

The Social Construction of Gender Roles in *Brave* (2012)

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines the representation of gender roles in the animated film *Brave* (2012) by applying Ann Oakley's theory of gender as a social construction. The analysis focuses on how femininity is constructed, regulated, and challenged through the relationship between the main character, Merida, and her mother, Queen Elinor. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes selected scenes, dialogues, and visual representations that depict processes of gender socialization, behavioral discipline, marriage expectations, and female resistance. The findings demonstrate that *Brave* portrays gender roles as socially constructed through family authority, royal traditions, and everyday practices that emphasize obedience, emotional restraint, and conformity to conventional ideals of femininity. Simultaneously, the film presents resistance to these norms through Merida's rejection of arranged marriage, restrictive feminine behavior, and imposed standards of perfection. This study concludes that *Brave* (2012) functions as a cultural text that reveals the social construction of gender within family and social institutions, while also offering a critique of traditional gender roles by foregrounding female agency and autonomy.*

Keywords: gender roles; gender socialization; femininity; *Brave* (2012)

A. Introduction

This study argues that gender roles in animated films are neither natural nor fixed but are socially constructed through cultural narratives, family relationships, and behavioral expectations. As cultural texts, animated films play a significant role in shaping ideas about femininity and masculinity by presenting socially accepted norms through characters, dialogue, and visual representation. Disney and Pixar films, in particular, often function as sites where traditional gender roles are introduced, reinforced, and, in some cases, challenged.

From this perspective, gender is understood not as a biological condition but as a social product formed through continuous processes of socialization. Oakley (1972) conceptualizes gender as a set of learned behaviors and expectations transmitted through institutions such as the family, education, and culture. According to Oakley, femininity is commonly constructed through obedience, behavioral regulation, emotional restraint, and conformity to social norms. These processes of gender socialization operate subtly through everyday practices, making gender roles appear natural and unquestioned. Media texts, including animated films, contribute to this process by normalizing particular forms of feminine behavior while marginalizing others.

Within animated narratives, family relationships often serve as the primary space in which gender roles are taught and enforced. Parental authority, moral instruction, and behavioral discipline function as mechanisms through which children, particularly female characters, are socialized into socially acceptable gender roles. Consequently, animated films can be examined as cultural sites where gender norms are negotiated between tradition and resistance. This makes animated films a relevant object of study for understanding how femininity is constructed within familial and social contexts.

Several previous studies have explored gender roles in animated films. Yuliasari et al. (2024), for instance, analyze *Mulan* using a qualitative descriptive method and semiotic analysis. Their study reveals that female characters are largely positioned within traditional gender expectations related to obedience, family loyalty, and marriage norms. Although *Mulan* presents elements of resistance to patriarchal authority, gender roles in the film remain strongly shaped by cultural values and social expectations.

Another relevant study is conducted by Putri and Prastiwi (2025), who examine the representation of Princess Merida in *Brave* (2012) through a liberal feminist approach. Their findings indicate that Merida is portrayed as independent, courageous, and resistant to arranged marriage, thereby challenging the traditional image of Disney princesses. However, this study primarily focuses on feminist resistance and empowerment and provides limited analysis of how gender roles are socially constructed through family discipline and behavioral control.

Despite these contributions, research examining *Brave* (2012) through the lens of gender socialization within family institutions remains limited. Previous studies tend to emphasize resistance to patriarchal norms while paying less attention to the everyday processes through which femininity is taught, regulated, and normalized. Therefore, this study applies Oakley's (1972) theory of gender roles to analyze how femininity is constructed, reinforced, and challenged through interactions between Merida and Queen Elinor. By focusing on everyday practices such as princess lessons, behavioral discipline, and marriage expectations, this study positions *Brave* (2012) as a cultural text that reveals the social construction of gender within familial and social institutions.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the representation of gender roles in the animated film *Brave* (2012). Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it aims to understand and interpret meanings, social values, and cultural messages embedded in visual and narrative texts. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on exploring and interpreting social phenomena based on participants, texts, or cultural products rather than measuring variables numerically.

The data source of this research is the animated film *Brave* (2012) produced by Pixar Animation Studios and directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. The research subject is the main female character, Merida, and her interactions with Queen Elinor, particularly in scenes that portray traditional gender expectations, female obedience, marriage arrangements, and resistance toward patriarchal norms.

The data collection technique used in this study is documentary observation. The researcher repeatedly watched the film to identify relevant scenes, dialogues, and visual

representations related to gender roles. The data were documented in the form of screenshots and dialogue transcripts. The selection of data was guided by Oakley's theory of gender roles, focusing on representations of gender socialization, behavioral control, and the construction of femininity within family and social institutions.

The data analysis technique applies a theory-based thematic analysis. The collected data were categorized into themes such as princess lessons, behavioral discipline, marriage control, female obedience, and resistance to traditional femininity. These themes were analyzed using Oakley's (1972) theory of gender roles, which views gender as a social construction learned through socialization rather than biological determination. This analytical process allows the study to examine how gender roles are constructed, reinforced, and challenged within the narrative of *Brave* (2012).

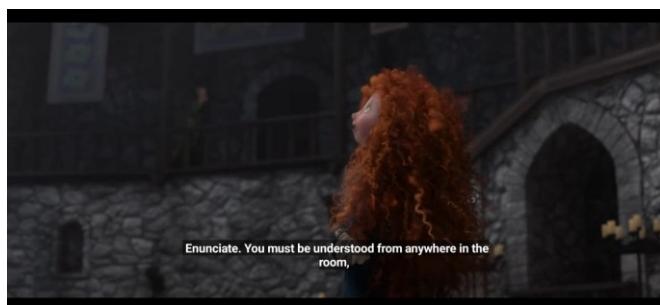
C. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the findings and discussion based on the analysis of selected scenes from *Brave* (2012). Using Ann Oakley's theory of gender roles, the study examines how traditional femininity is taught, controlled, and challenged through Merida's interactions with Queen Elinor. The analysis is organized thematically to show how gender roles are socially constructed and reinforced within royal and familial contexts, as well as how these norms are questioned through Merida's resistance.

A. Queen Elinor teaches Merida a princess lesson

In *Brave* (2012), Merida's identity as a princess is shaped through lessons taught by her mother, Queen Elinor. As a parental and royal authority, Queen Elinor plays an important role in teaching Merida how a "proper" princess should behave. These lessons include rules about speech, emotional control, body discipline, daily routines, and polite manners. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are not natural or biological but are learned through social processes such as family guidance and cultural expectations. The princess lessons shown in these scenes function as a form of gender socialization that teaches Merida traditional feminine values. Through repeated corrections, femininity is presented as something that must be practiced and controlled. At the same time, Merida's visible discomfort and resistance suggest that these gender roles are restrictive and do not fully align with her true identity. This tension shows that gender roles are socially constructed and can be questioned when they limit individual freedom.

Figure 1



Brave (2012), [06:03]

In this scene, Queen Elinor instructs Merida by saying, "Enunciate. You must be understood from anywhere in the room." The statement is delivered as a formal correction of Merida's speech

manner, emphasizing clarity, control, and proper articulation in public. This scene demonstrates how femininity is regulated through speech and communication. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are shaped through social expectations that govern not only behavior but also the way individuals speak and present themselves. By controlling how Merida speaks, the scene reinforces the idea that women, especially those in public or symbolic roles, must communicate in a refined and socially acceptable manner. Speech becomes a tool of discipline, reflecting how femininity is constructed through continuous correction and performance.

Figure 2



Brave (2012), [06:14]

In this scene, Queen Elinor states, “A princess must be knowledgeable about her kingdom.” The instruction highlights the expectation that Merida should possess knowledge appropriate to her royal role and responsibilities. This scene reflects the gendered framing of knowledge and responsibility. While the instruction appears empowering, it still positions Merida’s knowledge within a controlled and socially defined role. Ann Oakley (1972) argues that gender roles determine not only behavior but also the scope within which individuals are allowed to develop certain skills. In this context, Merida’s education is directed toward maintaining tradition and governance rather than personal ambition or self-exploration, reinforcing socially constructed limits on female identity.

Figure 3



Brave (2012), [06:31]

In this scene, Queen Elinor corrects Merida by stating, “A princess does not chortle.” The dialogue occurs when Merida laughs freely in a public setting. Her laughter is immediately framed as inappropriate according to royal etiquette and traditional feminine standards. The scene emphasizes that a princess is expected to behave calmly, gracefully, and with emotional restraint in public spaces. From Ann Oakley’s (1972) perspective, this scene demonstrates that Merida’s gender role is not determined by biological traits but is shaped through social instruction. Queen Elinor’s correction reflects the process of gender socialization, in which acceptable feminine behavior is taught and reinforced by authority figures, particularly within the family. The expectation that Merida must suppress her natural expressions illustrates how cultural norms

regulate women's behavior in order to conform to idealized femininity. At the same time, Merida's visible discomfort suggests an early resistance to these imposed gender roles, foreshadowing her later rejection of traditional feminine expectations throughout the film.

Figure 4



Brave (2012), [06:33]

In this scene, Queen Elinor corrects Merida's eating behavior by stating, "Does not stuff her gob!" The dialogue occurs while Merida is eating in a manner considered improper during a formal setting. Queen Elinor's comment emphasizes that a princess must eat politely and with restraint, aligning her behavior with royal and feminine etiquette. This scene illustrates how femininity is constructed through everyday practices such as eating manners. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are learned through social conditioning and repeated correction. By regulating how Merida eats, Queen Elinor reinforces the idea that women must control their bodies and natural behaviors to conform to societal expectations. The scene highlights how femininity is associated with self-discipline and decorum rather than comfort or authenticity.

Figure 5



Brave (2012), [06:34]

In this scene, Queen Elinor states, "Rises early," as part of a list describing the qualities and daily habits expected of a proper princess. The statement is delivered as an instruction rather than a suggestion, emphasizing routine and discipline as essential aspects of femininity. This scene illustrates how femininity is constructed through daily routines and behavioral discipline. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are learned through repeated social practices that shape how individuals organize their lives. By defining even Merida's daily schedule, the scene shows how feminine identity is regulated through expectations of discipline, responsibility, and self-control. The instruction reinforces the idea that women must conform to structured norms that prioritize duty over personal freedom.

Figure 6



Brave (2012), [06:44]

In this scene, Queen Elinor states, “And above all, a princess strives for... well, perfection.” The dialogue is delivered as part of a lesson outlining the qualities expected of a princess. Merida listens silently as the ideal image of femininity is defined for her. This scene reflects the construction of femininity as an unattainable ideal. Oakley (1972) explains that gender roles are shaped through social expectations that define how women should think, act, and appear. The concept of “perfection” places pressure on Merida to conform to rigid standards of femininity, leaving little space for individuality. This reinforces the idea that women are expected to continuously adjust themselves to meet idealized social norms.

Figure 7



Brave (2012), [10:08]

In this scene, Queen Elinor tells Merida, “Merida, a princess does not place her weapons on the table.” The dialogue occurs when Merida casually places her weapons beside her during a formal moment. The weapons symbolize Merida’s adventurous and independent nature, which contrasts sharply with royal expectations. This scene highlights the gendered separation between femininity and traits associated with strength and combat. According to Ann Oakley (1972), society assigns certain behaviors and objects to specific genders. Weapons are culturally coded as masculine, while femininity is associated with softness and restraint. By forbidding Merida from displaying weapons, the scene reinforces traditional gender boundaries and restricts female access to symbols of power.

Figure 8



Brave (2012), [10:13]

In this scene, Queen Elinor states, “A princess should not have weapons in my opinion.” This dialogue further reinforces the earlier restriction placed on Merida regarding weapons. The statement reflects a personal yet socially informed belief about what is appropriate for women, particularly princesses. This moment demonstrates how gender roles are internalized and justified as common sense. Oakley (1972) argues that gender norms are sustained when social expectations are normalized and treated as natural opinions. By framing the restriction as an “opinion,” Queen Elinor reinforces patriarchal gender values without questioning them. Merida’s continued resistance highlights that these roles are socially imposed and therefore open to challenge.

Figure 9



Brave (2012), [12:29]

In this scene, Queen Elinor corrects Merida by saying, “A princess does not raise her voice,” during a moment of emotional tension. Merida’s attempt to express herself verbally is immediately restrained, reinforcing expectations of calm and composure. This scene highlights how women’s voices and emotional expressions are socially regulated. Oakley (1972) explains that gender socialization teaches women to suppress assertiveness in favor of politeness and obedience. By discouraging Merida from raising her voice, the scene reinforces the idea that femininity is associated with silence, restraint, and emotional control. Merida’s frustration reflects the tension between individual expression and socially imposed gender norms.

B. Royal Authority and the Loss of Female Choice

In *Brave* (2012), the announcement of Merida’s arranged marriage clearly shows how royal authority limits female autonomy. Decisions related to marriage are presented as political and familial obligations rather than personal choices. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are socially constructed through institutions such as family and marriage, which often position

women as obedient subjects within patriarchal systems. The following scenes demonstrate how Merida's role as a princess removes her right to choose and places her future under the control of royal tradition.

Figure 10



Brave (2012), [12:07]

In this scene, Queen Elinor informs Merida, "The lords are presenting their sons as suitors for your betrothal." The announcement is delivered as a formal decision rather than a discussion, leaving Merida with no opportunity to express her opinion. Merida reacts with visible shock and confusion, indicating that the decision has been made without her consent. This scene reflects the traditional expectation that women must accept marriage arrangements decided by family and social authority. From Ann Oakley's (1972) perspective, this moment demonstrates how gender roles are imposed through social institutions, particularly marriage. Merida is positioned as a passive participant whose role is to comply with decisions made on her behalf. The absence of choice reinforces the idea that women's lives are structured according to social obligations rather than personal desires.

Figure 11



Brave (2012), [18:58]

In this scene, Queen Elinor refers to "...the presentation of the suitors," emphasizing the formal event where potential husbands will compete for Merida's hand. The focus is placed on the suitors and the ceremonial process rather than Merida's feelings or consent. This scene further reinforces the objectification of women within traditional marriage practices. According to Oakley (1972), gender roles are reinforced when women are treated as objects of exchange within social systems. Merida's role is reduced to a prize to be claimed through competition, while the men are granted agency and choice. This representation highlights the unequal power dynamics inherent

in traditional gender roles, which Merida later actively resists by challenging the marriage arrangement.

C. Queen Elinor Controls Merida's Behavior

In *Brave* (2012), Queen Elinor's control over Merida's behavior becomes more explicit when Merida openly challenges traditional gender expectations in public spaces. As a royal authority, Queen Elinor attempts to regulate Merida's actions in order to preserve social order, reputation, and traditional femininity. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are socially constructed and maintained by limiting acceptable behaviors for women and discouraging actions associated with masculinity. The scenes in this section show how Merida's physical skills, confidence, and public defiance are perceived as threats to gender norms. Queen Elinor's interventions reflect the pressure placed on women to conform, while Merida's resistance highlights the conflict between individual agency and socially imposed gender roles.

Figure 12



Brave (2012), [26:39]

In this scene, Queen Elinor warns Merida, "Don't you dare loose another arrow," during the archery competition arranged for the suitors. The warning is given to prevent Merida from participating further in an activity dominated by male contestants. Merida's use of a bow and arrow directly challenges the expectation that such skills belong exclusively to men. This scene represents a direct conflict between traditional gender roles and Merida's agency. Archery is culturally coded as a masculine activity, while femininity is associated with passivity and restraint. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are socially constructed and maintained by restricting access to certain behaviors based on gender. Queen Elinor's command reflects an attempt to reinforce these boundaries. Merida's decision to continue shooting symbolizes her rejection of the limitations placed upon her gender.

Figure 13



Brave (2012), [27:26]

Following the archery competition, Queen Elinor confronts Merida by stating, "You embarrassed them," and "You embarrassed me." The dialogue reflects Queen Elinor's concern with public image, honor, and social reputation. This scene highlights how women are often expected to prioritize social harmony and family honor over personal expression. Oakley (1972) explains that gender norms are reinforced through emotional regulation and social pressure. By framing Merida's actions as an embarrassment, Queen Elinor reinforces the idea that women must conform to societal expectations to maintain respectability. Merida's silence and emotional response suggest the emotional burden placed on women who challenge traditional gender roles, further emphasizing the oppressive nature of these expectations.

D. Merida Takes Control of Her Decision

In *Brave* (2012), Merida's open resistance to traditional gender roles reaches a critical point when she publicly asserts her right to make decisions about her own life. This moment marks a shift from passive obedience to active agency, particularly within the context of marriage and female autonomy. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are socially constructed to define women as compliant and dependent, especially in matters related to marriage and family. The scene in this section illustrates how Merida challenges these expectations by rejecting the role of a passive bride and claiming authority over her own future. Her action represents a direct challenge to patriarchal norms and demonstrates that gender roles can be resisted when individuals assert control over their choices.

Figure 14



Brave (2012), [26:11]

In this scene, Merida publicly declares, “And I’ll be shooting for my own hand,” during the archery competition arranged for the suitors. The statement shocks the audience and disrupts the traditional ceremony, as Merida asserts her right to participate and compete for her own marriage decision. This scene represents a clear assertion of female autonomy within a patriarchal marriage system. By declaring that she will shoot for her own hand, Merida rejects the notion that women must be chosen by men. Ann Oakley (1972) argues that gender roles in marriage are socially constructed to limit women’s agency and decision-making power. Merida’s statement subverts this structure by reclaiming control over her body, future, and identity. The public nature of her declaration further emphasizes the challenge to societal norms, marking a pivotal moment in the film where traditional gender roles are openly confronted and destabilized.

E. The Ceremonial Dress and Female Constraint

In *Brave* (2012), traditional feminine attire is used as a tool to discipline and control female behavior. Clothing, particularly ceremonial dress, functions not only as a symbol of femininity but also as a physical mechanism that restricts movement and self-expression. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles are socially constructed and reinforced through everyday practices, including expectations related to appearance and bodily presentation. The scenes in this section demonstrate how traditional clothing imposes limitations on Merida’s physical freedom and reinforces the idea that femininity requires restriction, discomfort, and self-control. Merida’s reaction to the dress highlights her rejection of these imposed norms and emphasizes that such expectations are neither natural nor neutral, but socially enforced.

Figure 15



Brave (2012), [26:23 - 26:26]

In these connected scenes, Merida struggles with her tight ceremonial dress during the archery competition. She exclaims, “Curse this dress!” as the gown tears while she attempts to move freely. The visual emphasis on the torn dress symbolizes the physical and social constraints imposed on Merida through traditional feminine attire. This scene symbolizes the oppressive nature of traditional femininity. The dress functions as a material representation of gender expectations that limit women’s physical freedom and agency. Ann Oakley (1972) argues that gender roles are maintained through social practices that regulate how women look and move. Merida’s verbal rejection of the dress, combined with its physical destruction, represents a symbolic refusal of imposed femininity. The absence of dialogue in some moments strengthens the visual message that traditional feminine attire restricts women’s autonomy. This act of resistance further reinforces the idea that gender roles are socially constructed and can be challenged through both action and symbolism.

F. Queen Elinor Follows Tradition

In *Brave* (2012), Queen Elinor is portrayed as a key figure in maintaining traditional gender roles through her strong commitment to law, heritage, and social order. As a royal and maternal authority, she upholds established customs that regulate women's roles, particularly in matters of marriage and public behavior. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles become powerful when they are reinforced through social institutions such as tradition, law, and family authority. The scenes in this section illustrate how Queen Elinor follows and enforces these traditions, positioning them as unquestionable rules. Her actions demonstrate how patriarchal norms are preserved not only through formal systems but also through everyday enforcement by those who have internalized these values.

Figure 16



Brave (2012), [22:14 - 22:26]

In this scene, Queen Elinor explains the rules of the marriage contest by stating, “In accordance with our laws,” “by the rights of our heritage,” and “Only the firstborn of each of the great leaders may be presented as champion.” The announcement is delivered formally, emphasizing legality, tradition, and lineage. Merida listens as the rules are presented as fixed and unquestionable. This scene demonstrates how patriarchal gender roles are legitimized through legal and traditional discourse. According to Ann Oakley (1972), gender roles gain authority when they are embedded within social institutions such as law and heritage. By framing the marriage arrangement as a legal and historical obligation, Queen Elinor reinforces the idea that women must comply with established norms rather than exercise personal choice. The language of law and tradition functions to normalize gender inequality by presenting it as cultural continuity rather than social control.

Figure 17



Brave (2012), [26:16 - 26:39]

In this scene, Queen Elinor reacts strongly when Merida steps forward during the competition. She says, “What are you doing?” followed by “Merida, stop this!” and “Don’t you dare loose another arrow.” Her tone reflects urgency and fear of public disorder, as Merida openly challenges the established rules. This scene highlights the role of maternal authority in enforcing patriarchal norms. Oakley (1972) argues that gender roles are sustained not only by men but also by women who have internalized social expectations. Queen Elinor’s reaction illustrates how women can become agents of patriarchal enforcement, prioritizing tradition and social order over individual autonomy. Merida’s defiance exposes the fragility of these norms, revealing that the rules governing gender behavior are socially constructed and maintained through constant enforcement.

D. Conclusion

This study analyzes the representation of gender roles in *Brave* (2012) using Ann Oakley’s theory of gender as a social construction. The findings show that gender roles in the film are not portrayed as natural or biologically determined, but as socially produced through family authority, royal traditions, and cultural expectations. Queen Elinor plays a central role in enforcing traditional femininity by regulating Merida’s speech, behavior, appearance, emotional expression, and life choices, particularly in relation to marriage. These practices reflect Oakley’s concept of gender socialization, in which femininity is learned through continuous discipline and normalization.

Furthermore, the film illustrates how marriage functions as a social institution that limits female autonomy. Merida’s arranged marriage is presented as a political and cultural obligation rather than a personal choice, positioning her as an object of social exchange within a patriarchal system. This reinforces the idea that gender roles are sustained through institutional practices that prioritize tradition and social order over individual freedom.

However, *Brave* also presents resistance to these traditional gender roles. Merida’s refusal to conform to imposed femininity, her rejection of arranged marriage, and her assertion of personal agency demonstrate that gender roles are negotiable and open to challenge. Her actions expose the restrictive nature of traditional femininity and emphasize the possibility of redefining women’s roles beyond obedience and conformity.

Overall, this study concludes that *Brave* (2012) represents gender roles as socially constructed and maintained through family and cultural institutions, while simultaneously offering a critique of these norms through the portrayal of female resistance and autonomy. The film

highlights that femininity is not fixed, but shaped through social processes that can be questioned and transformed.

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