

Draw and Release: Tension and Independence in the Mother–Daughter Dyad

A review of the film



Brave

(2012)

Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, and Steve Purcell (Directors)

Reviewed by

[Leafar F. Espinoza](#)

The advent of an animated movie featuring a feisty and rebellious teenage princess sporting a bow and arrow should not come as a surprise, particularly given the recent attention boost this weapon has been given by Jennifer Lawrence's character, Katniss Everdeen, in *The Hunger Games*. In fact, this weapon and the crossbow have been appearing in several other popular media, such as *The Walking Dead*, *Revolution*, *The Avengers*, and, of course, *Arrow*.

Combine this archery phenomenon with one of the most successful computer animation studios ever, Pixar, and one might expect the film *Brave* to capture the imagination, whisk it away, and regale it with a story befitting Pixar's first female lead. However, although the graphics and scenery were hailed by critics as outstanding, the tepid plot, limited character development, and uneven tone that ranged from serious to goofy comedy relief resulted in a bevy of less-than-favorable reviews. One cannot say, however, that it hurts to appeal to popular demand, as demonstrated by *Brave's* opening gross of \$66 million, placing it eighth on the 2012 yearly box office opening grosses (Box Office Mojo,

2012), although this was less than half of the \$152 million for *The Hunger Games*, which placed it third on the 2012 yearly box office opening grosses.

Yet despite some of these artistic flaws and the painfully uplifting songs by Julie Fowlis, *Brave* tackles a theme not commonly addressed in the realm of animation. Move past the stereotyped themes of the princess struggling with duty and expectations, the rebellious and all-knowing teenager who learns to take responsibility for her actions in a coming-of-age story, a princess being forced to marry, and the strong woman behind the throne of an oafish but lovable and entertaining king, and you'll see that the aforementioned themes are media used to explore, albeit in a somewhat shallow and formulaic manner, the challenges and joys of the mother–daughter relationship.

An informal survey of reportedly over 11,000 participants through the Circle of Moms website revealed that *dad* (or *dada*, *daddy*, *papa*, etc.) and *mom* (or *mama*, *mommy*, *mum*, etc.) are, respectively, the first and second most common first words spoken by babies (Circle of Moms, 2012). Tardif et al. (2008) conducted a large sample study of 265 English-speaking, 336 Mandarin-speaking, and 369 Cantonese-speaking caregivers of eight- to 16-month-old infants, revealing *Daddy* and *Mommy* to be the top two most common first words in the United States; *Daddy*, *Aah*, and *Mommy* the top three in Hong Kong; and *Mommy* and *Daddy* being the top two in Beijing (in their respective languages).

However, one does not need such statistics or research to know how influential parents are in the development of their children. For better and worse, the nurture that parents provide can have a long-lasting and profound influence extending to adulthood.

In the case of *Brave*, although nice to look at, the playful and easygoing father–daughter dyad is not the one that merits scrutiny. Rather, it is the tempestuous relationship between Merida and her mother, Queen Elinor, that warrants further analysis. Bishop (1992) described the mother–daughter dyad as the first dyadic relationship that a female child has, setting the stage for a continued process of self-disclosure between the two. Nadeau (1995) stated that understanding this relationship is critical to young adult girls because daughters bond with their mothers in a complex, interdependent association that often inhibits a daughter from establishing her own identity.

According to Boyd (1989), there seem to be two predominant groups of theories that attempt to explain the mother–daughter relationship and why girls become like their mothers. One is based in psychoanalysis and the other in social learning theory. Theories on the mother–daughter relationship center on identity formation as it pertains to issues of mothering, affiliation, and separation. Conflicts over the need to separate are thought to arise from a perceived lack of psychological distance within the dyad.

In this light, Princess Merida may have been experiencing the need to create distance from her queen mother, which begs the question: Are Merida's tomboy tendencies a product of her own innate adventuresome nature or the result of an inevitable attempt to create distance from the parent that Merida is most linked to biologically and psychologically?

Merida's tearing of a tapestry in a moment of anger symbolizes her railing attempts at developing this individuality and the resulting rift between mother and daughter.

A frequently cited framework is one proposed by Nancy Chodorow, a feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst, who proposed that women are more likely than men to maintain certain portions of their primary relationship with their mother. In her 1978 book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Psychology of Gender*, Chodorow discussed the continuing relationship between mother and daughter in terms of how a young girl's identification with her mother continues throughout life, whereas a young boy's identification with his mother is broken and switched to his father. In a revision of her book more than 20 years later, Chodorow took into account changes in economy and parenting roles, the development of shared parenting, and its effect on the traditional mothering role (Metzl, 2003), although the core tenets of the original theory appear to remain largely unchanged.

Pixar's world of ancient Scotland, however, is not affected by the large shift in modern parenting roles, and it is certainly not King Fergus who has taken the responsibility of guiding Merida through her duties. Rather, it is Queen Elinor who has donned this role. Although not much emphasis is placed on Merida's identification with her mother in *Brave*, much of it is implied, given that, in essence, Merida will become a queen, like her mother, with many similar responsibilities.

Social learning theorists, perhaps more mundanely, advocate principles of modeling (Boyd, 1989), positing that girls learn to mother through reinforcement when they imitate their mother's behavior (Weitzman, 1984). Nadeau (1995) proposed that, regardless of which theoretical framework one prefers, all women are daughters and must resolve the conflicts inherent in the mother-daughter relationship if they are to understand themselves and ultimately to establish their own identity.

In *Brave*, this quest for identity takes place without the typical romantic relationship that occurs in Disney animations. Instead, the prince-princess dyad is replaced with the tumultuous mother-daughter dynamic that allows for the analysis of much-explored stereotyped gender roles. According to Hershberg (2006), a founding member and director of the Psychoanalytic Training Program at the Institute of Contemporary Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, in adolescence, mothers and daughters are involved in a mutually ambivalent relationship, each often struggling with her relational needs and developmental pressures. From the mother's side, she might want to enjoy the close connection with her daughter, while launching her into adulthood (as Queen Elinor does by presenting suitors from three other clans in order to keep the peace between all clans). From the daughter's side, she might adopt her mother as a model of womanliness, while at the same time differentiating herself from her mother to be her own person.

Interestingly, the resolution of this attempt to be true to herself while not losing that connection with her mother may be symbolized by Merida putting her sewing skills to use to mend the literal and metaphorical rift between her mother and herself. In essence, the path

that the narrative takes allows for Merida to find an identity that rightly eschews sexist tradition, yet without denying her femininity (Larsen, 2012).

Bishop (1992), referring to disclosure, pointed out that it takes courage to become “real” to others. Along the same vein, it may take courage to see within ourselves. Indeed, an Internet Movie Database (IMDB, 2012, para. 1) synopsis states that Merida must rely on her bravery and her archery skills to undo a beastly curse, and, toward the end of the film Merida says, “Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it.” One might contend that Merida is brave for being true to herself and accepting responsibility. Concurrently, Merida’s behaviors may be viewed as selfish and demonstrative of the impulsiveness of youth, this view being supported by neurological research that reveals a relatively slow, linear development of impulse control, suggesting that decision making in adolescence may be particularly modulated by emotion and social factors (Blakemore & Robbins, 2012).

However, a title like “Finally Taking Some Responsibility” just does not seem to have the same pizzazz as “Brave.” Regardless of possibly being inaptly named, *Brave* reminds viewers of the primal power of the mother–daughter relationship, the draw between the two, and the inevitable need for release and independence that most adolescents feel.

References

- Bishop, C. (1992). Self-disclosure in mother–daughter dyads: The forgotten areas of study in interpersonal communication. *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association*, 20, 57–75.
- Blakemore, S.-J., & Robbins, T. W. (2012). Decision-making in the adolescent brain. *Nature Neuroscience*, 15, 1184–1191. doi:10.1038/nn.3177
- Box Office Mojo. (2012). *2012 opening grosses*. Retrieved from <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2012&view=widedate&view2=opening&sort=opengross&order=DESC&p=.htm>
- Boyd, C. J. (1989). Mothers and daughters: A discussion of theory and research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 291–301. doi:10.2307/352493  
- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the psychology of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Circle of Moms. (2012). *Baby talk: The 15 most common first words*. Retrieved from <http://www.circleofmoms.com/article/baby-talk-top-15-common-first-words-00718#>

Hershberg, S. G. (2006). Pathways of growth in the mother–daughter relationship.

Psychoanalytic Inquiry, 26, 56–69. doi:10.1080/07351690609353112

PsycINFO

Article

Internet Movie Database. (2012). *Brave*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1217209/>

Larsen, J. (2012, June 27). Disney, gender equality, and the bold move made by *Brave* [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://thinkchristian.net/disney-gender-equality-and-the-bold-move-made-by-brave>

Metzl, M. N. (2003, Winter). [Review of the book *The reproduction of mothering*, by N. Chodorow]. *DIVISION/Review: A Quarterly Psychoanalytic Forum*, 55–60. Retrieved from <http://www.apadivisions.org/division-39/publications/reviews/chodorow.aspx>

Nadeau, F. A. (1995, Winter). The mother/daughter relationship in young adult fiction. *The ALAN Review*, 22(2). Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter95/Nadeau.html>

Tardif, T., Fletcher, P., Liang, W., Zhang, Z., Kaciroti, N., & Marchman, V. A. (2008). Baby's first 10 words. *Developmental Psychology*, 44, 929–938. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.44.4.929

PsycINFO

Article

Weitzman, L. (1984). Sex-role socialization: A focus on women. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Women: A feminist perspective* (pp. 157–327). Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.