoming: Negotiating Whitehead, Deleuze, and Butler*, ed. Roland Faber and Andrea M. Stephenson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 178-179.

body politic, but about how she could serve and honor her family. When Mulan hugs the Emperor, Yao asks, “Is she allowed to do that?” The others shrug—because of the Emperor’s divine violence, they no longer know what the norms are, or how the Law operates... but China did not fall.

It is also important to note that while Mulan plays with her gender construction, she never questions her sex, her desire to be in a romantic and sexual relationship with a man, or her position in the heterosexual matrix. In fact, for how subversive many of her actions are, as a whole, she is still a woman exchanged between two men: Fa Zhou, the decorated war hero of a previous generation, and Li Shang, the new hero of the current generation who venerates Fa Zhou as an elder and military force. There is very little in the film about Mulan’s relationship with her mother and grandmother, and since Mulan herself goes through little to no change in personality, it can be argued that the film ultimately portrays what Butler calls “a relationship between men which is, finally, about the bonds of men, but which takes place through the heterosexual exchange and distribution of women.”⁶¹ If, however, it is exactly what Mulan wants, has wanted from the beginning, and is able to participate in the exchange on her own terms, is that a bad thing at all? Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart discuss how heterosexual women face “the complexities of loving the enemy,” and argue that “[l]oving the enemy in terms of survival means seeking relationships with those ‘enemies’ who actively attempt to resist the culture of male domination.”⁶² As Mulan’s father, Fa Zhou must have had something to do with her formation as an outspoken, independent woman. By the end of the film, Shang has proven

⁶¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 55.

⁶² Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 107.

his willingness to resist the culture that forces gendered constructions on particular sexes. Mulan even has the blessing of the Emperor. Things may not change for the rest of the women in China, but this narrative is not about them, and is not from them. This account of Mulan is not even for Mulan herself, but is instead for those who experience it—the children of the temple cult who are formed their embedded, embodied notions of what it means to construct a gender, live (and become) in relationship with others, and question the Law when it does violence to them. Mulan finds a way, and therefore so can they.

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