

The Witch in the Closet: Disney's *Frozen* as Adaptation and Its Potential for Queer and Feminist Readings

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The witch is a fundamentally ambiguous character. In fairy tales and folklore, she represents conflicting values: fertility and barrenness, life and death, erotic seduction and fatal rejection. Therefore, the witch, broadly defined as a female¹ human or human-like creature capable of magic feats, often embodies conflict. This article will discuss what we may call “the misunderstood witch trope.” The term refers to how several modern fairy tale adaptations reimagine the witch as a misunderstood creature who actually tries to do good. Throughout the article, the term *fairy tale* denotes a fantastic tale functioning socially as a didactic instrument for children, but with content that also appeals to adults, encompassing oral as well as literary fairy tales.

The focus of the analysis is how H.C. Andersen's fairy tale “The Snow Queen” [“Sneedronningen,” (1862) [1844]] is adapted into the Disney animated feature film *Frozen* (2013). The plot of *Frozen* revolves around Queen Elsa of Arendelle who has the power of creating ice. When this is revealed, she escapes, pursued by her little sister Anna. The latter must travel through ice and snow, defeat her love interest-turned-villain prince Hans, and save her own frozen heart through an act of true love. This act is not a kiss by the treacherous prince, but Anna's selfless deed of saving her sister from being murdered by Hans. While rejecting several of the standard elements in Disney movies, *Frozen* also takes great liberties with the story of “The Snow Queen.” Andersen's fairy tale focuses on the journey of the heroine Gerda, whose objective it is to save her friend Kay from the evil Snow Queen's thrall. Nevertheless, the observation that *Frozen* is a free adaptation should not be read as criticism of Disney. Rather, I will argue that the adaptation of Andersen's fascinating and troubling story produces its own polysemic complexities. The fact of its being an extremely successful and culturally influential animated movie also calls for an inquiry into what values and ideas it presents and transforms.

While there are several critical and scholarly comments on *Frozen*, few have investigated *Frozen* as an *adaptation of a fairy tale* in any detail.² Building on a discussion of the misunderstood witch trope, the following discussion will outline how the Disney movie preserves, transforms, or removes specific ideological and folkloric elements of Andersen's text. Further, I will discuss the interpretative space for queer and feminist readings of *Frozen*, arguing that the possibility of such readings becomes more apparent through an understanding of *Frozen* as an adaptation and its use of the misunderstood witch trope. In this way, the analysis identifies ideological complexities in both texts, arguing that they cannot be understood as *either* reactionary *or* progressive. Focusing on general issues of ideology and values, the discussion will center on symbolism, characterization, and intertextuality, and only to a limited extent present close readings.

¹ Historically, the term *witch* has also referred to males. However, witchcraft is doubtlessly gendered as feminine in the popular imagination. Cf. also Clark 1997, chapter I.8.

² One important exception is an article by Auba Llompарт and Lydia Brugué (2019). However, their analysis focuses on *Frozen* in comparison with other adaptations of “The Snow Queen,” and does not engage with the fairy tale in the original language or with feminist and queer theory.

The Misunderstood Witch in Adaptation

As adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon states, stories do not consist only of their means of transmission or their genre rules: “Those means and those rules permit and then channel narrative expectations and communicate narrative meaning *to someone in some context*, and they are created *by someone* with that intent” (2013, 26, original italics). In other words, an adaptation can be understood through a model of communication taking into account the producer or author, the intended audience, as well as the context in which the adaptation is made. It is therefore important to pay attention to the Disney company as producer of adaptations, as well as aspects of social and artistic context specific to the early twenty-first century, since Disney movies are creative artworks that also need to be marketable and cannot openly undermine mainstream values.

However, one such element of mainstream marketability is the very act of challenging traditional fairy tale tropes. Indeed, as Jack Zipes has argued: “More than ever before in history we have fairy tales about fairy tales, or fairy tales that expose the false promises of the traditional fairy tales and leave open the question of a happy ending or even end on a tragic note” (2006, 106). Cristina Bacchilega observes that such reimaginings break the reader’s horizon of expectation, creating an effect that is dependent on the reader’s or viewer’s acquaintance with the source text³ or the standard formulae and tropes of the genre (1997, 22–3). Thus, such tales highlight, and potentially change or subvert, the content of the specific source text and the norms of the fairy tale genre.

In this postmodern trend of retellings, several adaptations attempt to rehabilitate the wicked fairy tale witch. Besides *Frozen*, one might mention Gregory Maguire’s novel *Wicked*, which has been adapted into an extremely successful Broadway musical, and the Disney live-action movie *Maleficent*, an adaptation of Disney’s animated classic *Sleeping Beauty* as other contemporary examples. The former reimagines the Wicked Witch of the West introduced in L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books, as an idealist opponent to the ruling class represented by the tyrannical Wizard. In the latter, *Maleficent*’s curse—that on her sixteenth birthday, princess Aurora will prick her finger on a spindle and fall into eternal sleep—is motivated by her desire for revenge on Aurora’s father, who once spurned her love and amputated her wings.

However different these adaptations may be, their striking common feature is the characterization of the witch and her troubled relation to a repressive society. Misinterpreting her acts of protection as menacing signs of unbridled power, people turn against her. At the same time, the real crook in these adaptations is a character who uses the witch as scapegoat to further his or her own malicious political goals. Admittedly, these plot elements echo those of other misunderstood villains, such as the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* or Severus Snape in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books, who turn out to be benevolent. The term “misunderstood witch trope,” however, is here used to specify two particular features. First, the misunderstood witch is framed as evil only within the *diegesis*, i.e. the fictional world of the filmatic or literary narrative. In contrast with other misunderstood characters, it is obvious to the reader or viewer from the outset that she is in fact benevolent. Secondly, this implies that the witch is herself a victim of malicious framing by someone else – a framing that is often *gendered*, in keeping with how the witch as a powerful woman threatens hierarchies of gender.

³ I use this term, following Hutcheon (2013, 31), to avoid the simplistic understanding of an adaptation as a simple “imitation” of an “original” text. Moreover, regarding fairy tales, it may be difficult to identify an original text.

Given the profound changes made to Andersen's story in adaptation, one might admittedly wonder whether *Frozen* fits with Hutcheon's description of adaptations as "[a]n acknowledged transposition of a *recognizable* other work or works" (Hutcheon 2013, 8, italics mine). In fact, only in the closing credits of *Frozen* is the adaptation peritextually acknowledged, as a "Story Inspired By 'The Snow Queen' By Hans Christian Andersen" (*Frozen* 1:33:06). As such, the movie can be understood as what film theorist Dudley Andrew (1984, 99) calls *borrowing*, a kind of free adaptation whose success is dependent on its "fertility" and not its "fidelity." While many in the primary audience of children are likely unfamiliar with Andersen, adult viewers may experience the "elitist" pleasure of an adaptation based on a more subtle "intertextual echoing" (Hutcheon 2013, 117). As such, the *someone* to whom meaning is communicated is arguably a dual audience of children and adults.⁴

Furthermore, "knowingness" in an audience is about more than familiarity with the source text (Hutcheon 2013, 126). *Frozen* not only acknowledges its transposition of "The Snow Queen"; it also stands in an intertextual relationship to what Janet Wasko (2001, 114) defines as the "Classic Disney" style. This is characterized by light entertainment filled with music and humor, building on revised fairy tales. Among the values it promotes are individualism, romance, happiness, and the victory of good over evil. This form of intertextuality is likely more familiar to the primary audience, and the prince turning out to be evil thus constitutes a denaturalizing break with expectations (Bacchilega 1997, 22–3). Changing the marriage plot in a way that at least partly challenges traditional stereotypes of gender suggests a potential for feminist readings. The fact that the witch is given so much more time and character development in *Frozen* than in "The Snow Queen" also attests to the very importance of the witch character and the adaptors' intention of elaborating on the gendered misunderstood witch trope. Indeed, the liberties taken with the source text make these factors stand out.

Disney's Transformation of "The Snow Queen"

Andersen's fairy tale has a complex, episodic plot. It begins by presenting a theodicy, where a troll called "Dævelen" [The Devil] has made a mirror that breaks into myriad pieces spreading throughout the entire world. Shards of glass fall into people's eyes, distorting their vision permanently. Some even get a scrap of mirror in their hearts, thus becoming evil (Andersen 1862, 395). From the outset, the tale consistently associates evil with cold, goodness with warmth. The distorting mirror associated with trolls refers to a stock trope in Nordic folklore,⁵ while fundamental Christian beliefs constitute the second important intertext present in the tale. Thematically, the prologue of the mirror announces the central conflict between (Christian) goodness and (diabolic) evil. The two protagonists, the children Gerda and Kay, are torn apart when Kay is struck by pieces of the mirror; his heart turns into an actual lump of ice and must be thawed.

Before the crisis, Gerda and Kay are close friends, "ikke Broder og Søster, men de holdt ligesaa meget af hinanden, som om de vare det" (Andersen 1862, 396) [not brother and sister, but they cherished each other as much as if they were]. With only a grandmother present as an adult character, the two children give the impression of being alone in the

⁴ "The Snow Queen" also features what Astrid Surmatz (2003) calls a double address.

⁵ As an example, one of the Norwegian fairy tale collector Peter Christen Asbjørnsen's informants tells a story of distorted vision. Barbro the milkmaid is about to be forced into marriage with a troll, when one of the bridesmaids says "Ja nu veed jeg ikke, det er andet igjen end at vrænge Øinene paa hende" (Asbjørnsen 1859, 54) ["Well now I think there's nothing more left than to twist her eyes"].

world.⁶ This close relation between the protagonists and their ostensive lack of parents are some of the elements the Disney version transposes, where Elsa and Anna are not only *like* siblings, but actual sisters. In addition, Elsa and Anna have also lost their parents, in keeping not only with what is suggested in “The Snow Queen,” but also with the general Disney tendency of orphan heroes.⁷

The troll mirror makes Kay forget his trusting, childlike attitude towards the world. He begins to viciously impersonate grandmother instead of listening to her stories, indicating an ironic, knowing attitude—a symbol of growing up. However, this turns out to be useless facing the Snow Queen’s fantastic power of seduction. As the queen passes him on her sleigh one winter day, he attaches his sled to it, but soon finds himself abducted.⁸ The rest of the story follows Gerda’s journey in search of her friend. Her journey allegorically depicts how one can get rid of evil through good, Christian actions, while avoiding the perils of adult sexuality personified in the Snow Queen.⁹ However, Andersen not only contrasts Christianity with black magic and folklore; another ideological antagonist is excessive rationality. When the Snow Queen drags Kay away, he feels “ganske forskrækket, han vilde læse sit Fader vor, men han kunde kun huske den store Tabel” (Andersen 1862, 402) [quite frightened, he wanted to read the Lord’s Prayer, but he could only remember the multiplication table]. When we encounter him several “stories” later, Kay is unable to spell “Evheden” (Andersen 1862, 436) [Eternity]—the condition for his release from the Snow Queen. Until Gerda rescues him, and in spite of his “rationality,” he is unable to solve existential problems and reach the idea of eternal salvation. The characters of “The Snow Queen” thus embody a dichotomy between logic and sensibility, which is repeated in the trope of love as the solution in *Frozen*. However, while Andersen does not gender these characteristics in a categorical way—Gerda stands for love, but the female Snow Queen represents rationality—in Disney, as we will see, love and sensibility are gendered as female, rationality and strategic thinking as male.

On her journey, Gerda encounters talking animals and flowers, a helpful prince and princess, and several other magical helpers. Among them are a “Lapp” woman and a “Finn” woman, portrayed as good witches. Both terms are synonyms for “Sámi,”¹⁰ the indigenous population which the Scandinavian majority peoples have traditionally associated with magic and regarded with distrust (Mundal 1996, 99; Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1991, 164). In *Frozen*, however, only the music of the opening scene, alludes to the Sámi. The title of this

⁶ Indeed, their familial status remains a murky point in the tale. It is briefly mentioned that their parents have decided to live next to each other, but the parents never actually appear in the tale. Grandmother is the only adult character who lives with them, but it also remains unclear whose grandmother she is. Gerda refers to her as “min gamle, stakkels Bedstemoder” (Andersen 1862, 412) [my old, poor, grandmother], but she seems to be just as close to Kay.

⁷ As J.A. Appleyard (1991, 76) has argued, orphan protagonists are typical of children’s literature, likely because it allows the child reader to imagine a world where he or she must solve problems independent of parental authority.

⁸ The Snow Queen does not levitate on a broom, but rides a sleigh, presumably pulled by horses or reindeer. Using animals as a means of transportation is typical of the Nordic image of witches (Alver 1971, 34–5).

⁹ One often-commented motif in the text is Gerda’s sacrificing her red shoes to the river at the start of her search for Kay. Jørgen Dines Johansen states that this symbolizes “giving up selfishness, vanity, and sexual desire” (2002, 138).

¹⁰ *Lapp* and *Finn* are considered derogatory today. Astrid Surmatz (2006, 106–8) shows how the depiction of these two women, as well as the robber girl, displays stereotypical ideas of the Sámi population.

piece, *Vuelie*, is the South Sámi word for *joik*, which is a type of traditional shamanic chant.¹¹ Although the music might bring spiritual magic to mind, Andersen's derogatory depiction of Sámi magical helpers is removed. While it would perhaps be a stretch to view this as an indication of an increased sensibility to ethnic diversity, Disney's choice of using Sámi music is at least laudable. Importantly, Anna's magical helpers are instead a tribe of *trolls*, the Scandinavian fairy tale creatures present in the frame narrative of "The Snow Queen." The witch, and the phenomenon of sorcery in general, are in European culture traditionally defined in opposition to the Christian God (Russell 1980, 35). The association between Andersen's Snow Queen and the "devil" troll thus alludes to the common idea of witches as Satan's followers. In *Frozen*, however, rather than wicked, the trolls are advisers and comic relief. This strengthens the impression that *Frozen* actively reevaluates traditionally "wicked" characters.

In the end, Gerda finds Kay in the Snow Queen's castle in Norway's extreme northern Finnmark region, one of the core areas for the persecution of witches in Norway (cf. Alver 1971, 14).¹² The Queen conveniently leaves, and as Gerda embraces him, her tears melt the ice in his heart. When she sings Kay a hymn of child Jesus, Kay weeps, his tears washing out the piece of troll mirror in his eye. He completes the word puzzle and leaves with Gerda. Safely home, Kay and Gerda realize they have grown up, and the story ends with grandmother reading Matthew 18:3: "Uden at I blive som Børn, komme I ikke i Guds Rige" (Andersen 1862, 440) ("Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"). Allegorically, then, "The Snow Queen" is a story of growing up, surviving emotional, intellectual and physical challenges, and remaining good Christians. Kay's sudden and dangerously erotic maturation needs to be tempered by Gerda's self-effacing, childish devotion.

While the tale offers few details of the Snow Queen, she evidently conforms to several of the central prejudices surrounding witchcraft in Western Europe. Indeed, presupposing the reader's knowledge of such ideas likely allows Andersen to omit a detailed description. On a general level, the European witch might be considered one of many examples in human history where certain kinds of people have functioned as a scapegoat.¹³ However, historian Lyndal Roper (2012, 24) emphasizes that the witch in western European imagination expresses ambivalent feelings concerning "death, identity, and motherhood." These abstract characteristics are all visible in Andersen's Snow Queen, and many of them are transferred to Elsa.

¹¹ The composer, Frode Fjellheim, is of South Sámi origin. In the sequel, *Frozen II*, the tribe of Northuldra is clearly inspired by the Sámi.

¹² Earlier, however, Gerda's reindeer helper has told her that the castle is located on the island of Spitsbergen. While the names used imply a realistic environment, familiar to a Danish child reader in possession of a world map, this lack of continuity perhaps indicates that the locations of Finnmark and Spitsbergen should be taken more as markers of something exotic, isolated and extremely cold. As Johansen argues (2002, 144), references to concrete locations in "The Snow Queen" should be seen as mythic, in keeping with the mythic, cyclic representation of time in the fairy tale. Andersen himself did not visit Norway until 1871, although he had received many descriptions of Norwegian nature from Norwegian intellectuals and artists in Denmark (Storsveen 2006, 29).

¹³ "Fundamentally, the witch-craze was one particular form of a flaw in human nature, the desire of human beings to project evil on others, define them as outsiders, and then punish them horribly.... The ideology determines the form the evil takes, but the evil lurking behind the form is independent of ideologies" (Russell 1980, 172).

Other traditional aspects of the European witch, however, would be highly problematic in a children's animated movie today. The witch often represents dangerous, sexual knowledge, set to destroy the natural development of growth and reproduction. Writing on early modern European witch trials, Roper states: "the European witch hunt was fired by an obsession with the power of old women to destroy fertility in the human and the natural world" (2012, 1). The contrast between the barrenness of snow and ice and the fertility of summer, echoes this trope. On the one hand, the witch stands for lack of fertility, and a cold rationality in contrast to the warm "words of life" Gerda utters to save Kay. On the other hand, this cold threat is predicated upon her unusual, tempting beauty, luring Kay away. Paradoxically, the Snow Queen arrests life and love through a feminine mystique connoting seduction and eroticism. None of these disturbing motifs are preserved in *Frozen*.

As many have noted (e.g. Solomon 2013, 11), Disney's Elsa is an amalgam of Andersen's Snow Queen and Kay, a complex mix of frightful powers and a good heart. This also means that *Frozen* does not depict an abduction. Instead, the film features *two* quests by both female protagonists. Much in the same way that Gerda's journey in "The Snow Queen" reads as an allegory of puberty, so Elsa's and Anna's journeys symbolize a process of maturation, introspection, and insight. In both Scandinavian folklore and "The Snow Queen," Christian actions, such as uttering the Lord's Prayer, are a way out of the witch's imprisonment. This trope is altered in a profound way in *Frozen*, where there are two scenes of revelation. The first takes place after the troll master has told Anna that only an act of true love can thaw her heart, which Elsa has accidentally frozen (*Frozen* 1:09:07). However, when Anna wants her love interest, prince Hans, to kiss her, he refuses. He only proposed to Anna in order to inherit the throne and plans to kill both sisters. Moreover, Disney uses the possibilities of creating suspense in the film medium by not simply sending Hans away at the right moment, the *deus ex machina* solution in "The Snow Queen." In the second scene of revelation, as Hans prepares to kill Elsa, Anna leaps in his way, freezing into ice in slow motion, breaking Hans' sword (*Frozen* 1:26:22—28). This act of sororal sacrifice, however, makes Anna thaw once danger is averted. While the adapted Snow Queen, Elsa, is responsible for freezing Anna's heart, it is Hans who reflects the source text Snow Queen's evil act of capturing and seducing a defenseless child, as well as her cold rationality. While evil is transposed from a traditionally malevolent female character to the stereotype of the benevolent prince charming, the film adaptation retains and dramatizes the trope of devotional, non-erotic love as the solution to existential problems.

After having established some of the overarching differences between source text and adaptation, the following section of the article will address the ideological aspects of both: How deep does the reevaluation go? And what are some of the possible readings that emerge from a critical-comparative perspective?

The Potential for Resistant Readings

Discussion of ideology in Disney movies is often limited by categorical assertions. To some scholars and audiences, Disney is regressive, patriarchal, representing a conservative-capitalist worldview. To others, Disney is a force for progressive social change. The latter stance is demonstrated by film critic Douglas Brode, who has made the case that the Disney company is a vehement promoter of progressive politics, to the degree where their films allegedly paved the way for the late 1960s youth revolution and modern liberal views on homosexuality (Brode 2005, 6; 227–8).¹⁴ Some have labeled Disney's recent turn to more active female characters, such as Elsa, "feminist" (García-Manso 2017, 3). There is also a

¹⁴ See Giroux and Pollock (2010, 241; 245) for a critical discussion of Brode's readings.

clear tendency in the popular reception to regard *Frozen* and other recent Disney movies as “queer” and therefore progressive (Nikolas 2014).

While it is problematic to jump from the identification of progressive elements to reading an entire movie—or the entire Disney Company—as exclusively progressive, one may also object to interpreters who see no redeemable qualities in recent Disney works. For example, Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes conclude their analysis of *Frozen* by calling Elsa “just a variation on the archetypal power-hungry female villain whose lust for power replaces lust for a mate and who threatens the patriarchal status quo. The only twist is that she finds redemption through gender-stereotypical compassion” (2017, 9). Such an assertion would have to ignore the many actual “twists” in Disney’s treatment of “The Snow Queen,” as discussed above. Further, this analysis indicates a facile understanding of the movie’s characters. Far from power-hungry, Elsa is a reluctant queen, in clear contrast to the zealous prince Hans (and Andersen’s Snow Queen). Neither is her lack of a mate due to prioritizing power; she *fears* her powers and avoids engaging in emotional relations lest she inadvertently hurt others. Finally, such readings risk reducing *Frozen* into a single, coherent ideological message. Here, I agree with Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock’s call for nuance when they observe that Disney is progressive and regressive at the same time: “Such contradictions should not be taken as grounds for dismissing Disney as a cultural force but instead should be exposed and used for the potential spaces of resistance they provide and for the imaginative possibilities they might offer” (2010, 49). As Kay Stone has fascinatingly suggested in her investigation of readers’ responses to fairy tales, “the true power of fairy tales was found precisely in this flexibility, that they are always and ever open to new reactions and interpretations at any stage of life. ... for some readers fairy tales had the possibility of not being inherently sexist at all” (Stone 2008, 36–7). The meaning of a text is not entirely governed by the text itself; what one reader might consider sexist, might for another be liberating, a chance to identify, or even mentally “co-author” the plot and characters.

With respect to Disney movies, Wasko argues for distinguishing between the “preferred textual message” and other “resistant and even emancipatory readings [that] can be decoded by audiences” (2001, 188). The contradictions and complexities of the films can be dealt with on a production level (the author and his/her context), the “textual” level, and the reader level. Thus, we now return to the question of the audiences at which *Frozen* is aimed, the *to someone* of Hutcheon’s model. Instead of assuming that the narrative orders a specific kind of reading, the following discussion will consider the *potential* for queer and feminist readings of *Frozen*.¹⁵

Opening the Door to a Queer Reading

Witches and sexual “deviants” have in common the act of representing an “inversion” of societal norms: “Witchcraft, ... is an act of pure inversion. Witches model their behaviour on our world, just as we do. Because their inspiration is demonic, their perception is overturned; they see and do everything the wrong way up” (Clark 1997, 13). The allegorical leap from the witch to the homosexual thus seems small, which supports viewing witches as possible *proxy identities* for gay men, in the terminology of David Halperin (2012, 211).¹⁶ Describing gay male culture as “parasitic on mainstream culture” (2012, 422), Halperin argues that female melodramatic suffering is an accepted, cultural performance that gay male culture has

¹⁵ For an interesting example of a different resistant reading, see Michelle Resene’s (2017) analysis from a disability studies perspective.

¹⁶ Especially when the witch is a queen with magical powers: “The close association of gay men to the world of fantasy has contributed to some of the most common epithets for homosexuals in Western culture: ‘fairy,’ ‘queen’ and ‘princess’” (Griffin 2000, 62).

borrowed to express experiences that do not share the same cultural acceptance or respect. Crucially, gay male culture *treasures* such appropriation of elements from the majority culture. Thus, the “gayness” of a work does not depend on whether it features an openly gay character, but on the room for recognition and appropriation.¹⁷

Disney scholar Sean Griffin notes several common aspects in Disney movies that may connect with a gay community: the importance of fantasy and escape, the focus on outsiders who lack a loving family, the ability of animation to caricature and campily overdo depictions of masculinity and femininity (Griffin 2000, 63–4; 74). This indicates that both gay and feminist readings of *Frozen* might usefully focus on the female characters. As Elizabeth Bell remarks on Disney’s women:

Disney transforms the vain, active, and wicked woman of folktales into the *femme fatale*, the ‘deadly woman’ of silent film and of Hollywood classic film. ... Mary Ann Doane summarizes the *femme fatale*’s most striking characteristic as ‘the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable’ (Bell 1995, 115).

Not being what one seems to be and harboring a threat that escapes legibility are also classical tropes in the cultural construction of homosexuality.¹⁸ Bell concludes: “[t]he wicked women harbor depths of power that are ultimately unknowable but bespeak a cultural trepidation for unchecked femininity” (1995, 121). While this is true for depictions where the witch, such as the Snow Queen, is described from the outside, one might reasonably expect that these attitudes are changed in retellings where events are viewed from her perspective.

Many elements in the portrayal of Elsa are open to an allegorical reading where she *potentially* represents a gay male “proxy identity.” At the beginning of the movie, the master troll asks whether she is born with her power or whether she is cursed (*Frozen* 6:49). Innate or acquired—this is the same question that has been asked about homosexuality since the creation of nineteenth century sexology (Oosterhuis 2000, 39). In order to shield Elsa from the world and prevent her from causing damage, her parents lock her in her room. The visual metaphor of the closed door runs through the entire movie, creating the impression that Elsa has to stay *in the closet* to protect the integrity of her family. Isolation is also a leitmotif in “The Snow Queen,” as all of the witches live solitary lives. While the narrator’s voice in the fairy tale never states this fact, Elsa’s isolation is constantly emphasized in *Frozen*, and through Anna’s care for her sister the audience is led to feel sympathy for her.

In an animated musical movie, songs offer the main window into the psyche of a character. As Elsa walks up the mountain to escape from the social sanctions she fears after the “uncloseting” of her powers, the first piano chords of “Let it Go” start (*Frozen* 31:09—34:45). This song marks an emotional high point in the story, as well as providing a commentary on the plot and characterization. In addition, the lyrics and melody are of course composed to be marketable. As such, the lyrics are also *general* enough to be open to “filling in” by different audiences. In the first verse, Elsa assesses her new situation:

¹⁷ This, however, does not imply that only self-identified homosexuals are able to perform such readings. A good illustration of this point would be the Mormon blogger Kathryn Skaggs, who in February 2014 published a lengthy analysis of what she perceived as the hidden gay agenda in *Frozen*. Indeed, those on the lookout for a supposed corruptive, gay agenda might be more prone to identifying gay elements in a text than other audiences.

¹⁸ See Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis* (1994, 4–13) for an analysis of how the homosexual is constructed as simultaneously a carrier of signs and unreadable, and thus an object of homophobic panic.

The snow glows white on the mountain tonight
Not a footprint to be seen
A kingdom of isolation
And it looks like I'm the queen
The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in, heaven knows I tried
Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know

The lyrics are elegantly written, featuring an internal rhyme (“white—tonight”) and a paronomastic summary of Elsa’s condition: The word “isolation” contains the syllable “ice.” This poetic device suggests that the state of being cold is connected to solitude, and loneliness. At first, Elsa seems to grieve over this assessment. The voice actress Idina Menzel¹⁹ draws out the syllable “ice,” and adds a slight quiver to her voice during the first six lines. However, the song comes to a turning point as Elsa quotes her dad’s admonitions: “Be the good girl.” Here, she repeats the norms that have limited her life so far, ultimately rejecting them. Her rejection is pragmatic; because her powers are revealed, she decides to:

Let it go, let it go
Can't hold it back anymore
Let it go, let it go
Turn away and slam the door
I don't care
What they're going to say
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway

The chorus, of course, is ambiguous. “Let it go” means letting go of the rules, but also letting *out* the power to create ice. Elsa embraces her uniqueness, and as the music and Menzel’s voice soar, the obvious message is one of empowerment and staying true to who one is. However, the pervasive metaphor of the closed door suddenly appears here as well. Her decision to “slam the door” seems paradoxical as it is followed by the exclamation that she does not care “What they’re going to say.” One wonders who “they” could possibly be, as she has just decided to stay away from everyone else. The idea of “letting go” thus comes across as self-deception; she is only free to *stay isolated* from society. The freedom Elsa believes she has now gained is an example of dramatic irony as it depends on going back in the closet.

This fact is highlighted in the following verse, where the confident tone of Menzel’s voice contrasts with the solution of solitude:

It's funny how some distance
Makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
Can't get to me at all

¹⁹ Interestingly, Menzel was the first actress to play the reimagined Wicked Witch of the West in the Broadway musical *Wicked*. She is also known for a more obviously queer role, that of bisexual Maureen in the movie *Rent* (2005).

It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free

Again, Elsa's fears cannot get to her, because by definition the fear of being discovered or revealed is dependent on there being other people present. This also brings nuance to her triumphant assertion in the second chorus: "You'll never see me cry." She will not cry, but only as long as she has nobody to cry about. In the end, she *does* cry, when she believes Anna has died to save her. For Elsa, then, the plot is directed towards the realization that she cannot stay alone. Her actions have repercussions for everyone else, which can only be resolved by the act of Anna's sacrifice.

To an adult audience, it will be obvious that the trope of coldness is a metaphor for the psychological state of Elsa—for example in the simile "like this swirling storm inside" in the first verse. The filmmakers transfer this imagery directly from "The Snow Queen," where coldness stands for a lack of love.²⁰ The melody reaches a crescendo in the bridge building up to the final chorus:

My power flurries through the air into the ground
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
I'm never going back, the past is in the past

Let it go, let it go
And I'll rise like the break of dawn
Let it go, let it go
That perfect girl is gone
Here I stand in the light of day
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway

While singing these lines, Elsa builds her ice castle, a physical manifestation of her ice-olation. Her soul is compared to the fractals of a snow crystal, while her decision to never return "crystallizes like an icy blast." The fact that the cold is a psychological metaphor allows individual audience members to read their own experiences into Elsa's song. Her song of grief has by this point turned into a song of triumphant independence, as Menzel's voice reaches a climax at the final "on." However, the conclusion to the song is also ambiguous. Elsa repeats that cold does not bother her—it is something external to her, something she can embrace and tolerate, as opposed to the disapproving attitudes of others. This makes her different from Andersen's Snow Queen, who *is* cold, in essence. In addition, the non-verbal ending again puts an ironic twist to the message. As she sings "Here I stand in the light of day," she walks out onto her castle balcony, standing for a while in the sunrays. The visual composition of the scene refers back to the coronation earlier the same day, as Elsa peers at the gathering crowds from her castle balcony in Arendelle. In the previous scene as well as at the end of "Let it Go," we see her full-faced, confronting the viewer first with fear, then confidence. Disney's snow queen seems to paradoxically embrace the warmth of the sun, but in keeping with the ambiguous message of the song, she literally turns away from the viewer

²⁰ Of course, as the idea that love equals warmth and lack of love equals cold is close to universal, the symbolic meaning of these tropes might also be obvious to a child viewer.

and slams the door. The surface message of independence, self-assertion and staying true to oneself, is thus constantly undermined. Elsa's freedom comes with a condition that will prove to be untenable, a fact anticipated throughout the song.

Much in the same way that "The Snow Queen" is an allegorical tale of getting through puberty and reaching adulthood while maintaining a childlike heart, *Frozen* allegorically depicts the act of finding an identity in young adult life. Interestingly, where the source text focuses on Gerda's growth and maturation, *Frozen* depicts two different acts of maturation through the sister protagonists. While Elsa rejects societal norms—but gains love as well as real confidence at the conclusion of the film—Anna rejects the parental authority transferred to Elsa at the death of their parents. The movie ends with Kristoff kissing Anna, the broken horizon of expectation thus recovered in the end (*Frozen* 1:31:05). This is highlighted by the repetition of the instrumental track from "The First Time in Forever," which Anna sang earlier in the film as she dreamed of meeting "the one" at Elsa's coronation ball (where Hans proposed to her). The reader is thus encouraged to believe that Anna has learned from her mistakes; this time, it's right.

Hence, the plot features two different trajectories for its main characters. There is a heteroromantic current of boy-meets-girl and one might even argue that Anna's disillusionment with Hans's betrayal and her subsequent love for Kristoff represents the Disney trope of rejecting a wicked male character before finding true love where it is least expected (see Ross 2004, 62). The Elsa plot represents a different current. Elsa's breaking free, her need for isolation followed by acceptance and love, as well as her lack of visible, erotic involvement all create an interpretative space where she can function as an identifying character for a queer audience response.

Feminist Readings versus Gendered Stereotypes

These two plot trajectories present an interesting mix of gender conformity and nonconformity that also troubles the search for any clear feminist message. Andersen's ideal of the selfless Gerda is repeated in Anna, who sacrifices what she believes is her own salvation—a kiss from Kristoff—in order to put herself in harm's way as Hans raises his sword over her sister. Similar to how the portrayal of the Snow Queen hinges on misogynist tropes of the witch, Anna's act of love is also arguably based on a reductive idea of the benevolent, angelic female. At the core of both works is a conflict between two women. In "The Snow Queen," the queen represents the usual trope of the witch as embodiment of envy, specifically the trope of a menacing, witch-like queen challenging a younger woman who surpasses her in beauty and goodness (cf. Roper 2012, 91–6). In *Frozen*, however, Hans the love interest and villain is pushed into the background. Instead of the young girl vanquishing the wicked witch, the two are reunited, and envy gives way to empathy. Where the idea of the witch as an embodiment of envy reflects a society in need of explaining death or the loss of natural resources (Roper 2012, 97), the relation between Anna and Elsa rather reflects twenty-first-century Western ideals of female autonomy and the difficult balance between parental authority and the independence of a young girl.

Nevertheless, these elements of gender nonconformity and female empowerment are not without precedent in the source text, which does depict a female heroine encountering a host of other powerful, female characters. Indeed, "The Snow Queen" features strikingly few male characters. Kay and the Prince are the only human males with "speaking parts"—and only Kay is named. By contrast, there are ten female characters, counting both humans and non-humans: Gerda, grandmother, the Snow Queen, the woman with the enchanted garden, the female crow, the princess, the robber girl and her mother, the "Lapp" and the "Finn" women—in addition to the flowers in the enchanted garden. One might argue that Gerda and the Snow Queen embody what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000, 19) call the symbolic

ambiguity of the woman: the angel (the symbol of transcendence), and the witch (the symbol of subversion). As such, the protagonist and the villain come across as reductive stereotypes. However, the other women, such as the sorceresses Gerda meets, and the robber girl who sets her off on her journey to Finnmark, can hardly be reduced to any specific symbolic value. If we were to define “feminist,” like “queer,” on a parameter of audience involvement and possibilities for identification, “The Snow Queen” could be regarded as feminist, as its gallery of female characters represents an extreme variation. As Stone has shown, female readers tend to identify with both benevolent and malevolent female characters in fairy tales.²¹ This interpretive potential is much larger in “The Snow Queen” than in *Frozen*, where the main female characters both confirm Bell’s analysis (1995, 109) of the female Disney body as inspired by contemporaneous ideals of female beauty.

In some ways, however, the potentially feminist aspects of Andersen’s tale are enhanced in Disney’s adaptation. Most obviously, Anna’s presumed love affair with prince Hans ends with him trying to kill both her and her sister, a danger averted by Anna. An adult viewer might perhaps read a phallic symbol of castration into the way Anna breaks Hans’ sword as she turns into ice standing between him and Elsa.²² However one chooses to interpret this scene, though, the female characters of *Frozen* stand out as noble, responsible, and brave, while the males are either primarily malevolent or comical—such as Anna’s new love interest, Kristoff.

In an original way, *Frozen* transforms the Disney narrative convention where the Disney antagonist separates the heroine and hero, “who must then overcome the villain and live happily ever after” (Stone 2008, 34). Likely in agreement with the audience’s horizon of expectation, Elsa refuses Anna and Hans to marry (*Frozen* 26:38). Elsa’s prohibition of the wedding between Anna and Hans is also potentially empowering in the sense that the most important relationship is between the female protagonists. Their destiny does not depend on men, and both plot trajectories lead to their reconciliation as sisters. It is thus not primarily marriage-oriented. Instead, the plot depends on the character development of Elsa and Anna, and their moral and political choices. However, while these heroines are active and relatively independent, they also embody values such as self-sacrifice and familial love and care. One might also argue that when the excessive, cold rationality of the Snow Queen is transferred to Hans, this is in keeping with how masculinity has traditionally been tied to intellect and strategic thinking.

Elsa’s prohibition and the ensuing argument trigger her escape, as she loses one of her gloves, accidentally creating ice. This scene takes place at her coronation party, when “for the first time in forever” she shows herself to other people. This is also the moment when the viewers are shown how *other* people will perceive Elsa as a witch. Crucially, the scheming Duke of Weselton is the one who cries ‘sorcery!’ and calls Elsa ‘monster!’. Thus, it is the invocation of a pre-existing fear narrative, by a man invested with state authority, which

²¹ Indeed, one of her respondents, a 31-year-old woman, says: “I certainly identified with the women in the stories, but the ones I remember are the ones where the woman was dominant—like in <The Snow Queen,> where the woman is sort of all-powerful. She may be meant to be a negative figure, but I didn’t see her that way...” (Stone 2008, 43).

²² While Streiff and Dundes (2017, 3) remark the male symbolism of pitchforks and saws in the opening scene of *Frozen*, they do not comment upon the sword. Instead, they suggest a reading of Elsa’s lack of romantic involvement as castrating and emasculating. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how their *recherché* Freudian interpretation of the imagery in *Frozen* is relevant to their goal of discussing to which extent Elsa and Anna “provide an improved model for girls coming of age” (2017, 1). For example, one wonders what young girl would be able to read the passage to Elsa’s ice palace as a “vagina dentata” (2017, 6).

incites the citizens of Arendelle to turn against her. The way in which Elsa is constructed as wicked only *within* the diegesis, while the viewer has already worked up sympathy for her, is important. To the audience, the characters who view Elsa as dangerous will seem like members of an ignorant mob.

Hans especially represents a calculating, masculine rationality—quite literally calculating, since his motivation for killing Anna and Elsa is having too many siblings to ever hope to accede to the throne in his own country. Although Christian imagery is scarcely present in *Frozen*, it is worth noting that prince Hans is the thirteenth brother in his family. While on a plot level this explains his motivation for conspiring on the throne of Arendelle, on an intertextual level it alludes to the archetypal traitor Judas. Female compassion, on the other hand, is depicted through the metaphor of the heart, central in both source text and adaptation. In “The Snow Queen,” the magic of the “Finn” woman is powerless compared to the Christian benevolence embodied by Gerda; as Gerda’s reindeer helper asks the “Finn” woman to give Gerda a magic item in order to gain power over the Snow Queen, the woman replies:

Jeg kan ikke give hende større Magt, end hun allerede har! seer Du ikke, hvor stor den er? Seer du ikke, hvor Mennesker og Dyr maae tjene hende, hvorledes hun paa bare Been er kommen saa vel frem i Verden. Hun maa ikke af os vide sin Magt, den sidder i hendes Hjerte, den sidder i, hun er et sødt, uskyldigt Barn (Andersen 1862, 432).

(I cannot give her any greater power than she already has! do you not see how great it is? Do you not see how people and animals must serve her, how she has gone barefoot through the world so well. She needs not learn about her power from us, it lies in her heart, it lies in her being a sweet, innocent child.)

In both source text and adaptation, then, magic turns out to be an insufficient solution. Gerda’s Christian love of her (literal) neighbor in “The Snow Queen” is reflected in Anna’s selfless act in *Frozen*. The crucial difference is that her act is not motivated by Christian values but by love for her sister. In Disney movies, love is not depicted as a value anchored in belief systems or ideologies independent of the loving subject, but as a characteristic as innate and essential as the power of creating ice, “in her heart.” Of course, the actual freezing of Anna’s heart is mirrored in the metaphorical coldness of Elsa’s. The older sister has played tough, seeking isolation and independence. Only when she realizes how much her sister loves her does she gain control of her ability. In *Frozen*, such noble, devotional behavior, is the only possibility for a female; there are no robber girls or old crones with magical potions. The relationship between the sisters and the femininely coded powers of love and compassion turn out to be what ensures peace and political stability, instead of male brutality. Thus, the characters simultaneously confirm and challenge gender stereotypes.

While the potential feminist and queer messages of *Frozen* are laudable from a progressive point of view, one should also bear in mind the privatization and individualization of charity inherent in Anna’s “act of true love.” She is not responsible for upholding societal values or saving the monarchy, only for saving her sister. In this respect, The Walt Disney Company’s adaptation of “The Snow Queen” resembles their adaptation of another Andersen tale: “The Little Mermaid.” Elisabeth Oxfeldt argues that in Disney’s 1990 adaptation, the metaphysical conflict of the source text is privatized by being moved into the sphere of the family (2009, 23).²³ In *Frozen*, too, Andersen’s Christian ideology is

²³ As Oxfeldt also notes, “The Little Mermaid” presents the reader with a severe Christian ethic, which today seems little apt for children: the girl willing to sacrifice even her life for

transformed into a private, individual conception of love and solidarity as something occurring between two people, not between the individual and God or between the individual and humanity as such. By adapting the fairy tale to the contemporary secular and individualist values of Western society, Disney simultaneously streamlines Andersen's more complex and unsettling cast of characters.

Concluding Discussion

The apparent proliferation of the misunderstood witch trope calls for a discussion of why such retellings appeal to twenty-first-century viewers. In general, modern fairy tale adaptations often depict heroines that appeal to a post second-wave feminism audience (Bacchilega & Rieder 2010, 24). One could speculate that perhaps much in the same way the Wicked Witch represented evil in a misogynist culture (cf. Clark 1997, 120), the misunderstood witch trope attempts to shed positive light on female autonomy in an age when Western culture is less condemning of powerful women. Indeed, witches are often invoked in feminist activism and writing as symbols of the destruction of patriarchy (e.g. Sollee 2017). Similarly, the imagery of the closed door could indicate the heightened tolerance for minority sexualities that were previously always closeted. While neither homophobia nor misogyny is fully eradicated even in Western liberal democracies, acceptance of non-heterosexual sexuality and women's equality arguably constitute mainstream values.

By extension, one should also consider the marketing potential of such reimagined adaptations. As Hutcheon remarks, "expensive collaborative art forms like operas, musicals, and films are going to look for safe bets with a ready audience—and that usually means adaptations" (87). A movie like *Frozen* takes known elements—the Disney formula of princesses overcoming adversaries and the renown of H.C. Andersen—and puts them into a form that has marketing appeal. The adaptation has marketing value not only for young girls dealing with identity issues, but also for grown women and men able to perform resistant readings—or just enjoy the intertextual play inherent in the adaptation. As several Disney scholars have noted, an image of being progressive and tolerant is a great advantage for the company. Hence, as Griffin notes, one could criticize Disney for profiting on a subcultural reading practice without any real commitment to gay and lesbian emancipation:

[W]hile giving credit where it is due to the Walt Disney Company, one must not be blinded from seeing what else is going on. As Disney and its advertising seem to encourage homosexual viewers to 'do' gay readings of their product, such advertising also regulates how that reading is supposed to be done and who is authorized to do it, turning a subversive strategy into a potential for more profit (Griffin 2000, 214).

Indeed, the combination of artistic and economic pursuits likely contributes to the ideological complexity of *Frozen*. At the same time, criticisms of the political message in Disney usually take a very clear and categorical, but unrationalized stance on which message is the "right" one. However, as argued in this analysis of *Frozen* as adaptation, even seemingly misogynist elements can form a valuable basis for resistant reading practices.

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the man she loves, is rewarded with death (Oxfeldt 2009, 24). In this regard, the "innocent girl as savior" trope in "The Snow Queen" probably holds greater appeal for a contemporary audience.

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