

**Damsel in Distress? : Analysing *Damsel* as a Subversion
of the Chivalric Trope of ‘Damsel in Distress’**

Dissertation

In

English Language and Literature

University Of Kerala

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July 2025

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of the Chivalric Trope of ‘Damsel in Distress’**

DISSERTATION

*Submitted to the University of Kerala
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of
Master of Arts
In
English Language and Literature*

Examination Code: 53022402

Subject Code: 530

Course Code: EL 545

University Of Kerala

Thiruvananthapuram

July 2025

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PREFACE

The recurring appearance of the ‘damsel in distress’ and its implications on femininity, agency, and vulnerability are construed and constructed. The figure of the damsel continues to re-emerge in its traditional form. This dissertation, titled ‘Damsel in Distress? : Analysing Damsel as a Subversion of the Chivalric Trope of ‘Damsel in Distress’, aims to explore the nuances of this classical motif through the film *Damsel*.

The ‘Introduction’, lays down the trope of the ‘damsel in distress’ in traditional storytelling and media, also offering a brief summary of the film *Damsel* (2024). It introduces the central arguments of the project and highlights the need to critically evaluate the evolution of such tropes in contemporary feminist discourse.

The second chapter, titled ‘The Trope of the Damsel in Distress’, delves into its development through literary and cinematic traditions. This chapter provides a foundational understanding of the trope, examining how it has been mobilized to shape perceptions of gender roles, heroism, and vulnerability, especially in patriarchal and chivalric frameworks.

The third chapter, titled “*Damsel* as a Subversion of the Trope of ‘Damsel in Distress’”, analyses *Damsel* through Foucauldian notion of power, Butler’s concept of performativity, third and trauma theory. The chapter investigates how the film reclaims the ‘damsel’ figure and presents it as an agent of resistance, exposing the systems of domination.

The fourth chapter, titled ‘Conclusion’, reflects on the cultural implications of the film’s subversion of the traditional trope. It considers the

potential for wider cinematic portrayals of female agency and calls for further exploration of how genre films can contribute to the dismantling of long-standing gender stereotypes.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The ‘damsel in distress’ is a timeworn narrative device in which a passive, often helpless female character is placed in peril and must be rescued usually by a male hero. Rooted in ancient myths and popularized through medieval romances and modern cinema, this trope has shaped how femininity and heroism are portrayed. In recent decades, storytellers have begun to challenge and deconstruct this cliché, presenting female characters who defy expectations, take control of their narratives, and reject passivity.

It is a narrative archetype that has persisted across centuries of storytelling, from ancient mythologies to modern cinema. At its core, this trope features a young woman typically beautiful, virtuous, and passive who finds herself in peril and is subsequently rescued by a brave, usually male, hero. The scenario reinforces a gendered dichotomy: the woman as the object of rescue and the man as the active subject who performs the rescue. Though often dismissed as a simple storytelling device, the trope has deeply influenced how femininity, masculinity, and heroism are conceptualized in popular culture.

The damsel in distress can be traced back to classical mythology. In Greek myth, Andromeda was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster, only to be saved by Perseus, who slays the beast and claims her as a bride. Similarly, Eurydice, the wife of Orpheus, is lost to the underworld, prompting her husband to embark on a journey to retrieve her. These stories often depict women as passive rewards for male valour. The ‘rescue’ is not about the woman’s autonomy, but about the man’s heroism.

In medieval European literature, the trope became more romanticized through chivalric tales. Knights, such as those in Arthurian legend, were often portrayed as rescuing noble maidens from dragons, towers, or villains. These stories reinforced ideals of courtly love, where women were placed on a pedestal but simultaneously stripped of agency. The '*damsel*' became a symbol of virtue and beauty to be protected, not a character with her own narrative drive.

Tales such as Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Cinderella all feature young women in helpless circumstances, awaiting rescue—often in the form of marriage. The romantic reward was not only the culmination of their story arcs but also the solution to their problems.

In most of these tales, the women do not take decisive action to change their fates. Instead, they are patient, virtuous, and submissive, enduring suffering until a man arrives to free them. Even in cases where the female characters show resilience (e.g., Cinderella's endurance of cruelty), their salvation comes from outside forces usually a prince.

These stories were passed down and retold through generations, subtly reinforcing gender expectations: women should be good and beautiful, and their reward will be love and security provided by a man.

With the advent of mass media in the 20th century, the trope adapted to new forms. The persistence of the damsel in distress is not accidental. The trope serves symbolic and structural functions in storytelling. The damsel is often pure, gentle, and virtuous—representing the ideal woman within patriarchal frameworks. By rescuing the damsel, the male hero affirms his masculinity,

power, and worth. Her distress provides a narrative purpose for his actions. The damsel's suffering raises the emotional tension, providing urgency and justification for the hero's quest or violence. Saving the damsel often leads to romantic union, reinforcing the idea that rescue equals love. This model may serve plot purposes, but it reduces the female character to a mere narrative device stripped of independence or complexity.

Feminist critics have long argued that the 'damsel in distress' reflects and reinforces harmful gender roles. It portrays women as inherently weak and dependent, while glorifying male dominance and control. Laura Mulvey's influential 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, introduces the idea of the 'male gaze' the concept that women in film exist primarily to be looked at, desired, and saved by men. "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 62). This division helps explain why the damsel trope often silences the female subject and centers male visual and narrative control. The damsel trope exemplifies this, often rendering the female character voiceless or secondary to the male gaze and narrative.

Anita Sarkeesian, in her video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, highlights how this dynamic continues in modern gaming, where female characters are often reduced to objectives rather than protagonists. She explains that using women's suffering to motivate male action devalues female characters, turning them into tools to serve male development.

Even outside of media analysis, this trope has real-world implications. By consistently presenting women as passive and men as saviors, it contributes

to gendered expectations in relationships, workplaces, and society at large. Women may be expected to be helpless or emotionally dependent, while men may feel pressured to always be strong, dominant, and in control.

At its core, the trope frames women as passive, while men are active agents of change and rescue. The woman's suffering is used primarily to showcase the bravery, strength, or moral superiority of a male hero. This dynamic affirms the patriarchal idea that men are natural protectors and decision-makers, while women are naturally dependent and in need of protection. In many fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*, the heroine remains unconscious or passive until a prince arrives to save her, symbolizing that women require male action to achieve resolution or fulfillment.

Women in these stories are not typically given complex personalities or goals of their own. Instead, they function as plot devices—rewards, prizes, or victims. This reinforces a patriarchal framework in which a woman's value lies not in her choices or voice, but in how she serves the man's journey. The female character becomes a symbol, not a subject valued for her beauty, innocence, or virtue, rather than intellect or action. This upholds the notion that a woman's ultimate goal is to be claimed, loved, or saved by a man.

The damsel trope celebrates traits like obedience, patience, fragility, and silence—all traditionally 'feminine' virtues within a patriarchal society. "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a doing rather than a being" (Butler 402). This notion reframes the trope as a performative enactment of femininity—a ritualized repetition that is open to disruption and resistance.

Characters who exhibit independence, strength, or defiance are often punished, villainized, or cast aside. By contrast, male heroes are rewarded for assertiveness and bravery. This creates a moral dichotomy where women who conform to passivity are seen as good and deserving of rescue, while assertive women are seen as threats to male authority.

In many narratives, the act of rescuing the damsel is followed by romantic entitlement—the rescuer automatically gains the woman’s love, hand in marriage, or loyalty. This equates saving a woman with owning her, reinforcing the idea that male protection must be reciprocated with submission or affection. This reinforces a troubling idea: that a woman’s consent, autonomy, or feelings are secondary to a man’s heroic actions. The trope also serves to justify violence committed in the name of saving women. Entire wars or acts of revenge are launched because a female character is kidnapped, insulted, or harmed. In patriarchal narratives, women’s bodies often become the justification for men’s violence, heroism, or moral superiority. This dynamic perpetuates the idea that men are protectors by nature and that women’s value lies in being protected rather than in defending themselves.

Patriarchal ideologies rely on rigid gender binaries: men are strong, brave, logical, and dominant; women are weak, emotional, nurturing, and submissive. The ‘damsel in distress’ reinforces this binary by dramatizing the contrast between male and female roles.

In the film *Damsel* directed by Juan Carlos, the titular term is deliberately used with ironic weight. It invokes expectations of fragility, submission, and rescue precisely the assumptions the film seeks to overturn.

Rather than presenting a passive female character waiting to be saved, the film places its protagonist in a position where rescue is neither offered nor desired. This narrative move not only denies the viewer the anticipated trope but also calls into question the cultural appetite for stories that glorify female helplessness and male dominance.

Moreover the film exposes the structural violence hidden within the traditional trope where 'rescue' often masks control, entitlement, or transactional love. Instead of romanticizing captivity and submission, *Damsel* reclaims agency for its female lead, allowing her not only to survive but to self-determine. It reframes distress not as a narrative endpoint for women, but as a beginning of resistance and transformation.

The film becomes a postmodern reimagining of the trope, holding a mirror up to centuries of storytelling and asking: What if the damsel never needed saving in the first place?

'*Damsel*' is a 2024 American dark fantasy film directed by Juan CarloFresnadillo and written by Dan Mazeau. Millie Bobby Brown stars as Elodie, a young woman who accepts a marriage proposal only to realize that she is being used to repay a royal family's ancient debts and must now escape while surviving attacks from the dragon lurking in the chasm.

The first king of Aurea leads a futile attack on a dragon residing in his realm. All the king's men are killed, leaving the king at the Dragon's mercy. Centuries later, Elodie, the daughter of Lord Bayford, receives a proposal from Queen Isabelle of Aurea to marry her son, Prince Henry. On her father's urging, Elodie agrees to the marriage so her bride price can help their impoverished

people. Upon arriving in Aurea, Elodie and Henry are initially uninterested in each other, but begin to bond as they share a desire to travel. Elodie's stepmother, Lady Bayford, becomes suspicious of the motives of Queen Isabelle, leading her to futilely implore Elodie to end the engagement.

After the wedding, Elodie and Henry take part in an ancient ritual in the mountains, supposedly to celebrate their union. Isabelle describes the pact between the first king and the dragon, where he had to sacrifice his three daughters to ensure peace between his people and the dragon. Following a ceremony where their palms are cut and held together, Henry carries Elodie across the narrow path over the Dragon's lair, then at Isabelle's behest throws her down the chasm.

Recovering from the fall, Elodie realizes that she is an actual sacrifice. She escapes the Dragon after it burns her leg, and discovers an illuminated cave filled with glowing silk worms, which she collects as a light source. Elodie reaches a chamber with the note 'Safe Here She Cannot Reach', the names of past victims, and a map carved into the wall. While Elodie sleeps, the worms heal the burn on her leg.

Elodie follows the map to a dead end at a high vertical drop on the mountainside. She discovers the remains of dead dragon hatchlings, explaining the reason for the royal sacrifices. A rescue party led by Lord Bayford arrives. The Dragon kills them, including Lord Bayford, but the distraction allows Elodie to escape the mountain. She takes one of the rescue party's horses and hides under a rock as the Dragon burns the surrounding area in an unsuccessful pursuit.

Alerted by the conflagration that Elodie's sacrifice has failed, Isabelle resorts to kidnapping Elodie's younger sister Floria as a replacement. After learning this from a desperate Lady Bayford, Elodie returns to the mountain to rescue Floria, whom the dragon has left alive as bait.

Elodie creates a diversion to reach Floria. Telling her sister to hide, she confronts the Dragon and tries to convince her that they were deceived by the Aureans by joining their cut hands at the wedding, the blood of the brides and the Aurean royals mingled, making the Dragon think that the princesses were of Aurean descent. Refusing to believe Elodie, the Dragon states that the first king's assault was unprovoked, and then attacks her. The two battle until Elodie tricks the Dragon into burning herself. With the Dragon at her mercy, she convinces the Dragon of the truth and heals both of them with the glowing worms.

Elodie then interrupts the wedding of another sacrifice at the palace, exposing the Aurean royal family's treachery. Elodie advises the new bride and her family to flee, and the Dragon burns the palace with all the Aurean royals and nobles inside. Henry, remorseful for his actions, is shown to accept his fate. Days later, Elodie, Floria, and Lady Bayford sail home, loaded with supplies and accompanied by the Dragon.

One of the central themes of '*Damsel*' is the empowerment of its female protagonist. The film challenges traditional notions of the 'damsel in distress' by showcasing a character who takes control of her fate and fights against the odds. This theme highlights the importance of agency and self-determination. Sacrifice plays a crucial role in the narrative, both in terms of personal sacrifice

for loved ones and the broader implications of sacrifice within societal expectations.

The journey of the protagonist involves significant personal growth and transformation. As she navigates challenges and confronts adversaries, she discovers her true identity and capabilities. This theme underscores the idea that adversity can lead to self-discovery and empowerment. '*Damsel*' critically examines gender roles and expectations within society. By subverting traditional tropes associated with female characters, the film prompts discussions about gender dynamics, strength, and vulnerability.

The 'damsel in distress' trope has long served as a foundational narrative device in literature, cinema, and folklore, embodying not only a pattern of female vulnerability but also reinforcing the structural dynamics of gendered power. At its core, this trope casts a woman often young, beautiful, and passive as a victim awaiting rescue by a male hero. This narrative formula, while seemingly innocuous in fairy tales and fantasy, reproduces deeper patriarchal ideologies that have historically defined and confined women's roles in society.

From ancient myths to 20th-century films, the woman in distress typically lacks agency, existing primarily to validate male heroism. This mirrors the gender hierarchies present in real-world social structures, where men are often positioned as protectors, decision-makers, and actors, while women are relegated to dependent and decorative roles. In this light, the trope becomes more than a storytelling tool; it is a reflection of and reinforcement for existing power imbalances.

The woman's distress In these narratives is rarely political or economic; it is personal and emotional, thus privatizing her suffering and separating it from structural causes. Her victimhood is romanticized rather than resisted. She is not encouraged to challenge her oppressor; instead, she must wait helpless for a male saviour. In turn, the hero's masculinity is affirmed through the act of rescue, perpetuating the idea that male power is necessary for female survival. This relationship is symbolic of patriarchal power: men are powerful because women are weak, and women are defined through their relationship to male agency.

The damsel trope aligns with the framework, women are not only objects of desire, but also of sympathy and rescue, which enhances male dominance by rendering female subjectivity invisible. The lack of female y is embedded in the very structure of the narrative.

Moreover, the trope often erases diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity. It promotes a binary understanding of gender—where femininity is synonymous with weakness and passivity, and masculinity with strength and action. This not only marginalizes women but also constrains men who do not fit the aggressive, heroic mold. Power, in this context, becomes gendered, leaving little room for alternative representations.

As feminist thought began to challenge dominant narratives in literature and media, so too did creators begin to critique and subvert the damsel in distress trope. Rather than allowing the trope to stand unchallenged, contemporary stories have increasingly reimagined the damsel not as a passive

victim but as an agent of her own liberation. This shift marks a profound change in how gender and power are conceptualized in narrative structures.

The subversion of this trope lies in the redistribution of narrative power. When the damsel becomes the hero of her own story, traditional gender roles begin to unravel. The rescue is no longer the domain of the male figure; instead, the female character navigates her crisis, fights her battles, and reclaims control over her destiny. In these retellings, power becomes multifaceted—not solely physical strength or dominance, but emotional resilience, intellectual cunning, and moral integrity.

One compelling element of subversion is the refusal to romanticize female suffering. Rather than being an aesthetic device to elevate male heroism, suffering becomes a site of transformation and resistance. For example, in modern reinterpretations, the woman's trauma is linked to larger societal structures such as patriarchy, capitalism, or colonialism allowing the narrative to critique systemic inequality instead of personalizing the problem.

Contemporary works often blur or entirely reject the gender binaries that upheld the original trope. Characters exist outside the male saviour/female victim framework, and gender is no longer the defining axis of power. Some narratives portray men who are vulnerable or supportive rather than dominating, and women who are strategic, flawed, and self-reliant. These shifts illustrate a more nuanced understanding of power one that is relational, contextual, and not exclusively gendered.

The cultural pushback against the damsel trope also reflects evolving conversations about intersectionality. Earlier depictions of the damsel were not

only gendered but often raced and classed in exclusionary ways white, upper-class, heterosexual femininity was the norm. Today's subversions increasingly include women of colour, queer characters, and working-class heroines, broadening the scope of who can be seen as powerful and who gets to escape the confines of distress.

These transformations suggest that power is no longer simply who rescues whom, but who controls the story. To reframe the damsel in distress is to reclaim narrative authority and in doing so, disrupt the hierarchies that kept certain voices silent. Thus, the trope becomes a critical lens through which we can examine the intersection of gender, representation, and the ongoing redefinition of power.

The film depicts power dynamics where traditional male authority figures are challenged by the female lead's actions. By placing a woman in a position where she must confront or negotiate with powerful adversaries, the narrative can critique patriarchal structures and advocate for female empowerment. The protagonist's sacrifices could serve as a form of resistance against oppressive forces. By choosing to fight back rather than submit, she embodies a rejection of powerlessness, highlighting how personal sacrifice can lead to broader societal change. The character Princess Elodie is a victim of patriarchal norms that objectify women. Elodie gradually asserts autonomy and rejects the roles assigned to her. "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault 781). In this Foucauldian sense, Elodie transforms from an object of sacrifice into a self-reflective subject acting upon herself.

The film highlights the importance of challenging patriarchal norms and telling the truth. Elodie, the protagonist embody a more complex view of heroism that challenges traditional gender roles. Her journey could involve making sacrifices that defy the stereotypical damsel in distress narrative, ultimately positioning her as a strong, independent character who takes control of her destiny.

Second-wave feminism played a pivotal role in deconstructing the damsel in distress trope by revealing its ideological underpinnings and advocating for female autonomy in storytelling. It reframed passive femininity as a chosen and critically interrogated narrative trait rather than a default. It cultivated new images of women as active subjects with emotional, intellectual, and moral agency.

Second-wave feminism catalyzed the rise of on-screen characters visibly challenging gendered expectations. Figures like Jess Bradford rejected female helplessness through autonomy and moral complexity, refusing to be defined solely by victimhood.

Ellen Ripley was an iconic image of a female protagonist whose survival and agency directly confronted the damsel trope marking a shift from passive victim to empowered subject within the male-dominated action genre .

Second-wave discourse emphasized that female characters should have self-determined arcs and autonomy, not exist merely as objects, rewards, or catalysts for male journeys. This shifted storytelling to prioritize women's agency as character-defining, rather than narrative accessories—a direct challenge to traditional damsel portrayals. The damsel in distress trope was

analyzed as commodifying femininity and reinforcing male dominance through narrative structure and visual culture. This feminist lens enabled us to recognize and reject narrative patterns that reinforce dependency and passive female roles.

Second-wave feminism empowered filmmakers and writers to reimagine female roles. Figures like Ellen Ripley and Jess Bradford were not just characters—they were political acts, asserting that women could embody strength, decisiveness, and survival instincts without male intervention.

These influences laid the groundwork for later feminist film movements, which demanded nuanced, multidimensional female characters not as romantic rewards but as fully-realized protagonists with agency.

Chapter 2

The Trope of the Damsel in Distress

The trope of the ‘damsel in distress’ has long been a staple in literature, mythology, and popular media, portraying women as passive figures in need of rescue, often by a heroic man. This recurring narrative not only shapes fictional storytelling but also reflects deeper societal attitudes about gender and power. By consistently casting women as helpless and dependent, and men as strong, active saviours, the trope reinforces patriarchal ideas that associate masculinity with control and agency, and femininity with vulnerability and submission. As such, the ‘damsel in distress’ becomes more than just a character—it becomes a symbol of the unequal distribution of power between genders, subtly upholding traditional hierarchies and limiting representations of female autonomy.

The trope of the ‘damsel in distress’ operates as a powerful cultural narrative that encodes and reproduces gender hierarchies across various forms of storytelling. While it may seem like a simple plot device at first glance, the deeper implications of the trope reveal a highly constructed system of meaning, discipline, and social expectation. By drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of power and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, one can better understand how such a narrative function not merely as entertainment, but as a mechanism through which gendered power relations are internalized, enacted, and perpetuated.

Michel Foucault redefined traditional notions of power, shifting the focus from centralized authority to dispersed, relational, and productive forces embedded within discourse and institutions. In works such as *Discipline and*

Punish and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault emphasizes that power is not only repressive but also constitutive it produces knowledge, truth, and identities through normalized discourse. Power, according to Foucault, operates through subtle forms of surveillance, regulation, and classification, shaping how individuals understand themselves and others. "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). This understanding reveals how normalized structures such as gender tropes are not simply imposed from above but enacted within the smallest social interactions.

When applied to the damsel in distress trope, Foucault's insights illuminate how narratives are not just reflective of existing gender dynamics, but actively participate in the construction and maintenance of those dynamics. The figure of the damsel helpless, passive, and in need of rescue functions as a discursive construct that disciplines feminine behaviour, suggesting what is socially acceptable for women: dependency, submissiveness, and emotional vulnerability. Simultaneously, the hero figure reinforces norms of masculinity, valorising strength, control, and dominance. These characters do not emerge in a vacuum; they are produced and validated through a long history of storytelling practices that have been naturalized over time.

Foucault's emphasis on the 'panoptic' nature of modern power also sheds light on how individuals internalize these roles. Women, seeing themselves represented in such limited ways, may come to regulate their own behaviour according to these scripts. The damsel is thus not only a character but also a model of femininity shaped by societal expectations. Through repetition

across media, this trope becomes a disciplinary force, subtly shaping how viewers perceive gender roles and power relationships.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, articulated most clearly in *Gender Trouble* (1990), offers a complementary but distinct framework for analysing the damsel in distress trope. For Butler, gender is not an innate, stable identity, but rather a series of acts and performances that produce the illusion of a coherent self. Gender norms are sustained through the repetition of culturally sanctioned behaviours, gestures, and roles. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). This means that the damsel is not born, but becomes—rehearsed through generations of narrative embodiment. Crucially, these performances are compelled by social expectations and are governed by regimes of power.

In this light, the damsel in distress becomes a performance a culturally legible act of femininity that conforms to heteronormative expectations. The damsel's exaggerated helplessness, fragility, and dependency are not natural traits but socially imposed behaviours that are performed to maintain the appearance of 'true' womanhood. The repeated portrayal of such characters across generations of films, fairy tales, and novels reinforces the performative script, narrowing the possibilities for alternative expressions of gender.

Butler's concept of 'gender as citation' is particularly relevant here. The damsel trope cites an earlier set of gender performances, drawing from historical and cultural archives that have long constructed femininity as subordinate. Every new instance of the trope reaffirms the previous ones, giving the illusion

of naturalness and continuity. Yet, as Butler argues, the very fact that gender must be performed again and again reveals its fragility and contingency. The trope appears stable, but its repetition opens the door for subversion and resistance.

By combining Foucault's and Butler's frameworks, the damsel in distress trope can be seen as both a disciplinary narrative and a gender performance. Foucault helps us understand how discourse disciplines the body and shapes subjectivity, while Butler explains how individuals perform their gender in ways that conform to or resist these disciplinary scripts.

The power of the damsel trope lies in its apparent innocuousness. It does not appear as a tool of repression, yet it quietly enforces gender norms by making certain behaviours visible, desirable, and rewarded, while others are marginalized or punished. This aligns with Foucault's idea of power functioning not through force but through normalization. At the same time, the trope invites women to participate in their own subjugation through performative repetition—playing the role of the damsel because it is what culture has taught them is expected, accepted, and attractive.

Moreover, the narrative rewards and romanticizes the damsel's passivity. Her rescue is framed as a happy ending, reinforcing the notion that fulfilment for women lies not in self-empowerment, but in being chosen, saved, and validated by a male figure. This dynamic contributes to the broader economy of gendered power that privileges male agency and marginalizes female autonomy.

While the damsel in distress trope has historically been a vehicle for reinforcing gendered power imbalances, Butler's framework also points to the

possibility of subversion. Since gender is performative and contingent, it is also open to disruption. The repetition that sustains gender norms can be altered, parodied, or recontextualized to expose their artificiality. When contemporary media reimagine the damsel as self-reliant, capable, or even deceptive, they challenge the trope's foundational assumptions.

For instance, when a narrative features a woman who pretends to be in distress to manipulate those around her, or when the expected male saviour is rendered unnecessary, the traditional power dynamic is destabilized. These reconfigurations create space for alternative performances of gender and open critical dialogues about the stories we tell and the values they encode.

Foucault's notion of 'reverse discourse' is useful here: even as individuals speak within dominant discourses, they can also speak against them. By adopting the language and imagery of the damsel in distress only to subvert it, creators can challenge the systems of power that the trope has historically supported.

The trope of the damsel in distress, when examined through the lenses of Foucault's theory of power and Butler's theory of gender performativity, reveals its role as a deeply embedded narrative structure that shapes cultural understandings of gender and power. Rather than being a mere storytelling convention, it operates as a disciplinary mechanism that regulates gendered behaviour and reinforces patriarchal power. However, its repetitive and performative nature also renders it vulnerable to critique and transformation. Recognizing and deconstructing such tropes is crucial in the ongoing effort to question and reshape the narratives that sustain gender inequality. In doing so,

creators and audiences alike participate in a broader cultural shift toward more inclusive and empowering representations.

The 2024 Netflix fantasy film *Damsel*, directed by Juan Carlos and starring Millie Bobby Brown, reimagines the traditional damsel in distress trope by placing a young princess, Elodie, in a scenario where she must escape death not through rescue, but by becoming her own hero. The film's reversal of classic gender roles forms a rich ground for theoretical engagement. In this analysis, we explore the film through Michel Foucault's theory of power and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Together, these frameworks illuminate the mechanisms by which social institutions regulate bodies and identities—and how these mechanisms are resisted and reconfigured through acts of subversion.

Foucault's theory focuses on how power is not only repressive but productive. His ideas about disciplinary power, surveillance, and biopolitics help us understand how Elodie's body and behaviour are subjected to institutional control, particularly through traditions like arranged marriage and sacrificial rituals. On the other hand, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges the notion of a stable gender identity. Instead, she argues that gender is an effect of repeated social performances that can be subverted through repetition with difference. Using these perspectives, we analyse how *Damsel* critiques patriarchal structures and performs a radical subversion of traditional gender expectations. The goal is to understand how Elodie's journey is not just one of physical survival but of reclaiming agency and rewriting the narrative of femininity itself.

Elodie is introduced as a dutiful daughter, entering into an arranged marriage to secure political alliances between kingdoms. Her body becomes a transactional object in a larger geopolitical game. This depiction aligns with Foucault's notion of sovereign power, where control over life and death is exercised by rulers. Elodie is, quite literally, a sacrifice—offered to the dragon as penance for her kingdom's historical debt.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power further elucidates Elodie's social position. Her training in royal customs, grooming, posture, and ceremonial dress are all mechanisms through which the institution shapes her into a compliant subject. These rituals are less about personal development and more about normalizing her submission. Her bridal procession, laden with symbolism, enacts a gendered form of surveillance where deviation from the norm is impossible without punishment namely, death.

However, Foucault also insists that power is not absolute; it is met with resistance. When Elodie begins to question her role and later physically resists her fate, we witness what Foucault calls counter-conduct. Her transformation from passive victim to active survivor reconfigures the power dynamic. Her survival is not an escape from power but a rechannelling of it, revealing the constructed and maintainable nature of social control.

Elodie's identity as a princess is not innate; it is a role she learns and performs. According to Judith Butler, gender is a series of acts repeated over time, producing the illusion of a stable identity. Elodie's performance in royal rituals, smiling, bowing, accepting her fate demonstrates how femininity is manufactured through repetition.

However, the performance begins to unravel. After being cast into the dragon's cave, Elodie discards her gown, modifies her body language, and shifts her behaviour from passivity to strategy. These actions represent what Butler terms subversive repetition—acts that expose the constructed nature of gender by performing it differently.

The dragon, initially portrayed as a monstrous female force, becomes a critical mirror. Like Elodie, the dragon is bound by ancient rituals, punished for disobedience, and relegated to the margins of society. Their eventual alliance highlights a shared experience of gendered subjugation. Through dialogue and mutual recognition, they construct a new model of femininity rooted in solidarity rather than submission.

Elodie's journey is best understood not by separating power from gender, but by recognizing how the two intersect. The sovereign power that seeks to sacrifice her is buttressed by gendered expectations that render her compliant. Her subversion, therefore, involves both resisting institutional control and reconfiguring gender scripts.

The names of past victims carved into the walls of the dragon's cave become a symbol of counter-memory, a Foucauldian concept where suppressed histories are recovered as tools of resistance. Elodie draws strength from these forgotten lives, turning personal survival into a collective narrative of resistance. She refuses to be the next name on the wall, reclaiming authorship over her story.

The film also illustrates how power produces knowledge. Elodie's growing awareness of her history, her body, and her potential reframes her as an

epistemic subject—someone who knows and acts. This aligns with Foucault's view of power/knowledge: the more she understands the systems controlling her, the more power she gains to subvert them.

The 'damsel-in-distress' trope remains deeply rooted across storytelling traditions from fairy tales to digital media to visual journalism empowering male-centric narratives and reinforcing female passivity. However, modern scholarship and creative media increasingly expose, invert, or subvert it: The classic damsel in distress trope, seen in myths and medieval romances, typically depicts a beautiful, high-status woman in mortal danger who can only be rescued by a male hero.

Second-wave feminism saw the damsel in distress trope not just as a storytelling device, but as a symptom of patriarchal ideology that sought to keep women dependent, invisible, and voiceless. By calling out these patterns, feminists of the era began reshaping both public discourse and creative expression laying the groundwork for the reimagining's and subversions we see in later feminist waves.

The trope of the 'damsel in distress' a passive, helpless woman needing to be saved by a male hero—became a central image challenged by second-wave feminism during the 1960s–1980s. This feminist movement sought to dismantle patriarchal structures that confined women to roles of submission, dependency, and domesticity, making the damsel trope a powerful symbol of systemic gender oppression.

Second-wave feminists argued that media tropes like the damsel in distress reinforced a rigid binary where men were active, rational, and heroic,

while women were emotional, passive, and subordinate. The damsel trope, often seen in fairy tales, films, and comic books, perpetuated the idea that a woman's worth was tied to her beauty, purity, and vulnerability—and ultimately to her rescue by a man.

Second-wave thinkers believed that these narratives served to normalize female submission and were tools of cultural domination, as described by theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Friedan. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). The damsel character is not merely a passive figure, but a symbol of constructed femininity shaped by culture and expectation.

De Beauvoir argued that womanhood was a social construct created by male-dominated institutions and the damsel trope exemplified that construct. The damsel, often found in domestic or romantic storylines, reflects the division between public and private spheres, a key concern of second-wave feminism. Women were expected to remain in the private (home) realm, away from power and decision-making. The damsel never takes action in the public world; her entire story is defined by waiting, suffering, and ultimately being rescued.

Second-wave feminists viewed this as symbolic of real-world social and legal constraints placed on women limiting them from careers, leadership, and autonomy. This slogan encapsulated how seemingly personal experiences were deeply political, rooted in oppressive power systems.

Media criticism became a crucial feminist strategy. Writers like Laura Mulvey critiqued how women in film were often represented through the male gaze, where female characters existed mainly to be looked at rather than to act.

The damsel in distress was a central object of the male gaze, existing as a prize or reward for the male protagonist. Second-wave feminists rejected such portrayals and demanded more autonomous, active female characters in film, literature, and television.

As a response, some media in the 1970s and 1980s began to reflect second-wave feminist ideas introducing characters like Wonder Woman, Princess Leia, and Sarah Connor who retained femininity but also embodied strength, leadership, and agency. Many works attempted to repackage the damsel trope in modern settings, using subtle forms of dependency to reinforce old gender roles under new aesthetics.

The ‘damsel in distress’ trope where a woman is shown in danger, waiting to be rescued by a man—has long shaped how people think about gender roles. It paints women as fragile, helpless, and in need of saving, while men are cast as brave heroes. During the Second Wave of Feminism, which gained momentum, this stereotype came under intense scrutiny. Feminists began to question why stories were always told this way and what it meant for real women’s lives. The critique of the damsel trope became part of a broader fight to challenge gender expectations and reclaim how women were seen, both in media and in society. At the time, women had achieved some legal rights, but everyday life still held deep inequalities in the home, at work, and in the way, women were portrayed. The damsel in distress trope became a clear example of how women were shown as powerless and reliant on men. It wasn’t just about stories it was about the message these stories sent: that being a ‘good woman’ meant being quiet, gentle, and needing protection.

Second-wave feminists argued that this trope helped teach girls and women to accept passive roles. The damsel became more than a character; she became a script that many women felt pressured to follow. She was usually pure, pretty, and vulnerable and her value came from being saved. This portrayal fit neatly into the patriarchal idea that women existed in relation to men, not as individuals in their own right.

Feminist thinkers like Laura Mulvey began looking at how film shaped our understanding of gender. In the case of the damsel, the camera lingers on her vulnerability, framing her as someone to be desired and protected, not someone with her own goals. This kind of storytelling wasn't just about entertainment; it influenced how women saw themselves. The damsel was often beautiful, emotional, and voiceless. Her pain was used to drive the hero's journey, not her own. Second-wave feminists pushed back against this, arguing that these kinds of portrayals fed into real-life expectations for women to be dependent, docile, and decorative.

A big part of the second-wave feminist movement was something called 'consciousness-raising.' Women would gather in groups to talk about their everyday experiences and how they were connected to bigger systems of inequality. Again and again, women talked about feeling like they were expected to be 'saved' by a husband, a father, a system that didn't really see them.

These gatherings helped women realize that their personal experiences weren't just bad luck or isolated cases, they were part of a larger pattern. Many saw themselves in the damsel trope: told to stay quiet, told to be polite, told that

their lives didn't really begin until a man came along. Recognizing the trope's influence helped fuel demands for change.

One-way feminists fought back was by telling different kinds of stories. Writers like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood started rewriting fairy tales and myths, giving female characters real power. In Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, the familiar damsels don't wait around to be rescued—they fight back, they think for themselves, and they take control of their fates. It showed that women could be the heroes of their own stories. It gave readers new images of what a woman could be: strong, complex, flawed, brave. The more these stories were told, the more they chipped away at the old idea that being a woman meant being weak.

Second-wave feminists knew that how women were represented mattered. The damsel trope might seem harmless on the surface, but it played a big role in teaching girls what to expect from themselves and the world. It taught them to wait, to hope for rescue, to be afraid of taking up space. Challenging that image was part of a bigger fight to change the world. By exposing the trope's limitations, feminists made space for women to imagine themselves as leaders, thinkers, and creators. They made it clear that women's stories didn't have to be about being saved—they could be about choosing, acting, and changing things.

Connecting second-wave feminism with the damsel in distress trope helps us see how deeply stories shape society. The damsel isn't just a character—she's a reminder of how power works. But the work of second-wave feminists helped break that mould, encouraging new ways of seeing and being.

Trauma theory, particularly in literary and cinematic studies, emerged in the 1990s through the works of scholars like Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra. It examines how individuals experience, process, and narrate traumatic events especially those that disrupt identity, memory, and the sense of reality. In films, trauma theory helps decode how characters confront or resist trauma, how narrative structure reflects psychological rupture, and how viewers are implicated in witnessing traumatic experiences.

In *Damsel*, Elodie is initially introduced as a sacrificial bride, chosen to marry a prince under the illusion of unity and peace. However, this betrothal is a façade masking a ritualistic offering: she is to be sacrificed to a dragon to uphold a royal pact. This betrayal is the first moment of trauma — a psychic wound inflicted not only by the monstrous Other (the dragon), but by the human systems of trust, family, and power. Trauma is defined not only by physical violence but by the collapse of meaning, and Elodie's realization that her family, her groom, and her future are lies creates this collapse.

The trauma Elodie endures is deeply gendered. Her role as a sacrificial bride reflects the historical objectification and instrumentalization of women's bodies for patriarchal purposes — a theme trauma theory increasingly engages with in feminist contexts. The pain she endures is systemic, not personal. She is not merely the victim of a sadistic prince, but of a monarchic and mythic structure that consumes women. Trauma theory thus becomes a tool to expose how ideologies wound, not just how individuals suffer.

Caruth notes that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's repeatedly

relieved.” (Caruth 4). This is mirrored in the way Elodie continuously experiences threats of violence in the cave every sound, movement, and confrontation echo her initial betrayal.

Moreover, the film’s cave setting functions as a metaphor for the unconscious: dark, closed, cyclical. In trauma narratives, spatial confinement often represents psychic entrapment. The dragon’s lair isn’t just a prison; it’s a place where Elodie confronts both the violence done to her and the person she must become to survive.

Feminist literary scholars have long criticized the damsel in distress trope as a symbol of misogyny. In *Marvels & Tales*, Alison Lurie’s ‘Fairy Tale Liberation’ (1970) and Jack Zipes’s *Don’t Bet on the Prince* (1986) dismantle the underlying assumption of female fragility and male chivalry.

Anita Sarkeesian’s influential *Damsel in Distress Part 1* explores this trope in film and fairy tales, and extends the critique into video games, underscoring how female characters are often plotted without agency.

Tania Modjeski’s work (*The Women Who Knew Too Much*) analyses how Hitchcock repeatedly uses female vulnerability to galvanize male agency.

The trope’s link to ‘victim feminism’ – portraying women solely as victims is problematic. Scholars like Naomi Wolf argue that such portrayals erode female agency and contribute to the narrative of inherent female weakness. Disney princess films, examined in 2014 textual analyses (e.g., Maity), typically depict princesses valued for beauty and domestic traits, reinforcing damsel in distress stereotypes and emotional dependence on male rescue.

By the film's end, Elodie has not only survived but emerged transformed. Her refusal to return to the kingdom or forgive the betrayal reflects a radical break from systems of harm. She walks into the unknown, not as a victim but as a self-defined subject bearing the scars of trauma, but no longer imprisoned by it.

The film powerfully portrays that true survival is not just physical escape, but the reclamation of narrative, body, and future a message that resonates with trauma scholars and feminist theorists

Chapter 3

Damsel as a Subversion of the Trope of ‘Damsel in Distress’

In Juan Carlos’s 2024 film *Damsel*, the audience is introduced to a world that feels at once fantastical and uncomfortably familiar a world where patriarchal bargains are struck in the language of sacrifice and where a young woman named Elodie is promised a future that isn’t hers to define. What begins as a royal fairytale quickly unravels into a chilling exposé of power, betrayal, and survival. This film is more than a dark fantasy. It is a subversive text that interrogates the cultural myths still surrounding femininity, obligation, and heroism. To analyze the powerful undercurrents of *Damsel*, this study applies four interlocking theoretical frameworks: Michel Foucault’s theory of power, Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, Second Wave Feminism, and Trauma Theory. Together, these lenses help unearth how the film deconstructs the timeless trope of the ‘damsel in distress’ and reframes it through the raw, urgent lens of female resilience.

Elodie’s journey is also a powerful site for exploring Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is not a fixed essence but a series of performed acts, repeated over time, that create the illusion of stable identity. In *Damsel*, Elodie begins as the perfect daughter and betrothed—soft-spoken, graceful, compliant. These behaviours are not innate but rehearsed, a script written by generations of societal expectations.

“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). Elodie’s transformation illustrates how gender

identity is not uncovered, but rewritten through resistance. However, when Elodie is thrown into the dragon's lair—both literally and metaphorically—these performances are stripped away. What remains is not a collapse of identity but a reconstruction. Elodie does not become someone new; rather, she sheds the persona she was forced to wear. In surviving, strategizing, and eventually confronting those who betrayed her, Elodie ceases to perform and begins to act. Her gender, once bound by courtly codes and matrimonial duty, becomes a terrain of rebellion and authenticity.

Overlaying both Foucault and Butler's ideas is the broader historical context of Second Wave Feminism, a movement that challenged the confinement of women to domestic, ornamental, or sacrificial roles. Damsel feels like a cinematic echo of that feminist call for liberation. Elodie's arc mirrors the concerns of Second Wave thinkers like Betty Friedan or Kate Millett, who questioned the systems that presented women's subjugation as natural. The film critiques the way women are often viewed as extensions of male ambition—valuable only when they serve, marry, reproduce, or obey. The transactional nature of Elodie's marriage is not far removed from real-world histories of arranged unions or gendered labour. In the dragon's lair, we see not just a fantasy survival story but a metaphor for what countless women endure when they step outside the roles assigned to them—an uncharted space of danger, yes, but also of self-definition.

Equally important to the Trauma Theory, which allows us to consider Elodie's transformation not simply as a moment of empowerment, but as a

reaction to profound psychological rupture. Trauma, especially when caused by betrayal and isolation, does not follow a linear path. “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way it’s repeatedly relived” (Caruth, 4). In *Damsel*, Elodie relives the betrayal in every moment of silence and darkness in the cave, revealing trauma as recursive and embodied. It fragments identity, distorts time, and leaves survivors grappling with a reality that no longer feels stable. Elodie is betrayed not only by the royal family, but by her own father, who offers her willingly to cement an alliance. Her descent into the dragon’s lair represents more than a physical fall—it is an emotional and spiritual dislocation. Trauma theory helps us understand her later choices—not as heroic feats emerging from inner strength alone, but as responses to loss, grief, and the desperate need for agency. Her survival becomes not just a narrative arc but a reclamation of self, forged in pain.

The film opens with the ceremonial engagement of Princess Elodie to Prince Henry. The grandeur and ritualistic nature of the scene immediately invokes Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary institutions. “Power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the privilege of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions” (Foucault 94). The palace thus becomes a field where bodies and meanings are governed through ritual rather than direct force.

The castle, like the Panopticon, is an architectural symbol of constant surveillance and control, where Elodie’s movements, gestures, and attire are closely monitored. Her femininity is performed, not owned, aligning with Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity: she dons the dress, smiles dutifully, and rehearses the role of the demure princess.

Second-wave feminism critiques this moment as a reinforcement of patriarchal contracts—marriage here is not love but a transaction of power between ruling male figures. The trauma begins subtly: Elodie is being commodified under the guise of royal duty. She becomes the vessel for alliance-building, silencing her agency, which initiates a fracture between her interior self and societal expectation.

During the journey to the groom's land, Elodie is surrounded by armoured men. Her movements are restricted and she is told how to behave. The constant instruction and lack of autonomy reflect Foucault's theory that power is exercised more through discipline than outright violence. The gendered norms imposed on her—'speak only when spoken to,' 'maintain grace'—are not essential but performed scripts of femininity.

Here, Butler's theory is underscored, gender is a performance repeated over time under threat of punishment. Elodie's trauma builds not from singular violence but from sustained micro-aggressions. She begins to sense that she is not being honoured, but prepared—as one might prepare a sacrifice.

If we are analysing it with the lens of Trauma Theory, which allows us to consider Elodie's transformation not simply as a moment of empowerment, but as a reaction to profound psychological rupture. Trauma, especially when caused by betrayal and isolation, does not follow a linear path. It fragments identity, distorts time, and leaves survivors grappling with a reality that no longer feels stable. Elodie is betrayed not only by the royal family, but by her own father, who offers her willingly to cement an alliance. Her descent into the dragon's lair represents more than a physical fall—it is an emotional and

spiritual dislocation. Trauma theory helps us understand her later choices—not as heroic feats emerging from inner strength alone, but as responses to loss, grief, and the desperate need for agency. Her survival becomes not just a narrative arc but a reclamation of self, forged in pain.

Damsel tells a story of a woman who is cast aside as a tool for power, who then reclaims her voice, body, and future. It challenges the viewer to reconsider what power looks like, how gender is constructed and performed, and what it truly means to survive. Elodie's story is not just about fighting monsters—it is about exposing the monstrous systems that create sacrificial daughters and calling into question the stories we've long accepted as fairytales. In doing so, the film insists on the continued urgency of questioning tradition, dismantling myth, and listening to the voices of those once left in the dark.

The climactic betrayal unfolds as Elodie is lowered into the dragon's lair. The act is laden with symbolic power. This is where Foucault's notion of sovereign power emerges—the king and groom possess the ultimate decision over life and death. Power here is no longer hidden but spectacular and lethal.

This scene is also a violent rupture of gendered expectation. Elodie, having performed the ideal woman, is now discarded. Butler's theory is inverted here. The trauma is now explicit—betrayal, isolation, and imminent death. Elodie's body becomes a site of both destruction and resistance. Symbolically, Elodie's descent into the cave mirrors the descent into the unconscious—where trauma resides. She begins to unlearn obedience. The solitude becomes fertile ground for reimagining selfhood. Foucault's notion of resistance within power structures is evidenced here: as she survives, she begins to strategize.

Second-wave feminism would read this as the beginning of female liberation, where the heroine no longer awaits rescue. The trauma is ongoing, but it is not paralyzing. It becomes transformative. Rather than kill Elodie, the dragon engages her. This moment ruptures all prior expectations. Elodie listens. She learns the truth: many brides were sacrificed before her. Foucault's genealogy of knowledge and Butler's performativity coalesce here. Knowledge was monopolized by the state; Elodie begins to re-narrate history from below. The dragon, a female creature, represents the monstrous-feminine—a fear of female power. Second-wave feminism confronts this fear head-on: instead of fighting the dragon, Elodie allies with her. Trauma here becomes collective. Both are victims of patriarchal deception and reclaim solidarity. Elodie and the dragon conspire to escape. Foucault's theory that resistance is immanent within power is literalized. Every movement Elodie makes now is an act of rebellion against the normalization imposed upon her. She sheds the gowns, the etiquette, and assumes physical strength.

Butler's theory is subverted here, Elodie no longer performs gender but reconstructs it. Her femininity is now active, furious, and mobile. Second-wave feminism recognizes this moment as reclaiming the means of agency, rather than waiting for structural change. Elodie does not return for revenge but for truth. She confronts the royal court and reveals the lineage of betrayal. Foucault's notion of truth as a construct of power is laid bare. Her voice, once ornamental, now disrupts courtly decorum. Elodie has metabolized pain into testimony. She names the betrayal and, in doing so, breaks its spell. This public witnessing reorients history, destabilizes patriarchy, and affirms the capacity for healing.

The closing image—Elodie moving away with the dragon is pure symbolic transgression. Foucault's disciplinary structures are left behind. Butler's compulsory performance of femininity is unmoored. Second-wave feminism finds culmination in autonomy, and trauma finds restitution in connection. Elodie is no longer the damsel. She is the survivor, the witness, the liberator.

The opening betrothal scene In Damsel does more than just depict a royal engagement—it functions as a sophisticated staging of power, gender construction, feminist critique, and emerging trauma. Through this singular moment, the film immediately signals its critical stance on traditional fairy tale tropes and opens a space for reinterpretation.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the ceremonial setting reflects the structural disciplining of bodies, particularly the female body. The architecture of the palace, the ritual choreography of the event, and the silent presence of courtiers all function as technologies of surveillance. This is a world where power does not need to shout; it merely watches. Elodie's conduct is shaped by this invisible but inescapable gaze. Her very ability to 'fit in' is predicated on self-regulation—what Foucault termed the internalization of power. Thus, the palace becomes a symbolic Panopticon, and Elodie, its self-policing subject.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which exposes the way femininity is enacted here not as truth but as repetition. Elodie wears the gown, smiles gracefully, and moves delicately—not because these acts reflect her inner self, but because she has been conditioned to equate these performances with legitimacy. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283).

Elodie's identity is not self-determined, but externally imposed—a dramatization of how femininity is constructed and sustained by tradition. What the film does cleverly is render this artificiality visible. The camera lingers not just on her beauty, but on the tension behind her eyes, exposing the fragility of the gender script she's forced to perform.

From the standpoint of second-wave feminism, Elodie's betrothal represents a continuation of patriarchal traditions that have long commodified women through marriage. The transactional language surrounding her engagement—the emphasis on alliances, heirs, and legacy—reveals how her personhood is secondary to her political utility. Her father and the prince engage in a diplomatic performance that erases Elodie's agency. The film, by drawing attention to this erasure, aligns itself with feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer, who denounced marriage as a key institution in women's oppression. The scene thus invites viewers to see the princess fantasy as a form of gilded imprisonment.

But it is not only a social critique—it is also a psychological one. We understand how the foundations of trauma are laid in the absence of violence. This disjuncture between outer compliance and inner turmoil reflects the early phases of what Cathy Caruth calls 'unclaimed experience'—trauma that has not yet fully registered but begins to fracture subjectivity. The film does not wait for a dragon to appear to show us trauma. It shows that trauma begins in the quiet moments, in the loss of self when identity is dictated by others. *Damsel* positions itself against the grain of traditional fairy tale narratives, using the language of theory to critique the systems that perpetuate gendered violence and oppression.

In *Damsel* 2024, the dragon plays a subversive and radical role that powerfully aligns with both second-wave feminist ideology and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Traditionally, dragons in fairy tales symbolize the ultimate obstacle—a monstrous, often male-coded beast to be vanquished by the male hero. However, in this film, the dragon is reimagined as a female figure, embodying not evil, but vengeance, memory, and silenced rage. She is not the antagonist of the narrative, but rather its buried truth: the living proof of generations of women betrayed, discarded, and sacrificed. Her existence alone disrupts the patriarchal fantasy that casts women only as damsels in distress or as passive symbols of peace between kingdoms.

From the perspective of second-wave feminism, which sought to expose the systemic oppression of women within domestic, political, and mythic spaces, the dragon is a metaphor for the 'monstrous feminine'—a term used to describe how women who reject submission are demonized. Her power is feared precisely because it cannot be controlled. She is the literal embodiment of female rage, banished to the margins to preserve the illusion of male heroism and royal righteousness. This mirrors how patriarchal societies erase and vilify women who refuse to perform their expected roles. When Elodie allies with the dragon, the film collapses the dichotomy between heroine and monster, affirming a second-wave feminist demand to reframe the narrative—not around male saviours, but around women who refuse to remain victims.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further clarifies the dragon's disruptive role. If gender is not innate but performed through repeated social scripts, then the dragon represents a refusal to perform femininity at all. She is not passive, nurturing, or ornamental—she is fierce, vocal, and

independent. In this way, the dragon queers gender norms, revealing how the refusal to conform is punished with isolation and monstrosity. Yet Butler also argues that power is not only oppressive—it can be productive and subversive. The dragon's power does not merely destroy; it protects, remembers, and eventually liberates. She becomes a co-architect of resistance, helping Elodie break free from the rigid gendered expectations of princesshood.

Together, second-wave feminism and Butler's theory illuminate how the dragon is not a villain, but a reclamation of silenced female power. She exposes the violence that lies beneath courtly rituals and calls into question the structures that normalize sacrifice in the name of tradition. By surviving, remembering, and finally choosing alliance over revenge, the dragon becomes an agent of feminist redefinition—transforming not only how we view femininity, but who is allowed to hold power in the first place.

Elodie is not the first to be sacrificed—that many queens and princesses before her were trapped and offered to the dragon—introduces a chilling historical depth to the film's critique of patriarchal violence. These unseen women, stripped of their names and histories, represent a lineage of silenced trauma. Trauma theory, especially as formulated by Cathy Caruth, helps us understand how violence that is repressed or unspoken does not disappear—it haunts. The film's treatment of these forgotten queens positions them as ghosts of unresolved grief, both personal and collective.

Trauma, as Caruth explains, is not simply the experience of violence, but the disruption of meaning—a wound that the psyche cannot fully integrate. The earlier queens were not only physically imprisoned; they were symbolically

erased. Their suffering was institutionalized and normalized as ritual sacrifice, disguised as royal duty. Their pain was never witnessed, never narrated, and thus never healed. This absence of narrative—a key concept in trauma theory—renders their suffering as both invisible and eternal. They become echoes in the cave, remnants of what happens when patriarchal systems turn women into disposable objects for the sake of maintaining illusionary peace. The royal family, rather than reckoning with the horror of the first sacrifice, institutionalized it. Over generations, the kingdom continues to offer women to the dragon, repackaging violence as tradition. The trauma is systematized and passed down, infecting the cultural consciousness and rewriting horror as nobility. This repetition reveals the kingdom's refusal to confront its own moral decay, instead pushing the psychological cost onto its most powerless members—its women.

When Elodie eventually learns about these women—through the dragon's testimony or through remnants like letters, or inscriptions—the film stages what trauma theory calls 'the return of the repressed.' These queens are no longer silent. Their memories flood back, demanding recognition. This moment becomes a turning point not only in Elodie's story, but in the larger narrative of the kingdom. It challenges the viewer to consider the damage done by silencing generations of pain. Elodie's recognition of these earlier queens is an act of feminist solidarity and psychological witnessing. She does not simply survive—she remembers. And in remembering, she begins the process of historical repair. Thus, the earliest queens in *Damsel* are not merely background lore; they are central to the film's emotional and political core. Through trauma theory, their silent suffering becomes a powerful indictment of inherited

violence, cultural denial, and the cost of forgetting. Their stories, once buried beneath rock and fire, emerge not as tales of defeat but as foundations for reckoning, rebellion, and healing.

The man Elodie is promised to—Prince Henry, later revealed as a key participant in the ceremonial deception—serves as a powerful representation of both systemic power and the performance of masculinity. Though he initially appears charming, noble, and protective—an archetypal ‘fairy tale prince’—his character gradually reveals the violent mechanisms of institutional power that rely on manipulation, control, and disposability of women for the preservation of royal legacy.

From Foucault’s perspective, Prince Henry operates as an agent within a deeply disciplinary regime. The entire marriage proposal is a carefully orchestrated performance designed not for love or diplomacy, but for the continuation of a centuries-old biopolitical ritual—sacrificing young women to the dragon to ensure the kingdom’s safety. He is not merely a passive participant in this system; he is an embodiment of its subtle machinery. The power he exercises is not overt brutality, but rather the routinized performance of benevolence and tradition, which masks the underlying violence of the ritual. This is classic Foucault: power is most effective not when it is openly coercive, but when it hides itself within the normal and the expected. The prince represents precisely that kind of invisible, normalized authority.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity also casts revealing light on Henry’s role. As the royal male, he is expected to embody the values of masculinity: strength, decisiveness, protectorhood. However, his masculinity is

shown to be entirely performative—constructed to uphold a façade. He performs care and romantic interest, but this is part of a broader gendered script designed to lure Elodie into submission. His actions reveal that masculinity in this context is not authentic, but a ritualized deception, a performance designed to preserve male power and female subjugation. He does not challenge the role assigned to him; he reinforces it, proving how deeply entrenched such performances are within patriarchal structures.

Importantly, Henry's betrayal reveals a central feminist critique, that romance under patriarchy can be weaponized. His role as a suitor disguises the fact that Elodie is being offered not love, but death. His silence and complicity expose the way gendered performances can be mobilized to uphold systems of oppression while appearing natural or honourable. He is not a monster in the conventional sense, but he is monstrous in his complacency and obedience to tradition. In this way, Henry reflects how patriarchy survives not through open violence alone, but through routine, ritualized betrayal disguised as duty.

The roles of Elodie's stepmother and her younger sister are subtle yet deeply revealing of how patriarchy co-opts and divides women through internalized gender roles and generational trauma. These women do not actively plot Elodie's sacrifice, yet their complicity—through silence, passivity, or emotional distance—demonstrates how systems of power persist not only through male violence but also through the social conditioning of women to enforce those systems.

Elodie's stepmother performs the role of the dutiful royal woman—graceful, polite, and loyal to her husband's decisions. But in doing so, she

becomes complicit in Elodie's betrayal, as she upholds the image of the benevolent marriage alliance while knowing—or at least suspecting—what it entails. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers critical insight here: the stepmother does not express her beliefs authentically, but rather performs the socially expected behaviours of femininity, especially those of emotional restraint, obedience, and sacrifice. Her silence and composed demeanour in the face of a celebratory yet suspicious marriage ceremony reflect how deeply feminine roles are scripted, and how dangerous it can be when women are expected to be graceful in systems that destroy them and other women.

From a second-wave feminist standpoint, the stepmother represents the older generation of women who were socialized into patriarchal domestic ideals—supporting the family structure even at the cost of another woman's life. Second-wave feminists critiqued this tendency in women to preserve tradition rather than challenge oppression, especially in contexts where women were taught to find worth in submission or stability. Her role reinforces how internalized oppression can blur the line between victim and enabler.

Elodie's younger sister, on the other hand, represents the next generation of women, still impressionable and unaware of the brutal systems that shape their world. Her innocence is not simply naivety—it's the result of being raised in a culture where female sacrifice is normalized and hidden behind rituals of femininity. Trauma theory, particularly Judith Herman's notion of transmitted trauma.

At the same time, there are subtle gestures—perhaps a questioning glance, a hesitance in her voice—that suggest the early stirrings of doubt. Witnessing Elodie’s resistance might rupture the cycle of female submission. Second-wave feminism emphasized the importance of raising feminist consciousness, especially among young girls who have been socialized into traditional roles. The sister’s character, though minor, becomes a mirror: she reflects who Elodie used to be and who she refuses to let her sister become.

Elodie’s father in *Damsel* 2024 is a quiet yet critical figure whose actions reflect the deep structures of patriarchal power masked as paternal care. He is not a villain in the traditional sense—he does not raise a sword or directly harm his daughter—but through his complicity and silence, he becomes one of the film’s most haunting embodiments of systemic power and gendered betrayal.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Elodie’s father represents the internalized and bureaucratic face of power. He hands his daughter over to a royal family under the pretext of political alliance and duty—framing her sacrifice as necessary for the good of the people. This is not brute domination, but biopower in action. The regulation of bodies and lives under the pretense of national stability, lineage, and tradition. The father does not merely make a decision—he performs a state-sanctioned ritual, treating his daughter as a vessel to stabilize external relations. In doing so, he reveals how deeply systems of power embed themselves into the family unit, presenting violence as virtue.

Foucault’s notion that power operates not only through institutions but through ordinary, normalized practices is critical here. Elodie’s father participates in a tradition that has been repeated across generations. In that way,

he mirrors the palace elite as a figure of patriarchal control who maintains dominance by calling it love.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity also illuminates the father's role. He performs masculinity through stoicism, rationality, and decision-making. His authority in the household—his ability to decide Elodie's fate—emerges not from emotional engagement, but from social performance. He believes he is doing what a man, a ruler, and a father should do: provide, protect, and uphold tradition. Yet this masculine ideal becomes a mask that excuses moral failure.

In this context, Butler's theory shows how gender is not an expression of identity, but a ritualized enactment of cultural expectations. The father chooses power over empathy not because he is heartless, but because his role demands it.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Damsel (2024), directed by Juan Carlos. Throughout our analytical journey, we have dissected this film as a radical subversion of the ‘damsel in distress’ trope, drawing upon an interdisciplinary framework that includes Michel Foucault’s theory of power, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, the foundational insights of second wave feminism, and the deeply resonant lens of trauma theory. Each of these theoretical approaches offers a distinct yet overlapping interpretive key that reveals the political, psychological, and cultural dimensions embedded in Elodie’s harrowing yet empowering journey.

The central achievement of *Damsel* lies in how it dismantles the conventional ‘damsel in distress’ framework, a narrative device long entrenched in literary, mythological, and cinematic traditions. In this archetype, women are portrayed as helpless, beautiful, passive beings awaiting rescue by a heroic man. These representations often function not to explore the woman’s inner world, but to bolster the hero’s character arc. However, Elodie refuses this path. Elodie is not saved. She is not rescued, protected, or redeemed by a male saviour. She survives not by adhering to the virtues typically rewarded in these tales—obedience, beauty, sacrifice—but by rejecting them entirely. The film renders her not as a symbolic victim, but as a multi-dimensional subject, capable of rewriting her own story and those of the countless women erased before her.

This narrative shift is not simply aesthetic or superficial—it is deeply political. It speaks to a growing urgency in contemporary feminist discourse to

challenge and revise inherited myths that limit how women, especially those who endure violence and betrayal, are imagined and represented.

Michel Foucault's theory of power, particularly his ideas on the microphysics of power and the productive nature of disciplinary regimes, offers a potent lens for understanding the social architecture surrounding Elodie. Power in *Damsel* is not merely held by the king, the prince, or even the dragon. Rather, it is diffused through a web of societal expectations, traditions, rituals, and contracts. It is institutionalized through marriage, sacralized through ceremony, and justified through duty.

The betrothal of Elodie is framed as a reward, a political alliance, and an honour—but in Foucauldian terms, it is also a disciplinary mechanism that renders her body both visible and disposable. She is inscribed into a system where women are groomed to perform submission and then offered as solutions to diplomatic problems. Her body is marked as property, a site of exchange, and ultimately, a sacrificial offering to maintain social order. And yet, power does not only subjugate—it also produces resistance. Elodie's rebellion emerges not outside of power, but within its folds. Her refusal to accept her fate, her fierce negotiation with the dragon, and her refusal to forget or silence the pain of her predecessors exemplify the kind of subversive agency that Foucault envisioned. She becomes what Foucault might call a 'subject who acts upon herself,' transforming her condition not through external rescue, but internal revolt. "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by

control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault 781).

Her survival, therefore, is not a triumph of brute strength, but of epistemic power—she sees through the lies, the rituals, and the hierarchies that masked exploitation as tradition. Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity asserts that gender is not an internal essence but a set of socially sanctioned performances reiterated over time.

At the beginning of the film, Elodie participates in the ceremonial rituals of femininity: she wears the gown, bows her head, smiles on cue. Her movements are choreographed to match societal expectations of what it means to be a noblewoman and a bride. Yet, once cast into the dragon’s cave—stripped of these markers—she must renegotiate her body, her voice, and her identity. What emerges is a raw, unscripted version of selfhood—one forged through pain, endurance, and memory. Elodie no longer ‘performs’ femininity to please the gaze of others. Instead, she deconstructs it. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). She becomes unkempt, scarred, and assertive. She speaks out of turn. She mourns. She survives. And in doing so, she reveals the fragility of gender norms and the possibility of forging identity beyond them.

In Butler’s framework, this is not a failure of femininity—it is its radical reinvention. Elodie’s body becomes a site of resistance not because it rejects gender, but because it refuses the coercive repetition of gender norms imposed upon her.

Damsel echoes several key concerns of second wave feminism, particularly the interrogation of how traditional institutions—marriage, monarchy, religion, and family—operate as vehicles for patriarchal control. The marriage alliance in the film, for instance, is not a romantic union but a transactional contract rooted in deception. The ritualized sacrifice of women becomes a systemic pattern cloaked in duty and disguised as honour.

The film also centers on collective female experience. Elodie's discovery of the cave wall inscribed with the names of former queens' functions as a feminist archive—a painful reminder of historical silencing. Her decision to speak their names and tell their stories resists both individualism and erasure.

Trauma theory, especially as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, provides an invaluable lens to understand Damsel's exploration of memory, silence, and repetition. The cave is not only a physical prison—it is a psychic landscape haunted by unspoken pain. The voices of the past linger in shadows, etched into walls, echoing through the cries of the dragon and the flicker of Elodie's hallucinations.

Elodie does not simply endure trauma—she lives inside it. Her temporal disorientation, emotional fragmentation, and repeated flashbacks illustrate how trauma resists linear narration. Elodie does not move on from trauma in the traditional cinematic sense. She carries it. She names it. "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's repeatedly relived" (Caruth 4). She allows it to reshape her. Her survival is not a triumph over pain, but a coexistence with it—a testament to resilience that defies the silencing of suffering.

What *Damsel* ultimately offers is not just a feminist reimagining of a classic trope, but the outline of a new episteme—a new way of knowing and constructing gender, power, and resistance in popular culture. The film’s layering of theoretical dimensions reflects a shift in cinematic consciousness, one that resists the binaries of strong/weak, hero/victim, masculine/feminine.

In Foucault’s terms, the film gestures toward the birth of a new regime of truth—one that no longer defines women by their relationality to men. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). Instead, it centers female agency as complex, embodied, and resistant. The notion of performativity reframes gender not as fate but as improvisation.

This analysis of *Damsel* 2024 is, by design, not an ending but a point of departure. The intersections between power, gender, trauma, and narrative that the film evokes are fertile grounds for further research. Several promising avenues emerge. Postcolonial feminist readings could explore the racial and imperial undertones of sacrifice and sovereignty in the film’s royal systems, Trans and queer theoretical approaches could analyze how gender performance in *Damsel* resists binary logic and invites more fluid understandings of identity.

The cinematic world of *Damsel* invites us to think beyond the conventions of fairy tales and into the possibilities of feminist storytelling that acknowledges suffering without glorifying it, that centers survival without erasing struggle, and that empowers women to narrate their own histories—both imagined and real. As long as women’s voices continue to be silenced, as long as their stories are commodified or ignored, as long as the systems of sacrifice remain veiled in tradition—then works like *Damsel* will remain not only

relevant but necessary. This film—and the theoretical dialogue it inspires—is not a final word, but a clarion call for continued critique, remembrance, and reinvention.

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