

Proposed question for Independent Inquiry:

“How has gender representation and expression in contemporary entertainment media been shaped by societal and cultural events and movements.”

Keywords: Femininity, Masculinity, and Mythology.

Student Name: Matilda Griffiths

Student Number: 1900122

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Tutor's name: Louise Burston

Femininity, Masculinity, and Mythology.

Throughout history, the Masculine and the Feminine have each been presented in different and specific ways. With much of history, and arguably culture to this day, being largely influenced by societal gender roles and sexism, my goal is to explore the historical precedent of these two topics in art and mythology. This will relate to my three chosen artists Sandro Botticelli (Femininity), Jacques Louis-David (Masculinity), and Hayao Miyasaki (Mythology), as well as my chosen thinkers Judy Chicago (Femininity), Grayson Perry (Masculinity), and Jenna Carey (Mythology).

Femininity

“Because we are denied knowledge of our history, we are deprived of standing upon each other's shoulders and building upon each other's hard earned accomplishments. Instead, we are condemned to repeat what others have done before us and thus we continually reinvent the wheel.” (Chicago, 1997)

Historically the feminine within art has been driven by stereotypes and societal expectations dominated by men. From classical styles, with women naked and oblivious, a sexualised fantasy derived only for the male gaze and pleasure to the more recent, with Egon Schiele's grotesque and nearly childlike imagery of feminine sexuality. Whilst the styles in which these expectations are expressed may change, the depiction of women (by male artists) as to objectify them as something to be viewed for the pleasure of the male gaze is a motif far too common. Take for instance Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus'.



Botticelli, S. 1485 ca. *The Birth of Venus* [Online]. [Accessed 10 May 2021]

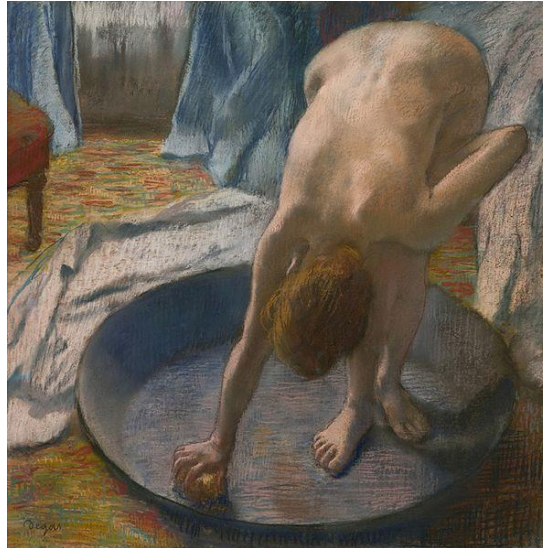
The figure of Venus is centre stage, being watched not only by the other figures within the painting in her nudity, but also by the viewer. She is an object of desire and beauty, presented almost as a pearl within a clam being stared at for its' beauty. The presentation of women in this way, whilst at the time of Botticelli artwork may not have been so overtly sexual, was still a common theme throughout history. Femininity was gentle and beautiful, and thus femininity in artwork was presented as such: an idealised version of the male fantasy. When not presented as nude objects, women throughout history have predominantly been shown within art to be subservient, to carry out the work of the woman and complete the "feminine tasks" at the word of a man. Artists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir regularly show these idealised roles of women within his work, and Edgar Degas' "The Tub" similarly presents the female figure unknowing of its own subjugation.



Renoir, Pierre-Auguste. 1873. *Mother nursing her child* [Online]. [Accessed 9 May 2021]



Renoir, Pierre-Auguste. 1873. *Woman with Parasol* [Online] [Accessed 9 May 2021]



Degas, Edgar. 1886. *The Tub* [Online]. [Accessed 9 May 2021]

It is important to remember that due to societal expectations at the time women were often not permitted to explore artistry in the same way men were, and thus the images shown thus far have all been created by men. However, is it not important with the society we have today to explore in further detail the female artists who were wiped from history? The portrayal of gender in art changes whether created by men or women-however due to women's historical subjugation the balance is heavily tipped in favour of men's portrayals up to the 1960s and 70s with the feminist art movements. However, there were still female artists creating despite most often being shunned for their gender. Artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola in the 15-1600s, Rosa Bonheur in the 1800s,

“Historically, women have either been excluded from the process of creating the definitions of what is considered art or allowed to participate only if we accept and work within existing mainstream designations. If women have no real role as women in the process of defining art, then we are essentially prevented from helping to shape cultural symbols.” (Chicago, 1996)

During the feminist movements of the 60s and 70s, more women came forward to reclaim the presentation of femininity. This movement aimed to include to women's perspective within art, the change the way femininity was presented exclusively as something for men. The gaze here is important as is has shifted: The male gaze sees women as something for the pleasure of men. Even

work much closer historically to us such as Egon Schiele, which at times has been praised for embracing the unique sexuality of women at a time when it was seen as immoral to do so, presented women as objects to be viewed, and in many cases furthered ideals such as “childlike women” and therefore women as less than or inferior to men.

I wish to explore how the historical precedent behind the exploitation and use of women and femininity in art has affected today’s media and storytelling, and how we can learn from it to create better representation of femininity.

Masculinity

“How we talk about masculinity might be just as important, if not more so, than what we say. The very idea that there is a strict set of rules needs to be chucked away. The future of masculinity is a plethora of masculinities.” (Perry, 2016)

Similar to traditional femininity in art being portrayed to fit a society structured view on gender, masculinity also has been presented in a certain way throughout history. Traditional gender roles place the masculine as the head of the house, the leader, a fighter, with strength, honour, courage. An example of this idealised version of a man can be seen in Jacques-Louis Davids “Napoleon crossing the alps”.



David, Jacques-Louis. 1801. *Napoleon crossing the Alps* [Online]. [Accessed 8 May 2021]

Masculinity is strength, heroism, stoicism, and power when looking throughout art history. Compared with femininity, masculinity is the strong one, the more important. Louis-Davids depictions of napoleon in this image can very much be seen as a prime example of what masculinity was and to an extent still is seen to be and is expected. Napoleon sits strong on a noble stallion, leading his troops amidst a grand and rocky backing. “Such textual and artistic ideals of masculinity were by nature not obtainable by real men,” (Milligan, 2012) and yet men were overwhelmingly the ones to portray masculinity in such a way. One might see this as another way in which throughout history, regardless of consequence, femininity was placed below masculinity. Much in contrast to how women had been portrayed in art at that time as subordinate and domestic (to fit the expectations of women in those

times and cultures), the man is presented as noble, honourable, and strong. Whilst many female artists were shunned from greatness throughout history, there is no shortage of great male artists, and so in many ways watching this presentation of masculinity from a male's perspective is vastly different from watching the presentation of the feminine through a man's eyes.

It is also interesting to look at art which portrays both the feminine and the masculine in conjuncture with each other, highlighting the great differences in the way that they were portrayed. Take Jacques-Louis Davids "Oath of the Horatii":



David, Jacques-Louis. 1784. *Oath of the Horatii* [Online]. [Accessed 8 May 2021]

What is interesting about this image and is something that I am interested in exploring further is Davids condemnation of the traditional masculine roles within this piece. A commission from the French king at the precipice of the French Revolution, *Oath of the Horatii* could be argued to condemn the roles of Honour and Nobility of men. The three men on the right are going to battle for their country, saluting the strength of the patriarchal figure the father, while the women weep to the side. He acknowledges the pain that is caused by the violence of masculinities need for strength and power, a theme that in many ways is truly being challenged much more recently. The idea of the harmfulness of gender roles can be explored through masculinity and the expectations it places in a similar way to femininity.

Whilst it is important to note the unfair expectations imposed on men by traditional gender roles that have been present in art throughout history, it is also important to recognise that these were in place

to put men above women. Whilst the ideas of men being expected to be strong, stoic, etc. as explored in the previous art pieces, this was done to place the domestic, subservient feminine role below the masculine. They work in tandem, to place the feminine as inherently below the masculine.

“The ‘ideal’ future might just be increasing tolerance and celebration of a spectrum of masculinities born out of increasing awareness of what feels good for the individual and for society.” (Perry, 2016)

It can be argued that the advent of the feminism movement has in turn progressed gender expression and equality for both men and women: the feminine is no longer as villainised as it was, or seen only as something men can get or take from women, but instead, as more feminist artwork has been created presenting the feminine as something different and equal to men, it has also made way for the masculine to be reinvented, for the arbitrary rules that guided how men should present themselves or strive to be to be changed and altered. However, in many ways recent media still villainises the feminine attributes in both men and women as a way of placing ‘traditional masculinity’ above ‘traditional femininity’.

Mythology

“Most often, women are purely sexual figures for men to look at.” (Carey, 2016)

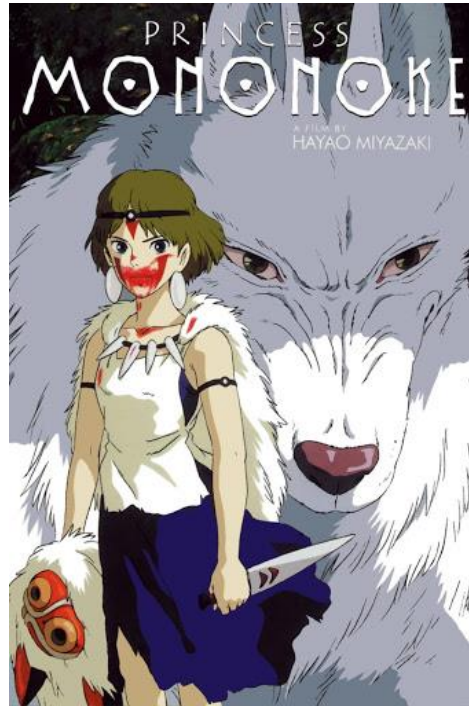
After looking at the context behind historical representations of men and women, and the feminine and the masculine, I now want to explore what this means for modern day art and media. Art is a valuable way of exploring the presentation of males and females in times when modern media storytelling such as film did not exist. By looking back at what the historical expectations of men and women were, and how masculinity and femininity were expected and enforced, I want to look further at how that has influenced more modern media, how those expectations have changed or stayed the same, and how there might be improvements still despite the large steps forward made.

Looking at the previous topics, the roles of male and female were clearly laid out, with women being subservient and domestic, and this is reflected within art. Stories have throughout history been ways of showing moral rights and wrongs and have been used to present the “ideal” in terms of masculine and feminine presentation. From myths in ancient Greece where women are at the mercy of the more powerful men, to early fairy tales-turned-Disney movies, where the princess awaits rescue by a prince, these stories set an ideal that in turn both reflects society and influences it. Despite the changes to the sexist viewpoints vastly made within today's media, there still lies a large issue of representation within media, specifically when it comes to femininity. “Since the media paints women in such a negative light, men think it's acceptable to treat them worse than they deserve.” (Casey, 2016). If we look at a Hollywood film such as “Transformers”, arguably one of the most well-known examples of the female lead being almost exclusively there to be looked at and fantasied over, where femininity, like in art, was presented as something in service to the male gaze. On a similar vein, if we look at a film such as “Mean Girls”, we do not see the same form of objectification, but rather we see traditional femininity being looked down upon and shamed from the perspective of other women. It is as though despite steps made, the presentation of gender roles and expectations in media is still a current issue. Having looked at the early examples of art which portrays the masculine and feminine roles, to then look at the progression of representation of both masculinity and femininity would be invaluable.

Modern media still has the issue of looking down on traditional femininity, which is not only harmful to women but to men as well, for the ideas of masculinity mentioned previously still exist. There are still so few examples of male character that present feminine traits, as femininity is still looked down upon, which leaves a large portion of male representation to be a toxic portrayal of masculinity.

However, just as there are bad examples, there are also examples of progression and change.

A good example of media which shows the change in attitudes would be the Studio Ghibli movie “Princess Mononoke”, directed by Hayao Miyasaki.



(Princess Mononoke, 1997)

Whilst studio Ghibli is known for their portrayals of diverse female main characters, their presentation of male characters is also something that goes against traditional roles and explores different ways to interpret masculinity. Take for instance the character of Ashitaka from Princess Mononoke. Within the story he is widely a force of balance and near passiveness. Compared to other characters, he is largely non-violent in contrast to what you might expect from societal expectations of masculinity. Whilst it is important to also recognise the cultural differences between Japanese and American media, this presentation of a gentler masculinity seems in line with Perrys’ urge for a change of masculinity.

Having looked at the early historical context for the representation of gender and traditional gender roles within art, I feel I have a more comprehensive understanding of the “starting point” for gender presentation in media. Understanding how art and media is reflective of contemporary societies, as well as how that media or art can then become the guide for how one should behave in that culture is an extremely important part of understanding how media presentation changes, and how we can make it change more. Moving forward, looking more in depth at the progression of representation from a more recent time would be invaluable in answering important questions. How is change in media enacted when there is the cycle of reflection? Historical events can also alter a societies view of certain groups or ideals, such as briefly touched upon when talking about Oath of the Horatii, and thus, what events more recent to now – within the past century – have been driving forces in the drastic changes seen from the art of the early 1900s to today? Whilst I think it was greatly important that I understood a wider historical context of representation than just the past century, moving forward an emphasis on more recent history to link more strongly with recent media is essential, especially since as previously mentioned there are still many areas for improvement and change. Researching media has led me to as many questions regarding specifically the role of masculinity within film and media, as whilst my focus was on gender roles, it is difficult to compare the presentation of masculinity and femininity given the context of male domination in these fields that exists even to this day. My research through these three keywords, as well as my key thinkers and artists have led me to the following proposal which I find encompasses my interest in the different ways masculinity and femininity are affected within the time frame I am most interested in: “How has gender representation and expression in contemporary entertainment media been shaped by societal and cultural events and movements.”

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Princess Mononoke

(1997)

Directed by Hayao Miyasaki

[Animation]

[Japan]

[Studio Ghibli]

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