

**THAWING THE SNOW QUEER: QUEER READINGS OF *FROZEN*'S ELSA**

by

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## Abstract

One of the highest grossing animated films in history, The Walt Disney Company's film *Frozen* tells the story of Queen Elsa, a young girl with secret magical abilities which she cannot reveal for fear of being seen as a monster. The story of Elsa's struggle seems to have resonated particularly well with some audiences as the children's film has amassed a large queer following over the years. Indeed, many fans have adopted the film's now famous song "Let It Go" as a "coming-out" anthem. The erotophobia surrounding discourses of childhood has made the queer study of works of literature and film aimed at children more difficult and therefore rare. In this analysis, I seek to rectify this fact by looking at *Frozen*, and more specifically its main character Elsa, with a queer lens. To do so, I use Alexander Doty's theory of queer reading, Clare Whatling's "looking lesbian" strategy, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. I, here, aim to question heteronormative assumptions in this adaptation (queer reading), unveil its possible lesbian desires ("looking lesbian") and deconstruct the idea of gender (gender performativity) within the film.

Results of my analysis show that *Frozen* can be read as queer. Intertextual knowledge of Idina Menzel's career (the actress behind Elsa) and of the history of the monster figure in film (especially the lesbian vampire) allows for a queer reading of Elsa. Moreover, a closer look at the film's use of the symbol of the door, both in the animation and in the text, reveals that *Frozen*'s narrative journey for Elsa can be summarised as a "coming-out" story, the doors representing the metaphorical closet door. Furthermore, my examination of Elsa's gender performance shows that the Disney character exhibits

an exaggerated display of femininity reminiscent of the gender performance of a *Femme*. Finally, Elsa's independence from men and her close ties to her sister contribute to giving the film a queer feel.

## Lay Summary

In this study, I examine the Walt Disney Company's movie *Frozen* and its main character Elsa and argue that the film can be read as a queer story. To this end, I analyse Elsa with the help of the reading strategies of Alexander Doty (queer reading) and Clare Whatling's ("looking lesbian"), two reading methods which posit that a text is not inherently queer or straight but can be read as either; as well as Judith Butler's gender performance theory which suggests that our idea of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and are not traits with which we are born. My research concludes that the film can be read as queer. Indeed, Elsa's story can easily be read as a "coming-out" narrative.

## **Preface**

The thesis is an original work by Leila Matte-Kaci. No part of this work has been previously published.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Research Statement

The words *once upon a time* are familiar to many of us in the Western world. Often dismissed as beneath our notice, fairy tales nevertheless endure. What gives them such longevity? Far from seeing them as purely entertaining harmless little stories, Jack Zipes argues in his socio-historical approach to fairy tales that they are powerful socialising tools which promise to reveal to us the pathway to happiness while hiding a dark underbelly of oppressive forces (Zipes, 1997, 2012). Yet these same stories can also be subversive and allow us to imagine possibilities for transforming the world around us (Zipes, 1997, 2012). However, even while they offer the imaginative possibility of transformation, they often reinforce oppressive gender norms. For this reason, fairy tales have attracted the attention of many feminist theorists (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979) who have contributed greatly to the critical reading of these stories. For example, Karen Rowe (1979) points out that while the fairy tale's portrayals of adolescents are filled with "waiting and dreaming, patterns of double enchantment, and romanticizations of marriage ... such alluring fantasies gloss the heroine's inability to act self-assertively" (p. 237).

While scholarly research devoted to feminist issues in fairy tales has a rich tradition to date, there has been little scholarly research that has taken a queer perspective. Kristen Proehl (2012) comments that the "critical neglect of LGBT children's and young adult literature might be attributed to the pervasive cultural anxieties surrounding the intersections of childhood and sexuality" (p. 287). Such cultural anxieties about childhood and sexuality can make the exploration of queer themes and

issues in children's literature a challenge. Yet queer approaches to the study of children's literature have been a growing topic in scholarly discussions. However, while there has been a steady increase of interest in this area of study, past research has focused primarily *on* LGBTQ children's literature as opposed to the whole of children's literature, to open the latter to queer interpretations (Prickett, 2012). Thus, it is perhaps time to expand our notions of children's literature and queerness so as to open new avenues of exploration (Prickett, 2012).

Before beginning any such discussion regarding children's literature and queerness, it is essential to understand what is meant by queer. The word queer itself resists any simple definition (Seifert, 2015). In a broad way, it can refer to the questioning of dominant social and political relationships and the refusal to set alternative "norms" (Seifert, 2015). However, it is most often used to denote a resistance to the heteronormative order (Seifert, 2015). As a verb, to queer "is to make strange by accentuating what departs from normative social expectations about gender and sexuality, hence exposing the notions of 'normal' gender and sexual identities as myths (albeit powerful ones)" (Seifert, 2015, p.16). In the context of scholarly research on fairy tales, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century film adaptations have provided a particularly rich source of queer readings (Seifert, 2015).

Contemporary wonder tales can take many forms from oral to print to film. I, here, use the term wonder tale as an alternative to the word fairy tale, as it more accurately than the word fairy tale "recognizes the ubiquitousness of magic in the stories (...) which leads to wonder" (Warner, 2014, p. xxii). Adaptations of wonder tales

pervade contemporary popular culture and can be seen to subvert and break the audience's understanding of the classic fairy tale. Claudia Schwabe (2016) writes that:

While fairy tales are constantly migrating into new cultures and different media, reinventing themselves along the way, recent years in particular have seen a wave of highly innovative but also highly disputable fairy-tale retellings in popular culture. (p. 1).

One such example is The Walt Disney Company (commonly known as Disney) film *Frozen* (2013) which was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's literary fairy tale "The Snow Queen" (1845) but does not follow its plot. Indeed, recent fairy tales from Disney have very loosely adapted source material in order to tell unique stories (e.g., *Tangled* (Conli, 2010), *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014) *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009)).

While there have been many studies of literary, film, and television adaptations of wonder tales (Bacchilega, 2013; Tiffin, 2009; Greenhill, 2015), a thorough search of the literature reveals that still relatively few studies have taken a queer lens or focus to these adaptations. The aim of this study will be to address this gap in the literature by exploring the movie *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). This study will be designed to question assumptions about the depiction of gender and sexuality in this modern innovative retelling of a fairy tale. To that end, Alexander Doty's theory of queer reading (Doty, 1993, 2000); Clare Whatling's "looking lesbian" strategy (Whatling, 1997); and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990) will provide the framework for exploring issues of gender depiction and sexuality in this Disney film. Through 1) questioning heteronormative assumptions in this adaptation (queer reading); 2) unveiling

its possible lesbian desires (“looking lesbian”); and 3) deconstructing the idea of gender (gender performativity), this study seeks to expand on ways of reading this adaptation.

## **1.2 Motivation**

The idea for this study found its roots some years ago, when I stayed with my aunt Martine, a foster parent. I used to read bedtime stories to the children she fostered. One of the boys was particularly fascinated by the story of “Hansel and Gretel.” He would have me read it over and over again and pause at certain key moments where the father of the children was shown to be too weak to protect them from their mother. The little boy would make comments, such as, “He’s not a good dad.” He was also entranced by the gingerbread house and the danger it hid. This child had been abused by his mother while his father did nothing to protect him. He had a troubling relationship with food and suffered from obesity. It struck me that his particular interest in “Hansel and Gretel” might not have been coincidental and that perhaps he was using the tale to deal with some experiences that were too difficult for him to address directly. Because of the conclusion to which I came, the same one Bruno Bettelheim came to before me, I began to take fairy tales seriously, and I have continued to engage with them into my adulthood.

## **1.3 Research Focus and Questions**

While there exist many new adaptations of old fairy tales, some of them even explicitly queer (Donoghue, 1997; Gaiman, 2015), this study will focus on *Frozen* (2013) and more particularly on the character of Queen Elsa – a character who has amassed a significant queer following (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016:). To explore the queer possibilities of this character, this analysis will take an anti-heteronormative theoretical lens by using Doty’s idea of queer reading, Whatling’s “looking lesbian”



strategy, and a gender performativity stance (Butler, 1988). Thus, this study aims to abandon assumptions about gender and sexuality and look at *Frozen* from a queer perspective. With the help of these theoretical lenses, I will endeavor to answer these questions:

- How does Elsa's gender performance fit with a queer reading?
- How does the narrative of the dangerous *Femme* (a queer woman with a preference for a stereotypically feminine gender role) fit with Elsa's villain status?
- What are the possible queer readings of Elsa?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Both the homophobia and the erotophobia surrounding the discourses of childhood have made it difficult for queer theorists to make a significant impact on the study of children's literature (Abate & Kidd, 2011). Queer theory has therefore barely touched research on fairy tales (Seifert, 2015). Many studies exist, however, which focus on queer desires, representations, and films (Doty, 1993; 2000; Weiss, 1993; Whatling, 1997); few of them, though, have looked at films aimed at children. In his analysis of *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), Doty (2000) acknowledges that queer readings of children's stories are taboo and hence often meet resistance. To address the gap in the research, this study will explore the film *Frozen* (2013) through a queer lens by exploring the gender performance of its main character Elsa and by "looking lesbian" – looking at Elsa with a focus on lesbian desires without heteronormative assumptions.

Although I am aware of a recent analysis which takes a queer look at *Frozen*, this previous study functions more as an intersectional critique of the film, which points at its

unavowed queerness, rather than as a queer reading of it (Charania & Albertson, 2018). A queer reading of *Frozen* would explain to the reader how and why the film can be read as queer. Instead of this, an intersectional critique would evaluate the way *Frozen* makes use of its queer narrative.

Indeed, Charania & Albertson's study discusses the queer melancholy (longing for acceptance) and feminist trauma (narrative centered around the fear/danger of girl empowerment) that *Brave*'s Merida (Andrews & Chapman, 2012), *Maleficent*'s heroine of the same name (Stromberg, 2014), and *Frozen*'s Elsa all share (Charania & Albertson, 2018). It explores how Disney has come to take a more feminist look at marriage in these films and how the company has made use of the queer narrative of "coming-out," although it only briefly brushes over what that narrative is (Charania & Albertson, 2018). But the study argues that while the company (Disney) has profited from such stories, it has never fully admitted to their queerness (Charania & Albertson, 2018). It also points to Elsa's whiteness and discusses how her race unfairly helps make her difference more acceptable to the mainstream (Charania & Albertson, 2018). While I accept this critique, it is not the aim of this study to discuss Disney's broader use of the queer narrative in its recent films.

Here, it is important to note that while I identify as a feminist, and this will undoubtedly affect my reading of the text, it is not my aim to look at gender from a feminist point of view. There already exists an extensive amount of research exploring gender in fairy tales from a feminist standpoint (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979). This study will instead build on that research by exploring gender representation through a queer lens. One might then argue that this analysis by its very

nature is an intersectional study and that it is therefore feminist. After all, my focus will be on creating a queer/female reading of a fairy tale adaptation. Queer and female are intersectional categories; consequently, this study by its very nature could be called intersectional. However, since the primary aim of this research is not to create a social critique or to effect social change within the industry, goals that are the hallmark of a strong intersectional study (Grzanka, 2014), I feel it would be misleading to call this analysis intersectional. The aim of this study is much more modest: to use queer readings as a lens to explore this text. I therefore do not believe that this study is similar to Charania & Albertson's important intersectional critique. It is not my wish to repudiate feminism in this study. Rather, I aim to explore issues of gender in ways that have rarely been used in the analysis of wonder tales. I believe this type of research is becoming more and more relevant in today's world, as evidenced by the Disney corporation which is slowly testing the water with regard to queerness (Caldwell, 2016; Hunt, 2016; Mumford, 2017; Okwodu, 2017).

## **1.5 Chapters Overview**

The following chapter will provide a literature review which will expand on first topics linked to queerness (queer reading/"looking lesbian," gender performativity, the lesbian vampire) and later on issues connected to the fairy tale and its adaptations as it relates to Elsa ("The Snow Queen," *Frozen*, fairy tale villains). Chapter three will explain the reasoning behind the selection of the film *Frozen* and describe the methodology that will be used for the analysis. Chapter four to six will focus on different queer readings of the film. Chapter four will look at how intertextual knowledge might help bring out the queerness of Elsa first by examining Broadway star Idina Menzel's history with queer

culture, and second by looking at Elsa's relationship to the monster figure in general and to the lesbian vampire in particular. Chapter five will examine the "coming-out" metaphor in the film. Finally, chapter six will explore topics relating to gender, gender performance, and female relationships in *Frozen*.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

“Conceal, don’t feel, put on a show,/ Make one wrong move and everyone will know,” (Buck & Lee, 2013).

These lyrics sung by Queen Elsa, from the movie *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), express her fear of letting people know about her magical powers. However, they can also be interpreted through a queer lens as meaning one wrong move might reveal her sexuality. The movie *Frozen* has attracted many viewers, some of whom view the plots of this fairy tale re-telling through a queer lens (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016). Such queer readings have received very little acknowledgement in the study of fairy tales (Seifert, 2015). The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by providing insights into a media adaptation of a well-known fairy tale character – Queen Elsa from the movie *Frozen* (2013), a loose adaptation of “The Snow Queen” (Andersen, 1845). Specifically, this powerful woman, whose origins come from a wonder tale villain, will be studied through a queer framework informed by Doty’s (1993) theory of queer reading, Whatling’s (1997) “looking lesbian” strategy, and Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1988).

The following literature review will provide the reader with the background against which this study unfolds. Section 2.2 will explore the work of Doty (1993) and Watling (1997) and the theories of queer reading and “looking lesbian.” Section 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5 will examine Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity; *Butch* and *Femme*, terms used in the lesbian and gay culture; and the term *Femme Fatale*. Section 2.6 and

2.7 will discuss the roots of the adaptation in the fairy tale “The Snow Queen” and identify the origins of the character of Elsa.

## **2.2 “Looking Lesbian” and Queer Reading**

In his book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (2000), film theorist Alexander Doty deplores having to constantly defend his readings of popular movies. His interpretations, what he calls queer readings, are a reading strategy which focuses on dissembling the heteronormative plot of a story to reveal its queerness (Abate & Kidd, 2011). To Doty (1993), queer readings “aren't ‘alternative’ readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or ‘reading too much into things’ readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along” (p. 16). In other words, according to Doty, there is not a singular “right” way to read a text and queer readings are not any less legitimate than any other kind of interpretation. By deconstructing the text, queer reading reveals the queerness of a text; it does not create it (Collier, Lumadue & Wooten, 2009; Doty, 2000; Espinoza, 2015). Closely related to queer reading, to “look lesbian” allows viewers to explore the lesbian possibilities of films with or without explicit queer content (Whatling, 1997). In her own book *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (1997), Clare Whatling argues that “there is no such thing as a lesbian film. Films are rather lesbianised by the individual (or in some cases collective) viewer” (p.5). Her belief is therefore that any particular interpretation of a text lies within its audience and not within the text itself (Whatling 1997). Thus, what she calls “to look lesbian” is a particular reading strategy which puts the viewers’ point of view and sexuality at the forefront of the text (Whatling 1997). It is a way of looking at a text that lets go of heteronormative assumptions and

instead looks at lesbian possibilities. Consequently, “looking lesbian” can be summarised as one form of queer reading which focuses on female queer desires in film. Here, I use the term lesbian broadly as I do not want to exclude any queer woman’s desire, no matter how she defines herself. Instead, this study will aim to explore the possibilities of queer female desires within modern fairy tale adaptations. The point is here to free our reading of heteronormative assumptions, to open up the text, rather than to limit it to only one possible lesbian desire. In this study, I will endeavour to “look lesbian” at *Frozen* (2013) to unearth its queerness. One way of doing so is by questioning our assumption about gender with the help of Judith Butler.

### **2.3 Gender Performativity**

To social constructivist theory, gender and sex are two different things (Shapiro, 2012). Sex here then refers to an individual’s biological sexual characteristics (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005), while gender can be understood as “a set of sociocultural roles and norms used to differentiate men and women” (Shapiro, 2012, p.4). Hence, ideas of femininity and masculinity are here understood to be socially constructed and not biologically determined (Shapiro, 2012). In queer theorist Judith Butler’s view, gender can be understood as a performance (Butler, 1988). According to her theory, gender is a stylisation of the body, a series of repeated manufactured acts, which are rigidly regulated and normalised over time, but are independent of the actor (Butler, 1988). Gender is not an inherent trait (although it appears natural in its performance) but a histo-cultural script (Butler, 1988). One is not born with the inherent desire to wear dresses or cut one’s hair short; instead, one simply learns to perform these acts and so becomes the idea of a man or a woman (Butler, 1988). Butler, however, is careful about comparing gender

performance to acting (Butler, 1988). While it may resemble it in some ways (the acting of a pre-existing script), in performing gender, unlike in a play, one is not conscious of acting a part, and one cannot stop acting (Butler, 1988). Moreover, other people are not any more perfectly conscious of the artificiality of our performance (Butler, 1988). The difference between the real and the performance is much more blurred and not quite as easy to see and understand as it is when one goes to the theater (Butler, 1988). Thus, performance can also be understood in the sense of doing an action, or in the case of gender, a series of repeated actions which acquire meaning in our culture (Butler, 1988). For example, someone who wears pants, sits with their legs spread open, and plays violent sports will be understood as being a man. It is not a single act, but the total repeated sum of them, which allows us to come to this conclusion. Furthermore, while we are not completely conscious of the artificiality of our performance, we are partly aware of it (Butler, 1988). Indeed, people who go off script are punished (Butler, 1988;1990). Drag queens and masculine women are sometimes viciously attacked for their gender performance (Butler, 1990; LaMarre, 2009). Their transgressions of gender boundaries bring to the surface the uncomfortable reality of gender as a performance (Butler, 1988). Gender is an act and not an inherent trait (Butler, 1988). We at least partly realise that, or else transgressions to gender rules would not bring forth such anger and fear (Butler, 1988). This desire to force these actors to act a certain part means that we know that gender is not a biological fact. Finally, if gender is a performance, it stands to reason that many incarnations of it are possible (Butler, 1990). Indeed, queer communities have large vocabularies to indicate performative preferences in themselves and their partners. In



lesbian communities, no gender identities have a longer history than the *Butch* and the *Femme* (Eves, 2004; Ward, 2009).

#### **2.4 *Butch/Femme***

Although romantic and sexual relationships between feminine women and masculine women have existed for millennia, it was not until the 1950s and 60s that the terms *Butch* and *Femme* were popularised, especially among working-class lesbians and lesbians of colour (Ward, 2009). The terms fell out of favour in the 1970s at the height of the second-wave feminist movement, which saw *Butch* and *Femme* as just a copy of heterosexual relationships (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Ward, 2009). Androgynous roles became popular during that period, and it was not until the 80s and 90s that *Butch* and *Femme* saw a revival (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Ward, 2009). In the 90s and 2000s, social constructivist theories became a big part of queer culture, and thus the idea of androgyny being more natural or progressive became outdated; instead, the queer community advocated for people's right to choose their gender, change it, or live in-between genders (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Ward, 2009). *Butch* and *Femme* became just two of many possible forms of gender expression. The terms, while complex, refer to one's preference for a stereotypically masculine (*Butch*) or feminine (*Femme*) gender role (Eves, 2004; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Walker et al., 2012; Ward, 2009). Of course, gender roles are multilayered and can refer to one's dressing style just as much as one's sexual preferences (e.g., to penetrate or be penetrated) (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Walker et al. 2012). Therefore, one can identify as a *Femme* when it comes to choices of hairstyle, but not when it comes to other aspects of one's life. For this reason, these labels have become more complex and specific with time (*Hard Femme*, *High Femme*, *Stone Butch* etc.), and

many lesbians do not identify with them or only partly (Eves, 2004; Walker et al., 2012; Ward, 2009). Moreover, it is true that the *Butch* has come to dominate our cultural image of the lesbian (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Whatling, 1997). When one is asked to picture a lesbian, the *Butch* is often the one that comes to mind. It is also true that she suffers the blunt end of homophobia (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017). Statistically, *Butch*-identified lesbians report more often being victims of hateful comments and aggression coming from outside of the community (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017). However, *Femmes* report being victim of more aggression from within the community (Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Vannewkirk, 2006). Femmephobia is common as *Femmes* are frequently seen as being “not-real” lesbians (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017; Walker et al., 2012; Vannewkirk, 2006). Their more stereotypical feminine appearance, which allows them to pass for heterosexual in the outside world, brings out suspicion in their community (Eves, 2004; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017; Vannewkirk, 2006; Ward, 2009). Their concerns are dismissed, and their point of view, ignored (Hemmings, 1999; Vannewkirk, 2006). Therefore, while *Butch* suffer more homophobia, they also benefit from more support within the community (Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017). Meanwhile, the invisibility of *Femmes* makes them an object of anxiety within and without the queer community (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017; Vannewkirk, 2006); within, because they are labeled as “not-real” lesbians, and without, because they touch upon deep heterosexual male’s fears about female sexuality which have manifested

themselves historically in both books and films (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Vannewkirk, 2006).

## **2.5 *Femme Fatale***

The fear of the feminine lesbian has a long history, dating back to legends surrounding the Countess Elisabeth Bathory, a sadistic 17<sup>th</sup>-century aristocrat rumoured to have bathed in the blood of her young and virginal female victims, and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), a vampire (who preceded Dracula by a few decades) with a preference for attacking women (Weiss, 1993). The lesbian vampire is in fact the most persistent image of the lesbian in cinema (Weiss, 1993). This mysterious aristocratic lesbian figure appears in many B horror and pornographic movies (Weiss, 1993), although *Carmilla* has resurfaced recently in the form of a young adult YouTube series, directed at a queer youth audience, showing her continuous relevance (Bennett & Maybee, 2014). The lesbian vampire is dominant, powerful, sexual and yet visually coded as feminine: "she has long hair, large breasts, pale white skin, and wears floor-length translucent dresses" (Weiss, 1993, p.90). Unlike the more common representation of the *Butch*, the lesbian vampire is most certainly a *Femme* (Weiss, 1993). This adds to her danger as she appears "normal" by society's standards (Weiss, 1993). She can pass human, but, more importantly, she can pass for a heterosexual woman (Weiss, 1993). Nothing about her appearance marks her as either a supernatural creature or as queer, making her even more terrifying (Weiss, 1993). Moreover, with her red mouth and pointy teeth, she also opposes images of sensual softness (red mouth) and violent penetration (canines) (Weiss, 1993). Her plush lips which hide her deadly canines invoke the old fear of the 'vagina dentata,' "the vagina with teeth, the penetrating woman" (Weiss, 1993, p.

91). The lesbian vampire thus is a representation of the anxiety of female penetration and mixes fears of violence and sexuality (Weiss, 1993). The embodiment of male fear of women's sexuality, the lesbian vampire also reveals anxieties around the *Femme*, the fear of her rejection but also the fear of not having been able to identify her and her "perversion" on sight (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Weiss, 1993). Or as one *Femme* academic writer puts it, the fear of the *Femme* lesbian is what has prompted this angry response to her rejection by her would be male suitors in the bars she frequents: "Are you a dyke or something? You're a dyke, aren't you? Dyke!" (Hemmings, 1999, p.454) Thus, deeply rooted anxieties around the feminine lesbian have existed for centuries. She is terrifying because she is sexual, yet she does not depend on male desires. Worst of all, she is not immediately knowable; she can walk among heterosexuals undetected. In films, she takes the appearance of the lesbian and vampire who must be destroyed by a masculine force: the good everyday Christian man (Weiss, 1993). In the real world, psychoanalysts saw the *Femme* as a sick, troubled, and undesirable young woman who had to be rescued from her confusion (Hemmings, 1999). The cure to her confusion was, of course, the love of a man (Hemmings, 1999). Therefore, the *Femme* is perceived as a threat which must be brought back under masculine control in order for heterosexuality to reign supreme. Perhaps oddly, however, lesbian vampire films, with all their homophobic discourses, have still garnered a sizable lesbian following which has chosen to focus on the campy aspects of these movies as well as the image of power their villains project (Weiss, 1993). I would argue that this reading of the lesbian vampire in queer circles has influenced readings of other powerful antagonists, including wonder tale villains. In this study, the focus will be on one important wonder tale villain, the Snow Queen, who has

garnered the attention of many queer women in her most recent incarnation. But let us first look at the history of the fairy tale from which she comes.

## **2.6 *Frozen* and “The Snow Queen”**

Since the focus of this study will be a close reading of the character of Elsa in *Frozen* (2013), this section explores the history of the fairy tale that inspired this media re-telling.

*Frozen* (2013) uses as its source Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Snow Queen” (1845). Unlike other fairy tale writers (e.g., Brothers Grimm), Andersen did not collect fairy tales but created them (Zipes, 2012). Writing in the middle of the 19th century in Denmark, Andersen infused his stories with a clear Protestant Ethic (Zipes, 2012). Born in the lower class, Andersen never stopped trying to show that he belonged with the upper class (Zipes, 2012). Thus, his tales celebrate the self-made man while maintaining a belief in the power structure that keeps oppressing the lower class (Zipes, 2012). This earned him a place in the nursery libraries of the dominant class (Zipes, 2012). However, while he may have used his stories to pontificate about Christian doctrine, his autobiography attests that even though he courted two women in his lifetime, the author felt a certain ambivalence towards heterosexuality (Greenhill, 2015). His relationships with other men took central stage in his life and showed many homoerotic undertones (Greenhill, 2015). Moreover, the fact that Andersen referred to himself as a ‘semi-woman’ and liked to cross-dress on stage have left many to speculate (Greenhill, 2015). While it is impossible to know which label, if any, the author would have chosen for himself, the fact remains that the queerness surrounding his sexuality may give his tales a certain added queer credential (Greenhill, 2015). This is especially

true of his story “The Snow Queen,” which has been understood as a somewhat biographical story about the writer, although it has too rarely been noted for its queerness (Greenhill, 2015).

“The Snow Queen” tells the tale of a little girl, Gerda, who goes on a quest to rescue her best friend Kay who has been kidnapped by the title character (Andersen, 1845). According to Andersen, the tale is an allegory for the triumph of the warmth of heart over the cold intellect (Greenhill, 2015). The association of evil with reason and goodness with instinct is a common one for the author, as Jack Zipes points out (Andersen, 2005). The story hence serves as a Christian baptism of sort where the children expunge evil (the Snow Queen) from themselves and show their innocence in order to obtain salvation (Andersen, 2005).

However, the fairy tale’s sexual and romantic undertones have been noted by fairy tale scholar Pauline Greenhill (2015), who argues that:

By any evaluation, Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Snow Queen” (1845) hardly instantiates sex normativity. Concerning mutual (sexual) attraction between a young boy (Kai) and an adult woman (the Snow Queen); mutual (sexual) attraction between two children (Gerda and Kai) who, though not biologically related, are raised as siblings; and mutual (sexual) attraction between Gerda and the various women and girls she meets on her travels, the tale explores a variety of arguably homosexual and homosocial relationships as well as arguably heterosexual and heterosocial ones. (p. 110)

Thus, the tale possesses queer possibilities which have also been noted by another fairy tale scholar, Maria Tatar (2008), who remarks on the relationship between Gerda and the

Little Robber Girl, a character the heroine meets on her quest. The Little Robber Girl simultaneously threatens Gerda with death and demands they share a bed. She shows the other girl affection yet also takes pleasure in scaring her. Moreover, as Tatar (2008) points out, the girl's acts of aggression (flirtation?) have strong sexual connotations. She steals Gerda's muffs (noted for being soft and warm) to warm her hands, and she threatens her with a knife while they lie in bed, a weapon which has the power to penetrate the other girl's body (Tatar, 2008). However, as Greenhill (2015) points out, Tatar's analysis seems to take for granted that the Little Robber Girl's flirtation is unwelcomed by Gerda, something which we cannot presuppose.

Rather than focusing on Gerda, the Disney adaptation of the tale, *Frozen* (2013), tells the story of the young Queen Elsa whose magical ice powers fall out of her control. Labelled a villain by her subjects, she escapes into the wilderness. Her younger sister, Anna, goes on a quest to rescue her and the kingdom of Arendelle which has been accidentally frozen by Elsa.

While *Frozen* can be labelled a fairy tale adaptation, it cannot be said to faithfully reproduce the original tale it is based on or to reinforce this story's core values. Instead, the film can be said to fall under the category of *analogue*, according to Thomas Leitch's classification system (Blankier, 2014). It invokes its source material rather than following it closely (Blankier, 2014). It does not reproduce the plotline or values of the text it is based on but rather uses the story's characters and motifs in a whole new way. However, while it would be too easy to simply classify this adaptation as an *analogue*, this would not be perfectly true. Adaptations are more complex than this. Indeed, "adaptations cannot be neatly categorized according to adaptational strategies on a text-by-text basis, but rather

on an individual-reference-by-reference basis” (Blankier, 2014, p.119). Therefore, any given film adaptation cannot be neatly classified under one category only. Instead, different aspects of an adaptation will fall under different categories. In the case of *Frozen*, some of its humour falls under the category of *parody* (a form of humour which thrives on ironic inversion) as it loves to make fun of the fairy tale genre and of past Disney adaptations (Blankier, 2014). Indeed, the film pokes fun at previous Disney romantic plots where princesses married princes they barely knew (“Who marries a man she just met!” (Buck & Lee, 2013)). I believe this form of humour shows a lack of reverence towards previous Disney texts. It also points to the artificiality of the film by showing that *Frozen* is just a text which exists in a web of fairy tale texts. Thus, because *Frozen* does not follow closely its primary source and because it makes fun of previous fairy tale adaptations, it invites viewers to play with the material and participate; it allows readers to come and add their own thoughts to the text, making it a perfect avenue for queer reading and “looking lesbian.” So, because of its lack of reverence for its source text, *Frozen* opens the door to queer interpretations.

However, while *Frozen* opens the door to queer interpretations, it is far from being a perfectly progressive text, and I should acknowledge some of the faults that have been noted about the film. Disney has come under fire in the past for encouraging consumerism and conservative/patriarchal values (Giroux, 1994; Zipes, 1997). *Frozen* can certainly be accused of encouraging consumerism (Hoyle & Lankston, 2014). One only needs to walk into the children’s section of most stores to realise how much *Frozen* has been commercialised. However, when it comes to issues of gender, the matter is more divided. Some scholars have praised the film for being at least partially more progressive



than its Disney predecessors (Charania & Albertson, 2018; Crosby, 2016; Rochester, 2014). These critiques have argued that *Frozen* offers a more feminist view of marriage and that it even promotes sisterly love over romantic love (Charania & Albertson, 2018; Crosby, 2016). They add that the film desegregates gendered space by allowing female characters to use their personal and political powers in both public and private spheres (Crosby, 2016). Moreover, they point out that while flawed, the film offers female characters who show agency, strength, and independence (Rochester, 2014). Other scholars have accused *Frozen* of faux-feminism for presenting stereotypical ideas of gender (especially when it comes to characters' appearances) and/or negative views of female empowerment (Charania & Albertson, 2018; Dundes, Streiff, & Streiff, 2018; Rochester, 2014; Rudloff, 2016; Streiff, & Dundes, 2017). They believe that the Disney film reflects societal fears over unattached women and new reproductive options (Dundes, Streiff, & Streiff, 2018). They also point to the fact that *Frozen* only offers heroines that are white and able-bodied and thus lacks diversity in its portrayal of womanhood (Charania & Albertson, 2018; Rochester, 2014). Taking all of these diverging views together, I might say that while the adaptation is firmly rooted in an American capitalist culture, *Frozen* has slightly evolved through the use of feminism to try to match contemporary sensibilities even if it sometimes fails.

Finally, I should note that while many feminist readings of *Frozen* exist, few queer readings of this text have been done. My look at the research on *Frozen* turned up only one such interpretation (Charania & Albertson, 2018). However, this analysis serves more as an intersectional critique of the movie than a queer reading of it (Charania & Albertson, 2018). It praises the film's more feminist outlook on marriage but also

critiques Disney for its treatment of princesses of colour versus its white princesses (Charania & Albertson, 2018). This study then points to the fact that Elsa's journey can be interpreted as a "coming-out" narrative but only brushes on why that is the case. I believe a more in-depth look as to why she can be read as such is warranted. In this study, I will attempt to fill this void.

Now that I have established where *Frozen* comes from, I want to focus on the figure of the villain to understand where Elsa stands in all of this.

## **2.7 The Villain**

To understand Elsa's appeal, it is helpful to understand traditional fairy tale villains and the roots of these stock characters. The term villain comes from the Latin word *villanus* which means "one who is attached to a villa or farmhouse" (Villain, 2018). When the noun moved into the English language, it first took on two different meanings, one (*villein*) similar to the Latin word which links someone to a particular class of people (serfs); another (*villain*) which signifies that someone is a 'low-born, base minded rustic' (Villain, 2018). Over several centuries, the term's meaning changed again to become associated with illegal activities (Villain, 2018). So, with time, the noun has come to imply rudeness and treachery. In fiction, the villain often functions as a foil to the story's hero.

To understand the figure of the villain, I want to start by looking at Vladimir Propp (1928) and his formalist theory on fairy tales. First, however, I want to note that Propp's analysis is based on folktales (stories that come from an oral tradition, generally anonymous and undatable) rather than literary fairy tales (stories that are signed and dated) (Propp, 1928; Warner, 2014). The formalist theory being as important as it is to

the analysis of fairy tales, I want here to touch on how it may be applied to the tale of “The Snow Queen,” a literary fairy tale. I do not wish to claim that the formalist theory perfectly matches this tale, but rather that some elements of the oral tradition, as described by Propp, can still be found in it.

Propp writes that the function of the *dramatis personae* in any story/tale is dictated by the story itself (Propp, 1928). According to him, a tale begins with some sort of initial situation (referred to as  $\alpha$ ), where we meet the members of the family, before one of them goes away or dies (a plot point referred to as  $\beta$ ) (Propp, 1928, p.13) In the case of “The Snow Queen” (1845), the heroine Gerda and her friend Kay are introduced to us, before Kay goes out to play in the town square. Not long after this point, the antagonist enters the tale (Propp, 1928). The role of the antagonist is to cause some form of misfortune, damage or harm (Propp, 1928). Here, Kay is met in the town square by the Snow Queen, who traps him. According to Propp (1928), at the start of the tale, the antagonist attempts to deceive her victim in order to obtain something from them ( $\eta$ ); the victim then submits ( $\theta$ ). In Andersen’s tale, the Snow Queen gives Kay magical kisses which have the powers to make him forget his previous life and render him completely malleable. The antagonist then hurts a member of the hero’s family or the hero himself (A) (Propp, 1928). This includes kidnapping a character like the Snow Queen does with Kay (Propp, 1928). After this, the antagonist leaves the story for a while but comes back at the end to fight the hero and/or be defeated (H/I) (Propp, 1928). Here, Andersen’s story does not follow Propp’s pattern since no confrontation between Gerda and the Snow Queen takes place. Following this, the initial misfortune is liquidated, meaning that the hero reaches his goal (K). Here, Gerda rescues Kay. In some tales, the antagonist is then

punished (U), but the Snow Queen avoids such a fate (Propp, 1928). Gerda saves Kay after the Snow Queen has left him alone in her palace, so no battle between them takes place. Most tales then come to a close with a wedding between the hero and his intended (W) (Propp, 1928), but this is not the case for Gerda and Kay who only reach puberty by the end of their story. Thus, while Andersen's tale does not perfectly follow Propp's theory, the character of the Snow Queen fulfills the role of the antagonist.

As we can see here, the antagonist is the villain, the obstacle the hero must overcome to reach the end of the narrative. Moreover, in traditional tales, they often take the form of familiar female characters, such as the wicked stepmother, the witch, the cannibalistic cook, and the evil mother-in-law (Tatar, 2003; Warner, 1995; 2014). Any given tale can make use of more than one of these stock characters; however, while a tale can have more than one antagonist, Maria Tatar (2003) believes that all these characters are really one and the same. These villains can be summed up as nothing more than a thinly disguised bad biological mother (Tatar, 2003). As a member of the family, the bad mother is a part of everyday life and takes the form of the wicked stepmother, but in the woods, she is a witch whose inflated maternal evil makes her almost mythical (Tatar, 2003). For example, the blind witch from "Hansel and Gretel" is just a more dangerous version of their wicked stepmother. Both women represent the children's evil mother and can thus be conflated. So, while the antagonist of wonder tales can take many forms, they often can be described as evil maternal figures (Tatar, 2003).

Villains are then antagonists to the hero which often take the form of a bad mother. But why are evil maternal figures so common to fairy tales? To psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (1976), the reason lies in children's developmental anxieties. Indeed,

according to him, as they grow, children begin to develop feelings of resentment towards their mother; she becomes less than perfect in their eyes. These feelings, however, prompt these youngsters to feel guilt (Bettelheim, 1976). To deal with this guilt, Bettelheim believes that children divide their mother in their mind into both a bad and good mother figure so that the good mother can remain uncontaminated by their anger (Bettelheim, 1976). Most tales with a bad mother also contain a good female helper, often believed to represent the good mother (Tatar, 2003). Cinderella, for example, has both a fairy godmother (good mother) and a wicked stepmother (bad mother). This divide mirrors the one children make to protect themselves from the guilt they feel so that they can freely be angry at their bad mother for her failure to meet all of their needs without experiencing distress (Bettelheim, 1976). What is more, the bad mother also serves an Oedipal function (Bettelheim, 1976). In this case, the evil jealous mother is nothing more than a projection of the child's own anger (Bettelheim, 1976). The child is jealous of the relationship between her parents and wants to keep her father's love to herself; however, as she also loves her mother, she feels guilty for wishing her away (Bettelheim, 1976). Again, in order to protect herself from these feelings, the child projects her envy onto her mother, believing the latter is the one who is jealous of her (Bettelheim, 1976). So, the child makes herself the victim of her own family drama and pushes her mother in the role of the villain (Bettelheim, 1976). Just like Snow White, the little girl is the fairest of them all, the object of her father's love, and the evil mother plots her demise.

Many fairy tale scholars disagree with Bettelheim's theory (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2012). They instead believe that there are socio-historical reasons which explain why fairy tales contain more evil mothers than evil fathers. To Jack Zipes and Marina Warner,

the bad mother does not reflect children's psychological anxieties but the societal anxieties of the time of their creation. According to Zipes (2012), these villains are the vestiges of pagan goddesses who could be benevolent but also dangerous (Zipes, 2012). These powerful figures were transformed as Christianity gained power (Zipes, 2012). It found the beliefs and practices of paganism to be abhorrent, and to counter the power of the pagan goddesses, the Early Church re-cast these powerful figures as witches and evil fairies (Zipes, 2012). This theory is not at all farfetched considering that one of the first known literary appearance of the wicked stepmother is in Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche* (2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D.), a precursor to "Beauty and the Beast," where she appears as Venus, Psyche's evil mother-in-law (Warner, 1995). In *Perceforest* (14<sup>th</sup> Century), the predecessor of "Sleeping Beauty", the fairies are three goddesses (Lucina, Themis, and Venus) (Tatar, 2003). For her part, fairy tale scholar Marina Warner agrees that villains find their origins in myths; however, she points out they also come from the real world (Warner, 2014). According to her analysis, back in the days when Western folktales were first told, childbirth was the most common cause of death for women (Warner, 1995). Most men took a second wife relatively quickly after losing their first which created family conflicts as the new wife, her children, and her stepchildren had to compete over scarce resources (Warner, 1995). Wonder tales are hence rooted in a specific socio-economical and historical time (Warner, 1995). They reflect issues that women faced as they competed over the allegiance of a man upon whom they depended economically (Warner, 1995). Therefore, to both Zipes and Warner, the bad mother of fairy tales is the product of the misogynistic times they were created in; times which vilified powerful

women and forced them to depend on men and compete for their attention. The lack of a man's support could spell poverty and starvation for a woman.

With origins such as these, it is perhaps not surprising that villains have attracted the attention of feminist scholars who question what these characters are meant to teach us to fear. Karen Rowe, for example, sees the evil female of fairy tales as a fear of menopausal women and of female sexuality (Rowe, 1979). The bad mother is the counterpoint to the virginal and youthful heroine, the embodiment of predatory sexuality and old age (Rowe, 1979). As for Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), who focus solely on Snow White's evil stepmother, they saw the conflict between mother and daughter as one between an angel woman and a monster woman, two creations of Western patriarchy. To Gilbert and Gubar, these women represent two possible life trajectories: one is docile and complies with patriarchy, while the other is active, nomadic, creative, and socially subversive (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). The evil stepmother with her disruptive and disturbing nature fascinates, while Snow White is a bore (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

But villains have also attracted the attention of queer theorist Dallas J. Baker who points out that fairy tale villains (not just female) are often transgressive (Baker, 2010). Heroes perform gender roles in a way that society finds acceptable (Baker, 2010). Villains, however, do not conform and try to stop the happy heteronormative ending of the heroes for which they are violently punished (Baker, 2010).

Moreover, in their study *Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film* (2003), Li-Vollmer and LaPointe examine ten full-length children's animated movies for gender transgression as an indicator of deviance and villainy. Their findings confirm that

gender transgression is a feature of villains in this sample of children's animated movies. They also note that male villains have become more common, which they believe may be due to a desire to portray women in a more favourable light on the part of the animators.

Thus, villains are the antagonists of wonder tales who stand in the way of the heroes' happy ending and push them on their journey (Propp, 1928). They can take many forms, but most of them seem to be variation on the evil maternal figure (Tatar, 2003). Bettelheim believes that these characters are the manifestation of children's anxieties regarding their own mother (Bettelheim, 1976). Fairy tale scholars, however, tend to see them as manifestation of socio-historical anxieties regarding women, especially powerful ones (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2012). Feminists and queer theorists, for their part, agree that these figures are transgressive and defy gender rules (Baker, 2010; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Rowe, 1979). So as a whole, villains can be described as powerful, subversive, and transgressive. Their transgressive nature is closely linked to their gender. Elsa is based on the Snow Queen and can be considered a fairy tale villain; however, she is not the true villain in *Frozen* (2013). In more recent times, as noted by Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003), the villain is more likely to be a man. In the case of *Frozen*, Prince Hans becomes the true villain of the tale. Still, it can be argued that Elsa reflects this complex notion of the villain as a person who disturbs the peace of a family or community, delays or stops a heterosexual ending, and who may be understood as queer and subversive (both in traditional fairy tales and in Disney). Given this notion of the villain, it is perhaps not surprising to find that this character has such a popular appeal in queer communities (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016). Thus, in this study, I will endeavor to see Elsa without heteronormative assumptions, to look at her in a queer way, to "look



lesbian.” Furthermore, to read this character as queer, I must acknowledge the baggage that follows the lesbian villain and her performance of gender.

## 2.8 Summary

In summary, few studies have looked at modern film and television adaptations of fairy tales through a queer lens. Queer reading, a way of understanding a text without heteronormative assumptions, offers a way of exploring media adaptations of children’s fairy tales (Doty, 1993). What is more, “looking lesbian,” a kind of queer reading which puts queer female viewers’ interpretations at the forefront of its analysis, has been used to unearth the queer female desires of films meant for an adult audience (Whatling, 1997). One of the ways that we can “look lesbian” is by observing characters’ gender performance with the help of Judith Butler’s theory which states that gender is a cultural construct and not a biological fact (Butler 1988;1990). Gender exists in the repeated actions of its actors and not in the actors themselves (Butler, 1988). In queer communities, the understanding of gender performance has taken many forms, but none have had such a long history as the *Butch/Femme* divide (Eves, 2004; Ward, 2009). *Butch* (masculine lesbian) and *Femme* (feminine lesbian) have been understood differently by our culture (Eves, 2004; Ward, 2009). While the *Butch* faces more homophobia, she has also become the image of the “real” lesbian (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Levitt & Puckett, 2015; Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, 2017; Whatling, 1997). Meanwhile, the *Femme*, because of her capacity to blend into heterosexual societies, has become a source of anxiety both in and outside the queer community (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Vannewkirk, 2006). She has become the face of the most common lesbian villain of cinematic history, the lesbian vampire (Weiss, 1993). Hence, I

argue that queer readings of feminine villains will likely be coloured by our fear of the lesbian vampire and what she represents (Weiss, 1993). This study, which will use Doty's queer reading and Whatling's "looking lesbian" strategies as well as Butler's theory of gender performativity, will focus on a fairy tale adaptation, something which has yet rarely been attempted. I will look at *Frozen* (2013), a contemporary interpretation of "The Snow Queen" (1845), a tale by Hans Christian Andersen, a man whose sexuality has left many to speculate as to his queerness (Greenhill, 2015). Whether the writer was queer or not, "The Snow Queen" certainly possesses many homoerotic undertones, making any queer readings of its adaptations particularly interesting (Greenhill, 2015). *Frozen*, however, does not follow the plot of the original tale as it was adapted to fit today's sensitivities (Crosby, 2016). Still, I would argue that there is more than a little of queer sensibility left in this adaptation of "The Snow Queen," and in this study, I will explore the queer possibilities of the characters of Elsa, who comes from a legacy of wonder tale powerful and transgressive villains.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This study aims to thread together queer readings of a fairy tale's filmic adaptation developed for children. This has rarely been attempted. Thus, the methodology of this research thesis is rather new and will demand a careful explanation.

This chapter therefore will first outline the rationale behind the primary text selection for this analysis. In other words, I will discuss why *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) makes for the perfect focus of this study, after which the method of analysis will be outlined followed by the limitations of this study. Finally, the chapter will end with a glossary outlining the key terms used in the study.

### 3.2 Rationale for the Texts Selection

There have been many modern adaptations of fairy tales – some have even included obvious gay and lesbian characters. Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997) or Neil Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2015), for example, challenge the “boy-kisses-girl” bias of traditional fairy tales. Additionally, in Disney's adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's “The Little Mermaid” (1837), the heroine, Ariel, desires not just to change her life but to change her physical form (i.e., a girl who believes she has been born into the wrong body) (Clements & Musker, 1989). The mermaid's plight has been taken-up by members of the transgender community who see themselves in her (Romain, 2017). However, while these fairy tale retellings and adaptations challenge heteronormative attitudes, none has had the impact of *Frozen* (adapted by Disney from “The Snow Queen”) and whose main character Elsa needs no male partner to complete her self-realization.

Indeed, few movie characters have managed to grab the interest of such a huge queer following as the character of Elsa in *Frozen*. The queer coding of Disney villains is well-known in queer communities (Martinez, 2015; Nichols, 2017). For example, Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* was modelled on the drag queen Divine (Bell, Haas & Sells, 1995; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Such coding has prompted mixed responses among those fans who find these characters homophobic in their messages and yet are much more captivating than the heterosexual heroes (Doty, 2000; Martinez, 2015; Nichols, 2017; Tjwest3, 2013). Perhaps because of this long history with villains in general (e.g., the lesbian vampire) and Disney villains in particular, the complex character of Elsa has managed to capture the heart of many queer fans (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016). The popularity of this character has prompted the popular twitter hashtag #GiveElsaAGirlfriend (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016), and the movement has proved so popular that it drove a response from the actresses behind the role (Bell, 2016; Schnurr, 2016). The great popularity of this reimagined villainous character among queer communities makes Elsa the perfect focus for a study which aims to discover the queer possibilities of new fairy tale adaptations.

Moreover, although it does not follow the plot of Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (1845), *Frozen* is based on this tale which has been noted for its queer undertones and its perhaps queer writer (Greenhill, 2015). Indeed, the relationship between the heroine of the tale and the character of the Little Robber Girl has been read as homoerotic, and while we will never know the exact nature of Andersen's sexuality, the apparent queerness of it gives a certain queer credential to his stories (Greenhill, 2015).

Finally, because the film is an *analogue* adaptation of a wonder tale, it invites queer interpretations (Blankier, 2014). *Analogue* adaptations do not care to follow their source material (Blankier, 2014). In doing so, I would argue they allow their audience to play with the text as well, which opens the door to queer readings.

Therefore, *Frozen* (2013) matches my criteria for text selection: 1) it transforms a villain – Elsa – a character normally interpreted as anti-normative, into a protagonist (Baker, 2010); 2) it has a large queer following (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016); 3) it is based on a text that has been read as queer, and has been written by a potentially queer writer (Greenhill, 2015); and 4) it is an *analogue*, a kind of adaptation which does not adhere strictly to its source material and thus invites readers to play with its text (Blankier, 2014).

### **3.3 Method of Analysis**

My research will be done through a careful close reading of *Frozen* (2013). Since this study will focus on a film, it will not only concentrate on the spoken text, but also on the visual text. Characters' poses, movements, and appearance will be just as relevant as what they say. What is more, Doty's queer reading and Whatling's "looking lesbian" strategies as well as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity will serve as the frame of analysis. Therefore, I will endeavor to look at *Frozen* without heteronormative assumptions. Instead, lesbian desires will serve as one of the main lenses through which the film will be understood. Moreover, gender will be analysed as a performance and not as an inherent character trait.

The analysis will be divided into three chapters which will all attempt to answer the question: *What are the possible queer readings of Elsa?* Chapter four will examine

how intertextual knowledge might colour our view of Elsa and tackle the question: *How does the narrative of the dangerous Femme fit with Elsa's villain status?* Chapter five will then examine the door imagery within the film as it relates to her character. Finally, chapter six will focus on issues of gender as a performance as well as female relationships in the film and address the question: *How does Elsa's gender performance fit with a queer reading?*

### **3.4 Limitations of the Study**

It is not the aim of this study to be an objective and “correct” analysis of *Frozen* (2013). The point is instead to open the text to its non-heteronormative possibilities. Thus, this reading cannot be called “correct” or objective, and it is only one conceivable interpretation among many and an interpretation which is strongly guided by my personal point of view. “Looking lesbian” demands that the viewers’ point of view colour their experience of the text. It is an appropriation of the text by its readers. While the viewer does not need to be queer to “look lesbian,” one must look at the text through the prism of lesbian desires in order to bring out the queerness of the film. Therefore, this study is very much informed by the point of view of its writer as this is the only way the queerness of these films can emerge.

### **3.5 Glossary**

So as to ensure the clarity of this thesis, I believe that it would be wise to define some terms first, before I delve into my analysis of *Frozen*.

*Butch*: A term used in queer communities to refer to a queer woman with a preference for a more stereotypically masculine gender role.

*Femme*: A term used in queer communities to refer to a queer woman with a preference for a more stereotypically feminine gender role.

Gender: A social construct which dictates a preferred way of expressing one's sexual identity.

Gender Performativity: A theory which posits that gender is a stylisation of the body, a series of repeated acts rather than an inherent trait.

Heteronormative order: An institutionalised assumption that we are all heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior to all other orientations.

“Looking Lesbian”: A frame of interpretation where a viewer's lesbian desires are put at the center of the analysis. A way for a minority group to appropriate a film which may or may not have been meant for their visual pleasure.

Queer: A word which resists any simple definition. It can be understood as the questioning of dominant norms and the refusal to set alternative ones. It most often refers to a resistance against the heteronormative order. To queer means to make strange by questioning norms about gender and sexuality and exposing them as myths.

Queer Reading: A way of reading which focuses on dissembling the heteronormative plot of a text to reveal its queerness. Here, I will use Doty's (1993) understanding of queer reading as not an alternative way of reading or a purposeful misreading, but as a means of bringing out the already present queerness of a text.

Sex: A term which refers to males and females' biological differences.

## **Chapter 4: The Lesbian Vampire Over the Rainbow: Elsa and Intertextuality**

### **4.1 Introduction**

*Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) is to this day the highest grossing animated film of all time (Verhoeven & Robinson, 2018). Its influence and resonance can therefore not be underestimated. It tells the story of two sisters, Elsa and Anna, the two princesses of the fictional kingdom of Arendelle. Elsa, the heir to the throne, is born with magical powers which allow her to create and control ice and snow; Anna, in contrast, is an ordinary girl. Close at first, the two siblings are forced apart by their parents when Elsa's powers accidentally hurt Anna. Kept ignorant of Elsa's magic, Anna does not understand the loss of their intimacy while Elsa becomes a recluse. Years later, Elsa is coronated queen, but a fight with Anna provokes her into using her powers. Labelled a monster, she runs away, releasing an eternal winter over her kingdom. Anna, with the help of ice-seller Kristoff, his reindeer Sven, and snowman Olaf, goes on a quest to rescue Elsa and their kingdom.

In this chapter, I argue for three queer readings of Elsa and her powers through the use of intertextual knowledge. When readers approach a text or indeed viewers approach a film, they bring with them a body of knowledge of other texts (intertextual knowledge) which may influence their current reading. First, I argue that knowledge of Idina Menzel's (the actress behind Elsa) previous body of work may colour our understanding of Elsa. The Broadway star's status as an LGBT icon may indeed cast a new light on her



character. Second, I contend that since Elsa is labelled a monster by other characters within the film, it is important to look at how the figure of the monster has been interpreted in other texts. Finally, this section considers Elsa in terms of the lesbian vampire character. Specifically, this comparison is intended to surface ways in which our perception of Elsa may be impacted by these narratives.

#### **4.2 From “Defying Gravity” to “Let It Go”: Pay Attention to that Woman Behind the Curtain**

In her book *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (1997), Clare Whatling discusses the importance of the notion of the extra-filmic in the fantasy life of the viewers. Focusing on the speculations and rumours surrounding the sexuality of American actress Jodi Foster, Whatling points out that readers of a text bring with them their own intertextual knowledge which can have just as much of an influence on their reading as the text itself. Whatling focuses on the influence of rumours on fans’ lesbian desires and fantasies that they bring to their viewing experience, using the example of Foster’s character Clarice from *The Silence of the Lambs* (Utt, Saxon, & Bozman, 1991). Similarly, queer scholars like Anne E. Duggan (2013) and Jennifer Orme (2015) have touched upon the ironic double meaning of fairy tale films with queer actors and queer cultural references. In her book about French director Jacques Demy, Duggan (2013) discusses Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* (Beauty and the Beast) (1946) and Demy’s *Peau d’âne* (“Donkey Skin”) (1970). She reflects on the choice of both these well-known queer filmmakers to cast queer actor Jean Marais (Cocteau’s romantic partner) in the role of the Beast and Donkey Skin’s incestuous father respectively. She remarks that using a queer actor for these roles gives the sexuality of his characters and their intended lover a

second meaning (Duggan, 2013). Beauty's love for the Beast and its bestial implication and Donkey Skin's love for her father and its incestuous undertone become commentaries on societal views of queer sexuality (Duggan, 2013). Likewise, Orme (2015) discusses the ironic double meaning of David Kaplan's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997), a short film based on "The Story of Grandmother" (Delarue, 1991), one of the oldest known variants of the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale. The short uses for its soundtrack Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) which queer danseur Vaslav Nijinsky first choreographed. Moreover, the film stars queer celebrity Quentin Crisp in the role of the narrator (Orme, 2015). Thus, while the film focuses on the relationship between a male wolf and a female Little Red, it takes on a queer double meaning which might not be immediately obvious to its viewers (Orme, 2015). These readings of these films fit well with Cristina Bacchilega's argument on the importance of understanding the readers' system of knowledge, cultural habits, and critical agenda when interpreting a fairy tale (Bacchilega, 2013). However, her focus is on the fairy-tale intertextual web, and I wish to expand upon this. I would agree with Whatling, Duggan, and Orme that queer actors and references to queer culture do give films a possible double meaning for their audience, but I would add that an actor does not need to be queer themselves to have acquired an importance in queer culture. In the case of *Frozen*, I would argue that knowledge of Broadway star Idina Menzel's (the actress behind Elsa) previous work can also contribute to our queer reading of her character.

The musical style has a history of being associated with the queer even if it has more often been linked in public consciousness with male queer culture:

While there has been at the very least a general, if often clichéd, cultural connection made between gays and musicals, lesbian work within the genre has been less acknowledged. However, the evidence of lesbian viewing practices (...) suggests that lesbian viewers have always negotiated their own culturally specific readings and pleasures within the genre. (Doty, 1993. p.12)

Therefore, one could say that Idina Menzel's status as a Broadway star is by itself fraught with queer possibilities. Furthermore, her rise to stardom only adds to these possibilities. Making her debut on the musical, "Rent" (Larson, 1996), a modern reimagining of Puccini's "La Bohème" (1895), Menzel was first nominated for a Tony Award for her performance in the musical as bisexual character Maureen Johnson (NPR, 2012; Tommasini, 2008; Tony Award Productions, 2018). Thus, Menzel's very first prominent role was that of a queer woman.

She went on to play in the musical, "Wicked" (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003), being the first actress to interpret the role of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West (NPR, 2012). "Wicked," based on Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), tells the story of the Wicked Witch of the West from the book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900) and its famous filmic adaptation *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939). Parallels between Menzel's character Elphaba in "Wicked" and her later role in *Frozen* (2013) can easily be made. Both Elsa and Elphaba are different from the norm; Elsa is different because of her powers, Elphaba because of her green skin. Elphaba is labelled the Wicked Witch by other characters, while Elsa is labelled a "wicked sorceress" (Buck & Lee, 2013). Both have known rejection because of their differences, and both have formed an important relationship

with another woman. For Elsa that woman is her sister, Anna, and for Elphaba it is her school friend, Glinda. Finally, both young women, after struggling with their desire for acceptance, decide to abandon all pretences and burst into song. Their songs (“Defying Gravity” (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003) and “Let It Go” (Buck & Lee, 2013)) reflect on their choice to be free and alone rather than to find love by hiding their true selves:

“Well, if that’s love, it comes at much too high a cost...and if I’m flying solo, at least I’m flying free” (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003).

“I don’t care what they’re going to say...I’m free...That perfect girl is gone”  
(Buck & Lee, 2013).

Because of these parallels between both characters, it is interesting to look at readings of the Wicked Witch of the West as these may influence our view of Elsa. The Wicked Witch of the West, as she appears in the 1939 movie adaptation, has been interpreted as a queer character by Alexander Doty (2000), who sees her as the *Butch* to Glinda the Good Witch’s *Femme*. Indeed, Doty interprets the film as Dorothy’s sexual fantasy, where the young girl confronts her own budding lesbian desires (Doty, 2000). Torn and conflicted over her new sense of identity, Dorothy explores two possible lesbian roles, one safer than the other but also less tantalising: “So what we have set before us in *The Wizard of Oz* is the division of lesbianism into the good femme-inine and the bad butch, or the model potentially ‘invisible’ femme and the threateningly obvious butch” (Doty, 2000, p.59). Here, the Wicked Witch of the West is nothing more than a representation of Dorothy’s fear and fascination/love for the *Butch* as the teenage girl comes to grips with her sexuality (Doty, 2000).

Similarly, Menzel's Elphaba/Wicked Witch of the West has been read as a queer woman (Wolf, 2007; 2008). Indeed, the musical "Wicked" focuses on the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda (the *Butch* and the *Femme*) which has been read as romantic (Wolf, 2007; 2008). Although the musical itself never overtly labels the relationship as queer, its use of romantic tropes and clichés to tell the story of these women allows for this reading:

"Wicked" is structured like a queer 1950s Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. It follows many narratological and musical conventions of the 'golden age musical' but places two women as the central couple. Like the heterosexual couples of mid-twentieth-century musicals, Glinda and Elphaba begin as enemies and competitors, as opposites in voice and temperament. Constructed as a butch/femme couple, they eventually merge vocally through the show's numerous duets. By the end, they express their love for one another and promise eternal commitment in 'For Good,' as they sing, 'Who can say if I've been changed for the better? Because I knew you, I have been changed for good.' (Wolf, 2007, p.52)

The Broadway star therefore became famous playing roles which were either overtly queer or have been interpreted as such, and thus queer readings of the Wicked Witch of the West/Elphaba may influence our views of Menzel's other witch character, Elsa. Lastly, Menzel's Broadway fame earned her a guest star role on the teen show *Glee* (Murphy, Falchuk, & Brennan, 2009-2015), a television series which tells the lives of High School glee club members. The show was well-known for its depiction of queer youth (Siegel, 2015). Therefore, because of her past Broadway roles on "Rent" and "Wicked", and because of her involvement in queer youth television, Menzel's name has

been associated with queer culture. The actress has herself commented on the importance her LGBT fanbase has had on her career, characterising them as loyal (Azzopardi, 2016).

I suggest then that this intertextual knowledge of the Broadway star's previous work is to be considered when we look at Elsa. Rather than seeing Elsa as separate from the actress playing her, I propose that Menzel's association with queer culture can serve as a lens through which to see *Frozen*. Although this lens will probably not be used by young children watching the film, given the popularity of the television show *Glee* and the Broadway show "Wicked" among pre-teens and teenagers (Wolf, 2007), it is entirely possible that this audience does use it. If I am to look at this Disney movie with a focus on lesbian desire, then I must acknowledge the intertextual knowledge that a queer audience (young or otherwise) might bring to the text (Whatling, 1997). Thus, Menzel's rise to fame within queer culture becomes a part of Elsa, and *Frozen* exists within an intertextual web full of queer possibilities. If this is true, then Elsa's powers, her supposed monstrosity, much like Jean Marais' Beast's bestiality (Cocteau, 1946) and his King's incestuous desires (Demy, 1970), take on another meaning reflective of societal views of queer sexuality (Duggan, 2013). Elsa's powers are therefore here to be seen as simply a thin metaphor for her queer desires. As we will see in the next section, it is not the first time that a monstrous figure has been read as a metaphor for societal anxieties around queerness.

#### **4.3 Are You a Monster Too?: Elsa and the Monster in the Closet**

Monstrosity, a theme which surfaces many times in *Frozen* (2013), serves as the way others characterise Elsa's difference ("Monster!" (Buck & Lee, 2013)). There is no doubt that for the citizens of her kingdom of Arendelle, Elsa is the monster of the tale,

something which she seems to have internalised, judging by the anxiety and fear she experiences over using and revealing her powers. Moreover, although the Broadway Musical based on *Frozen*, which has recently opened, is not the subject of this study, it can still be noted in that version, Elsa is given a new solo called “Monster” (Lee, 2018).

It is therefore important to look at how monsters have been read in other films to better understand what we are to make of Elsa’s supposed monstrosity. Certainly, I will not be the first to argue for a queer reading of the figure of the monster in films as others have done so before me (Benshoff, 1997; Warman, 2016). Indeed, the monster of the horror English-speaking film has been read as queer (Benshoff, 1997; Warman, 2016). Much like queerness, monstrosity is understood to be dangerous and wrong, and in some cases, as in the case of the werewolf, it is something that must be kept hidden (Warman, 2016). Moreover, monsters, like fairy tale villains, stand in the way of the happy heteronormative conclusion of the story and disrupt societies (Baker, 2010; Benshoff, 1997; Warman, 2016; Weiss, 1993). Similarly, queerness has been interpreted as a danger to the heterosexual family unit and its “family values”, as queer people question and sometimes reject this societal prescript (Benshoff, 1997; Sheldon, 1984; Warman, 2016). If queerness was to be accepted according to this societal view, then people might choose not to marry or have children, which would spell the end of the nuclear family. Thus, in films, queerness becomes a monstrous condition which must be stifled by society in order for nuclear families to continue to exist (Benshoff, 1997; Warman, 2016). The monster figure represents the terrifying expression of society’s repressed sexuality that must be destroyed in order for the family unit to continue to thrive (Benshoff, 1997). Addressing Elsa with this label therefore can carry a double meaning, which I want to explore here.

Elsa is called a monster. More specifically, she is understood to be a witch as the dialogue makes clear: “Sorcery!” “a wicked sorceress” (Buck & Lee, 2013) In being named so, Elsa “is therefore connected to [...] centuries-long Western cultural associations between witchcraft and lesbianism” (Doty, 2000, p.59). Indeed, this supernatural creature has a long history of being associated with queer femininity. Consequently, the witch having been especially associated with the image of the lesbian, Elsa’s link to the character type further reinforces the connection between her monstrosity and queerness.

What is more, like the monster, Elsa’s powers are also understood to be dangerous and wrong, and something which she must keep hidden (Warman, 2016). The lyrics “Conceal, don’t feel, put on a show,/ Make one wrong move and everyone will know” express what Elsa has learned to do from her father (Buck & Lee, 2013). From childhood, she was taught to fear and hate herself by her parents who believed her to be a danger to their family and their kingdom. Therefore, Elsa is taught that what makes her different (her powers/monstrosity) must be regarded as a shameful secret, in the same way that queer desires have often been viewed.

Furthermore, the reveal of her powers happens just as Elsa refuses to give her blessing to her sister’s marriage. On the day of Elsa’s coronation, upon first meeting him, Anna falls madly in love with Prince Hans, a foreign aristocrat. The two quickly decide that they want to marry. Elsa, presumably the legal guardian of her younger sister as they are both orphans, disapproves of the match and refuses to give her blessing. In the ensuing fight between Anna and Elsa, the latter’s magical powers are revealed. Elsa’s opposition to Anna’s romance with her prince exposes her “villainy” to the world and



leads to everyone labeling her a monster. Just like the monster and the traditional fairy tale villain, by standing against the heterosexual marriage of the heroes, Elsa opposes the heteronormative order and becomes dangerous (Baker, 2010; Sheldon, 1984; Weiss, 1993). Her desire to keep her sister from becoming the possession of the stereotypical hero shows her to be a witch. Therefore, the narrative links Elsa's monstrosity (her powers) with an opposition to the heteronormative order, further reinforcing the connection between Elsa's witch-like powers and queerness.

If this was not made clear enough, the film continues to drive home that point as Elsa tries to escape the walls of her castle. Coming face to face with groups of parents with their children (the nuclear family, a symbol of the heteronormative order), she finds that they all recoil from her when faced with her powers. The nuclear family here sees her as a threat and is frightened by her monstrosity. Therefore, Elsa not only threatens heterosexual romances (Hans and Anna), she threatens the existence of the "traditional family." Elsa is perceived as a threat to the heteronormative order as she stands in the way of heterosexuality and the nuclear family. Much like the monstrous queer, Elsa is terrifying to these parents and their children because her powers (her queerness) are a direct threat to their existence.

*Frozen*, therefore, like many other monster films, associates the supernatural with queerness in a way that could be very problematic as it reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is "normal," while queerness is "abnormal," even monstrous. However, the movie does in some way lead its viewers to question this divide. Elsa is labelled a monster by the other characters, but she appears sympathetic to the viewers. She is the one with which we are meant to empathise, and at the end of the story, we are meant to

rejoice in her self-acceptance. In other words, Elsa does appear to us to be different but not monstrous. Instead, many of the so-called “normal” characters, the very same ones who have labelled her a threat, are the ones who take on a monstrous guise. Their hatred and bigotry render them awful and terrifying. Subsequently, while there could be something problematic in labelling queerness as supernatural or “abnormal,” I would argue that the film’s choice to focus on the beauty of the “monster” and the ugliness of the “normal” stereotypical hero is a more progressive way of dealing with that narrative (Benshoff, 1997; Warman, 2016). It should, however, be noted that by not clearly stating the monster’s queer nature, *Frozen* continues to marginalise queerness (Benshoff, 1997). To be acceptable, Elsa’s sexuality must be silenced; the friendly monster cannot be clearly labelled queer to be accepted by the mainstream (Benshoff, 1997; Doty, 1993). Still, the fact that Elsa’s journey ends in her embracing her difference and finding love and support is also a more positive message to what could otherwise be a very disturbing view of queerness. Thus, while *Frozen* links the queer and the monstrous, it does twist this normally negative reflection on queer sexuality into something more positive, challenging the idea that what is different must be stifled and repressed. Nowhere is that twist more noticeable than in the way the film reverses our expectations in its treatment of the dangerous *Femme* narrative.

#### **4.4 Stronger than a Hundred Men: *Frozen* and the Dangerous Femme Narrative**

At first glance, it might seem strange to compare a film meant for children, *Frozen* (2013), to a series of Gothic B horror/pornographic movies. After all, what could a Disney movie have in common with films clearly meant for an adult audience? On the surface, they could not be more different. *Frozen*, with its use of pastel colours, upbeat

music, and silly characters, stands as far as one can get from the Gothic genre, and with the exception of one bawdy joke destined to fly over the heads of children (“Foot size doesn’t matter” (Buck & Lee, 2013)), it cannot be called pornographic in any way. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that some comparison between Elsa and the lesbian vampire can be made and that perhaps part of the charm of the former is in the way Disney twists a familiar misogynistic/homophobic scenario.

To better understand how readings of the lesbian vampire figure might come to influence our view of Elsa, I want to first look at both characters’ appearances and the symbolism surrounding them.

Elsa’s powers are often associated with sexuality and femininity, something which I will explore in more depth later in chapter six. The same thing can be said about the lesbian vampire who is described by cultural historian and film maker Andrea Weiss (1993) as follows: “she has long hair, large breasts, pale white skin, and wears floor-length, translucent dresses” (p.90). The lesbian vampire as she appears in horror/pornographic productions from The Hammer Studio (*The Vampire Lovers* (Baker, 1970), *Twins of Evil* (Hough, 1971), and *Lust for a Vampire* (Sangster, 1971)) is extremely feminine (Weiss, 1993). As she accepts her powers, Elsa’s appearance changes; she lets down her long hair, her dress becomes translucent ice, and more of her white skin is displayed, especially her neck and upper torso. So, while her sexuality does not become as predatory as that of the lesbian vampire, her clingy dress, exposed skin, and the more sensual way she has of moving certainly appear to link Elsa’s ice powers with her sexuality and femininity. Just like the lesbian vampire, Elsa is coded as a sexual feminine woman, and this coding is associated with people’s fear of her supernatural

powers. Indeed, Andrea Weiss (1993), in her discussion of the film *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), makes this observation about the villain: “Carmilla’s ‘badness’ is conveyed through sexual signs: her dress is low-cut, her smile mischievous and seductive, and her body too well developed to confirm the youthful, girlish pose she assumes” (p.92).

What is more, like the lesbian vampire (Weiss, 1993), Elsa’s powers contrast images of femininity with those of violent penetration. In her book *Vampires & violets: Lesbians in film* (1993), Weiss discusses how the lesbian vampire contrasts images of feminine softness and sensuality (her mouth) with those of violent masculine penetration (her canines). In this way, the vampire evokes the fearful image of a vagina with teeth. She is dangerous because she mixes traditional gender codes. She performs the feminine and yet transgresses it. Similarly, Elsa’s powers are equated to both femininity and masculinity. Her powers are dangerous because they mix gender codes. Elsa and the vampire’s powers are thus both connected with gender transgression.

When empowered, Elsa’s appearance becomes softer and girlish. Moreover, Elsa has the capacity to create life out of snow and ice, giving life to both the snowman Olaf and a violent bodyguard nicknamed “Marshmallow.” It is interesting to note that while she created a snowman as a child, that one remained inanimate. Her lifegiving powers only seem to manifest themselves after she reaches maturity; linking her birth-giving magic to puberty. Her powers then include giving birth, but they do not require a heterosexual coupling. Clearly, her supernaturality is associated with the feminine just as the vampire and her plush mouth are (Weiss, 1993). However, her powers are also that of creating an eternal winter. She spreads snow and ice everywhere and creates a world that looks dead and barren. No flowers can grow under all this snow; people’s lives are

threatened as they all take refuge at the castle to find capes and drink soup to keep warm. Barrenness and death are not symbols of femininity. Furthermore, when threatened by men, Elsa protects herself by trying to impale them with gigantic icicles. Interestingly, the knights who come to defeat her do not do so armed with fire, which one might expect given that they are fighting an ice wielding witch; instead, they come armed with small arrows, swords, and spears, battling one phallic symbol with another. The scene then seems to indicate that the knights are fighting to reassert their masculinity over Elsa, battling their small arrows against her large icicles. In fact, this image of her danger to men's masculinity is given more attention when Olaf, while discussing Elsa, inadvertently walks into an icicle and remarks casually "Yes, I bet she's the nicest, gentlest, warmest person ever. Oh, look at that... I've been impaled" (Buck & Lee, 2013). The humour of this scene relies on the calm reaction of Olaf to what would seem to us to be a very threatening situation, but also on the contrast between his view of his creator as a warm, gentle, and kind individual (feminine coding) and the visual evidence presented which paints her as a cold and dangerous person with the capacity to penetrate another's body (masculine coding). Interestingly, in this scene, Anna's companion Kristoff narrowly escapes walking into a sharp icicle himself and getting stabbed in the eye just as he questions the viability of Anna's plan to rescue their kingdom. However, in this scene, the icicles never threaten Anna. They never touch her, only the male characters are threatened by them. These phallic symbols clearly only challenge the masculinity of the male characters, reflecting the link between Elsa and the female horror movie monster and her powers of symbolic castration (Whatling, 1997). It should be noted, however, that Elsa becomes more dangerous the more other characters fear her. Love and

acceptance have the reverse effect of rendering her inoffensive. Elsa does not plot to hurt men and their masculinity; unlike the vampire who means harm. Men's insecurities and need to reassert themselves do more damage than help. Thus, like the lesbian vampire, Elsa opposes images of soft femininity and violent penetration, making her a threat to masculinity even if that threat is mostly a by-product of male fear.

Now that I have established the link between the lesbian vampire and Elsa's supernatural symbolism and appearance, I will turn my gaze towards the plot of the vampire film and how it compares to *Frozen*. To do so, I want to first go through the familiar cast which accompanies the gothic film monster, so I can see how they compare to the characters which surround Elsa's story.

I discuss here the fact that, as in the gothic vampire story, the character of Elsa is surrounded by a familiar cast of characters. In particular, I argue that Anna (the pure and naïve heroine) and Hans (the brave Christian/Protestant hero) share many characteristics with characters found in gothic vampire stories (Shapira, 2014; Weiss, 1993). The fact that Elsa is surrounded by the same type of characters as the lesbian vampire reinforces her resemblance to that character.

As opposed to her sister, Anna is similar to other Disney heroines. She, like these other princesses, is kind, naïve, youthful, and dreams of finding true love, so much so that she willingly gives her hand in marriage to the first prince she meets. Anna plays the part of the helpless ingenue and serves as a contrast to Elsa, the powerful and monstrous figure of the tale. While she is not a passive character by any means, Anna is twice relegated to the role of damsel-in-distress. It can be seen first at the beginning of the film, when her sister accidentally hits her on the head with her ice power, and again at the end

of the movie, when Elsa again inadvertently hits her (seemingly fatally). Therefore, although she does not sit around and wait for rescue as other heroines have done in the past, Anna resembles more what you would expect of a Disney princess. However, she does show some courage and agency, which differentiates her from many of the passive Disney female characters. Furthermore, she differs from the mold in other ways. First, she is shown as silly and prone to mishaps at times. This seems to be one of the ways Disney differentiates its latest heroines (Rapunzel (Conli, 2010), Giselle (Josephon & Sonnenfeld, 2007)) from its earliest ones (Snow White (Disney, 1937), Sleeping Beauty (Disney, 1959)). It is a way of giving them a more relatable/less-than-perfect personality without challenging previous feminine ideals. Second, the film also loves to make fun of Anna's naiveté and romantic notions, another way for Disney to show that they realise that their previous heroines and their dreams of marriage have become outdated. Nevertheless, Anna is still relegated twice to the role of the victim, once at the start of the film when her sister accidentally hits her with her power and later when Elsa fatally strikes her in the heart. I am here arguing that Anna has retained some of the characteristics of Disney's previous heroines. She is an update of an old and familiar character, even a commentary on that character rather than a brand new one. In so being, she resembles the victim of gothic stories. That is perhaps not surprising as the gothic maiden is the literary child of the fairy tale's persecuted heroine as fairy tales have inspired gothic stories (Rowe, 1979). Anna's character comes from the protagonist of "The Snow Queen" (Andersen, 1845), Gerda, just as Elsa's comes from its villain. Although *Frozen* modifies most of the original story, it keeps some elements of the relationship between Gerda and the Snow Queen intact. Gerda is both the protagonist, the

heroine on a quest to rescue her beloved, and the victim of the villainous Snow Queen who has kidnapped the boy she loves. Comparatively, in *Frozen*, Elsa does hurt her sister twice and puts her life in mortal peril, hurting her more than the Snow Queen ever hurts Gerda, even if she does so inadvertently. Thus, even as Elsa and Anna love each other, the spirit of the antagonist/protagonist relationship is kept in place. This echoes the relationship between Le Fanu's character Carmilla (in the novel of the same name) and her victim Laura (1871). The book makes it clear that the vampire loves her victim but is powerless in front of her own compulsion to kill (Weiss, 1993). In some strange way, by retaining the villain/victim element of its fairy tale but transforming it by adding love to the mix (albeit sisterly love), *Frozen* is offering us something closer to the relationship between the lesbian vampire and her lover/victim than to the traditional fairy tale; a supernatural and feminine creature who loves the naïve heroine yet cannot help but hurt her as is her nature.

If Elsa and Anna's relationship resembles that of the vampire and her beloved victim, Elsa's relationship with Hans is at first more akin to that of the masculine hero and the vampire. Indeed, the persecution of the damsel-in-distress in the gothic story is generally followed by the attempted rescue of the innocent maiden by a gallant hero (Weiss, 1993). The hero, as he appears in films like *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), is understood to be morally righteous and is associated with family, community, and Christianity, while the lesbian vampire is understood to be an outsider (Weiss, 1993). He is the "good man" to her "bad girl" persona (Weiss, 1993), the prince Charming of our gothic story. This rather bland hero then fights for possession of the fair maiden who has fallen in the clutches of the lesbian vampire (Weiss, 1993). Similarly, in *Frozen*, Anna,



the wide-eyed heroine, meets Prince Hans, a man who has all the appearance of a generic fairy tale hero. He is tall, broad shouldered, and visually coded as masculine. He is handsome, polite, and courteous and the youngest brother of a royal family as many fairy tale heroes are, but he is the 13<sup>th</sup> brother - a warning to the viewers! Interestingly, however, Hans is an outsider. While Elsa is the queen of Arendelle (the location of the story), he comes from a foreign kingdom, reversing the relationship between the supernatural and foreignness. In this movie, the supernatural being is part of the community, while the seemingly bland hero is a foreigner; perhaps a clue that *Frozen* will not entirely follow traditional patterns. Nevertheless, at the start of the film, Prince Hans appears poised to play the part of the traditional hero, a character which in the lesbian vampire film is meant to fight the villain in order to rescue the persecuted heroine.

It is clear then that both Anna and Hans serve the same purpose in the narrative as the damsel-in-distress and the masculine hero in the lesbian vampire film. One is meant to play the part of the wide-eyed innocent victim, who is in some cases beloved by the villain, while the other plays the part of the paragon of heterosexual masculinity, here to save his damsel.

Having explored the characters that engage with and follow the lesbian vampire and Elsa, I now turn to the plot of the Gothic novel and *Frozen* to explore the ways in which these stories resemble each other and yet diverge in notable ways.

The narrative of the lesbian vampire film centers on the villain and the hero's desire to possess the heroine as they both fight for ownership of her (Weiss, 1993; Zimmerman, 1981). Comparatively, Elsa and Hans do not fight over the possession of

Anna (Elsa does not hold romantic feelings for her sibling); however, as previously stated, Elsa's powers are revealed to the world because of a fight she has with Anna over the latter's decision to marry Prince Hans, a man she just met. It is then her opposition to the traditional heterosexual fairy tale marriage which starts the initial conflict. Just like the lesbian vampire, Elsa is keeping Anna from the masculine hero, albeit not by kidnapping her, but by standing in the way of her marriage (Weiss, 1993). Thus, Elsa's powers and her refusal to give her consent to Anna's marriage, linked through the narrative, make it clear that, like the lesbian vampire, Elsa is doubly dangerous. She is a danger because she is a supernatural creature and because she opposes the heteronormative order (Weiss, 1993). Thus, while Elsa does not desire her sister, like the lesbian vampire, she stands in the way of the hero's ownership of the heroine. In the gothic film, the villain hurts the heroine, which naturally leads to a confrontation between the vampire and the hero - *Frozen* is no different.

The reveal of Elsa's powers leads her to accidentally freeze over her kingdom and to run away, starting Anna's quest which then occupies most of the plot. The latter's search for her sister to convince her to save their kingdom and come home ends in Anna being accidentally mortally wounded by Elsa. Prince Hans (Anna's betrothed) finds Anna's riderless horse, and he concludes that something terrible has befallen Anna, before he too embarks on a quest to find Elsa. What follows is the confrontation between the hero (Prince Hans) and the supernatural antagonist (Elsa). Prince Hans and his band of knights are bent on capturing and punishing the monster they believe Elsa to be. This parallels the lesbian vampire narrative, where an innocent maiden is hurt by a supernatural being who loves her, followed by the entrance of the hero (Weiss, 1993).

Elsa is the one who has kept the two apart, and the good man comes to stop her from hurting his beloved. *Frozen* thus follows the same storyline as the one found in many lesbian vampire movies (Weiss, 1993). However, it here diverges from the gothic plot in an interesting way - the traditional narrative is given a twist when it is revealed that Prince Hans is a villain and that his love for Anna is feigned, just the start of his plan to take possession of Arendelle by assassinating both sisters. This then completely changes the gothic plot. Elsa's choice to oppose the match is no longer the sign of her monstrosity but the wise decision of a loving sibling. Standing in the way of a heterosexual romance becomes morally coded as good, while Hans' rescue of Anna becomes bad. The story of the queer woman being vanquished by the heterosexual man is reversed from the story of the triumph of heteronormativity (Weiss, 1993; Zimmerman, 1981) to one of triumph over heteronormativity. The storyline, while familiar, is given a twist that results in a change in the moral code – Elsa is a “good woman,” while Hans is a “bad boy,” completely flipping the values of the usual narrative.

Elsa shares some of the physical and symbolic attributes of the lesbian vampire. She is followed by the same cast of characters and the plot of her story is in large part similar to the gothic film. However, unlike the traditional monster, Elsa is good, while the traditional hero is bad. *Frozen* is not the story of how the monstrous queer is vanquished but how it triumphs. Thus, *Frozen* offers us a new twist on an old narrative. It gives us a familiar figure, the monstrous queer, but delivers a more positive conclusion to that character's storyline.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

While *Frozen* (2013), the story of a young Queen who accidentally freezes over her kingdom and the sister who tries to rescue her, may not appear queer at first blush, intertextual knowledge might help us unearth some of that queerness. Indeed, looking at Idina Menzel's previous body of work and the way it relates to LGBT culture sheds new light on her character of Elsa. The actress has become famous first by playing a bisexual character and later by playing the Wicked Witch of the West in the musical "Wicked" (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003), facts which might colour our view of Elsa. Similarly, as Elsa is labelled a monster, we can also look to the queer history of the monster figure to get a better sense of what that label means and how it relates to *Frozen*. Doing so, we can see how both the monster figure and Elsa have been seen as standing in the way of the heteronormative order (Benshoff, 1997). More specifically, we can look at the most famous queer monster, the lesbian vampire, to understand how *Frozen*'s depiction of Elsa and her powers link her to that supernatural figure. Like the vampire, Elsa's feminine and sexual appearance are associated with her dangerous magical powers. Moreover, her powers, like the lesbian vampire's, are attached to symbols of femininity and castrations (Weiss, 1993). So, Elsa resembles this monster in looks and the symbolism surrounding both women's magic match. Furthermore, *Frozen*'s characters and plot also have things in common with the lesbian vampire film. Indeed, both supernatural characters are surrounded by a familiar cast, the hero and the damsel-in-distress, and their stories follow a similar pattern. Thus, Elsa and the vampire stand in the way of the heteronormative romance plot of their respective film which leads to a confrontation between them and the hero over the heroine (Weiss, 1993). However, by the end of their respective narratives, Elsa and the lesbian vampire's story diverge. The vampire is vanquished by the hero who

rescues the ingenue, while it is the ingenue who rescues Elsa from the false hero/villain, giving a new twist to an old tale.

*Frozen* is therefore a text which exists in a web of very queer texts. While a young audience might be unaware of the existence of this web, the latter continues to give the film a queer double meaning, even if that meaning is not immediately obvious.

However, while, as is evident here, intertextual knowledge might help us bring out some of Elsa's queerness, it is possible to look at the film without this prior context. There is more to Elsa's queerness than her association with Idina Menzel or the monster figure of the horror genre. For one thing, the film also makes heavy use of the metaphor of the closet, making it clear through its text and animation that Elsa's journey is a "coming-out" story.

## **Chapter 5: Love Is an Open Door: Closet Metaphors in *Frozen***

### **5.1 Introduction**

While thinking of the film *Frozen* might invoke pictures of snow and ice, I would argue that images of doors are more important to the film's visual motif. Indeed, I believe that the picture that would best encompass Elsa's struggle throughout the film would be that of a closed door. The story of Elsa is the story of a young woman kept hidden behind a door. The film is littered with images of open and closed doors. Moreover, the text keeps on pointing to their opening or closing as meaningful events. Clearly, doors and their opening or closing are central to the narrative. If I am to look at *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) queerly, then I cannot ignore this central motif. This motif is especially interesting when we look at how it resembles a familiar metaphor for one important queer experience, that of "coming-out" of the closet.

### **5.2 Come Out the Door: Elsa's Opening of the Closet Gates**

The closet is probably the best-known metaphor for being queer. In her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the trope has come to define the queer experience in our cultural psyche but that it has also been used as a tool of oppression. She ties the metaphor of the closet to societal discourse about dichotomies which include public/private, ignorance/knowledge, and gay/straight, to name a few. Finally, she argues that the metaphorical closet has become a popular way of understanding queerness when homosexuality started to be seen as a distinct category of identity rather than a simple sexual practice. In other words, the closet became central

to discourses surrounding same-sex desires when those were no longer seen as sexual acts and taste but as distinct categories of identity (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual). Sedgwick does not offer, in her book, an alternative way to understand queerness, but instead deconstructs our current understanding to expose its flaws and how it can be used to keep a hierarchy system in place between homosexuality and heterosexuality. All the same, Sedgwick recognises the cultural importance of the closet metaphor and how it frames our understanding of queerness, writing:

Gay thinkers of this century have, as we'll see, never been blind to the damaging contradictions of this compromised metaphor of in and out of the closet of privacy. But its origins in European culture are, as the writings of Foucault have shown, so ramified —and its relation to the "larger," i.e., ostensibly nongay-related, topologies of privacy in the culture is, as the figure of Foucault dramatized, so critical, so enfolding, so representational — that the simple vesting of some alternative metaphor has never, either, been a true possibility. (p. 72)

While extremely critical of the metaphor of the closet, Sedgwick argues here that no other understanding of queerness has ever truly surpassed it in the Western popular imagination. The experience of “coming-out” is therefore the defining queer experience in our cultural discourse about the topic.

Here, one might argue that it is possible to come out as Jewish or of a particular ethnic group for example and that “coming-out” is not a specifically queer narrative. However, while individuals in other minority groups might know what it is to hide one’s identity, these experiences are often important but not widespread within their group. To come out is the central experience of being queer (Sedgwick, 1990). It is not a fringe

experience but a defining one (Sedgwick, 1990). Taking into account this understanding of the closet and its tie to queer identity, it is interesting to see how much the image of the door takes central stage in *Frozen* (2013). Hiding or being forcefully imprisoned behind a door summarise much of Elsa's identity struggles.

Elsa, we are told, was born different, and while her younger sister has always celebrated Elsa's difference, it soon becomes a source of anxiety for her parents. After Elsa accidentally strikes Anna with her powers, their parents become worried that their eldest might become a danger to everyone, including her family. Their solution is to isolate her as much as possible and keep her powers secret. The secrecy around Elsa's powers and its later association with closed doors can reasonably be understood as a metaphor for queerness. The notion of knowledge and secrecy has a history of being associated with sexuality, especially queer sexuality in Western societies:

...hence sexual knowledge and knowledge per se, is a same-sex desire ...by the end of the nineteenth century, when it had become fully current —as obvious to Queen Victoria as to Freud —that knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiably exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject.  
(Sedgwick, 1990, p.73)

Given our cultural understanding of knowledge and secrets, the secrecy around Elsa can reasonably be associated with same-sex desires as secret knowledge has long been associated with queer sexuality. Moreover, Elsa's powers becoming something secret is then linked immediately with the film's first use of the closed-door imagery. As the king



explains, off camera, his plan to isolate his daughter, we are treated to a visual sequence of the castle servants closing the gates, doors, and windows of the palace, before seeing Elsa walk to her room and close her door on Anna. The shadows around the door of her room then look something like the bars of a prison. This is the first use of the imagery which will come to dominate Elsa's storyline. This divide between closed/opened, in/out, silence/speech, secrecy/disclosure, alone/together, and private/public will make its way throughout the narrative. These divides are themselves part of the "coming-out" story (Sedgwick, 1990), which serves to make Elsa's tale very much queer.

Kept alone by the king and queen, Elsa finds herself spending her childhood locked inside her bedroom. Her closed door recalls the figurative closet, one in which Elsa is forced to hide. Moreover, as she grows, she is taught that what makes her different is wrong, something she must learn to hide: "Conceal it, don't feel it, don't let it show" (Buck & Lee, 2013). Elsa's powers are something she can hide to a certain extent; she can pass for a non-supernatural being with some training. Thus, *Frozen* presents us with both a literal and metaphorical closet for Elsa; she is kept locked behind the door of her room and her difference is kept locked behind the doors of her mind; it is something she must keep a secret so that she can pass for someone "ordinary." But the older she gets, the harder it becomes for her to hide, and as puberty approaches, Elsa's powers only become stronger. The film reinforces this idea both through the text ("It's getting stronger" (Buck & Lee, 2013)) and through its images. Elsa becomes increasingly enclosed as she grows. Her limited access to the outside world is a window, which she cannot touch without covering it in ice. As she approaches puberty, she can no longer touch people without fear of hurting them. Finally, by the time she is a teenager and

grieving her parents, Elsa is shown huddled in a ball, surrounded by a cold blue light, snowflakes floating in the air. Her body has here become its own prison. She cannot even move freely in her room as everything surrounding her has turned cold. She cannot answer the calls of her sister who is begging her to let her in; her powers are simply too strong to allow any movements, not if she wants to keep them hidden. The older Elsa gets, the more powerful she becomes and the more she needs to stay a recluse. This works well if we are to think of Elsa's magic as a representation of her sexuality. As she matures and enters puberty, her sexuality becomes harder to keep hidden.

Thus, Elsa is kept isolated behind her door, causing a rift between her and her sister who does not understand why Elsa will not come out. The image of Anna trying to talk to Elsa through a closed door is used throughout the musical number "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" (Buck & Lee, 2013) to explain the rupture of that relationship and Elsa's deepening isolation. Elsa remains mostly silent to her sister's calls for most of the musical sequence. Except for a throw away line ("Go away Anna!" (Buck & Lee, 2013)), she does not answer her sister's plea to come out and play with her. Elsa's closed door is thus linked visually with her silence. Elsa keeps Anna out, both literally and metaphorically. Her silence, however, is not deprived of meaning (Sedgwick, 1990). It is not a lack of action but an action in itself (Sedgwick, 1990). Her silence is her way of keeping this part of herself hidden and interpreted by Anna as a loud rejection. Elsa is closeted by her silence just as she is by her closed door (Sedgwick, 1990).

This separation and isolation create feelings of depression in Elsa. Furthermore, fears of not being able to conceal who she is generate anxiety in her. Elsa internalises that she needs to be a "good girl" (Buck & Lee, 2013) and that to be good she needs to be

someone she is not, someone “ordinary.” She is then locked in, hidden, depressed, and anxious because she believes her identity to be something shameful. All of this echoes some experiences of being in the closet, particularly the feeling like one’s sexual identity is wrong and must be kept hidden (Warman, 2016). The anxiety about concealing this part of the self might be coupled with feelings of loneliness as one cannot share or reveal oneself with anyone. Indeed, this may sound familiar to many queer youths who often report feelings of isolation (Lipton, 2008). Moreover, these young people are at an increase risk of depression and suicide compared to non-queer youth (Ahuja, 2016; Almeida & all, 2009; Marshal & all, 2011; Trevor Project, 2017).

Imagery of doors continues as we learn that on the day of the Elsa’s coronation, the gates of the castle will be opened, an event that we are to understand is exceptional. Anna is excited by the prospect as she believes that this will provide her with the opportunity to meet a potential romantic/sexual partner. Anna and Elsa in their shared song “For the First Time in Forever” (Buck & Lee, 2013) share their diverging views over this event. Anna links the opening of the gates with romance and sexual maturity: “Finally they’re opening up the gates (...) suddenly see him standing there, a beautiful stranger, tall and fair (...) For the first time in forever, I’m getting what I’m dreaming of (...) a chance to find true love...” (Buck & Lee, 2013). This is reinforced by the animation which shows Anna coming to the realisation that she might find a romantic partner as she plays with a family of ducks (linking the idea of romance with the nuclear family) and later as she dances with a male statue and takes the place of the female figure in different paintings depicting heterosexual couples. Throughout the musical number, Anna is bathed in light, singing from an open window and later from outside the castle.

Meanwhile, Elsa sings about the importance of keeping herself hidden: “Conceal, don’t feel, put on a show,/ Make one wrong move and everyone will know” (Buck & Lee, 2013). The animation shows her alone in her room. We first see her through the wooden frames of her closed window. The image looks almost like Elsa is singing from behind the bars of a prison. Through most of the musical number, Elsa remains in the shadows. Thus, one sister is dreaming of love, while the other is figuratively imprisoned, closeted.

The opening of the gates heightens the likelihood that Elsa’s secret will be exposed, a fact that makes her terribly nervous. The opening of gates therefore signifies that Elsa is making herself vulnerable to the world; it is linked with the opening of herself. The opening of the gates then takes on a sexual meaning, overtly with Anna who hopes for romance and covertly for Elsa who dreads discovery. The gates signify that both sisters have reached sexual maturity. Anna is excited at the prospect of finding a partner, while Elsa is afraid that her body will betray her and disclose the truth of her sexuality. The gates take on the double meaning of representing the closet doors but also the sisters’ sexual bodies. This is further reinforced by the visual which shows Anna in a ball gown, her shoulders and a demure amount of cleavage exposed, as she opens a door with a smile and runs towards the open gates. In contrast, Elsa covers every inch of her skin and opens doors with reluctance. Anna is bathed in sunlight, while Elsa is surrounded by shadows. One sister is happy at the thought of finding sexual fulfilment, while the other is worried this will force her to reveal her queerness. One sister is out, while the other is closeted.

As soon as the coronation is over and the ball to celebrate it is underway, we are treated to a romantic duet sang between Anna and her would-be lover, Prince Hans,

“Love is an Open Door” (Buck & Lee, 2013). The song revolves around Anna’s and Hans’ newfound love and their need for acceptance and human connection. Because of the romantic relationship between the singers, the metaphor becomes clear and can be summarised in the following way: for love and sexuality to flourish, one must open oneself up to others. The song thus continues to link sexuality and romance to the door imagery. To keep one’s door closed is to hold back on love. If we apply this idea to Elsa, it becomes clear what this song would mean for her character. Her magical powers are nothing but a metaphor for her love. Elsa’s love and sexuality are being figuratively held prisoner behind the gates which she always keeps close. If love is an open door, then by keeping her door closed, Elsa is hiding what makes her different, her queer love.

As the ball continues, Elsa is already thinking of retreating. In fact, once her sister’s announcement of her engagement comes to threaten her peace, Elsa announces her plan to stop the ball and close the gates once more. Like the closet door, the gates offer her a measure of protection, a way to hide herself from a world who would vilify her for being born different.

Things quickly unravel, however, and her secret is exposed. Her anger at her sister’s pleading leads her to let out a blast of ice in the middle of their ballroom, shocking all of their guests. The door imagery once again comes into play, and a terrified Elsa runs, opening a succession of doors to find herself face to face with her people, represented by parents and their children, one symbol for the heteronormative order (Sheldon, 1984). As they discover her magical powers, they turn away from her in fear. This scene seems to represent the risk that comes with opening the metaphorical closet door. As Elsa opens her own closet door, here the doors to her castle, she finds herself

confronted by heteronormative families who do not understand her. All they know is that she is different from them. Their ignorance quickly makes her out to be a threat, a monster. Their rejection and accusations push her to flee.

The event profoundly changes Elsa's attitude towards herself. The figurative closet door was opened, and what she feared would happen has happened. She has been rejected, and she has been seen as a monster. Her fears being realised has a liberating effect on her. She has nothing left to lose. She has faced her people's fear and revulsion and come out alright. This realisation leads to her singing the now famous song "Let It Go" (Buck & Lee, 2013), a song which also has been adopted as a gay anthem (Dockterman, 2016). Elsa expresses her feelings as she abandons all pretenses and embraces who she is, taking pleasure in discovering her own powers and swearing off approval in lieu of self-love. She expresses her newfound freedom in these terms: "Turn away and slam the door!" (Buck & Lee, 2013) Elsa is figuratively opening a door and slamming it behind her; keeping others out even if she roams free. The song ends on another door image as Elsa announces to the world, "Here I stand in the light of day. Let the storm rage on! The cold never bothered me anyway," and steps through the open doors of her ice castle, her arms opened, her figure straight (Buck & Lee, 2013). While before Elsa opened the doors to her castle in Arendelle in a panic, this time she steps through them with pride and self-confidence. Mixed with the lyrics of her song, this imagery evokes the well-known queer saying, "I'm here, I am queer, get used to it." The symbolic closet door, represented by the doors to her balcony, has been opened, she is no longer hiding and does not wish to ever do so again. Here she is in the light of day, telling

Arendelle that she is different and that they best get used to it. This is Elsa's "coming-out".

From then on, Elsa holds an ambivalent relationship with doors. She refuses to be locked away and leaves her doors open. For example, as she declares to Anna that while she is alone, she is free, we can see her opening the doors to her balcony, showing that she is free to move as she pleases even if she is still not free to join the rest of the world. Moreover, as soon as Anna knocks on the doors to Elsa's ice castle, they open, indicating that she is welcomed, that Elsa is no longer hiding. When captured and locked away again, Elsa blasts open her prison cell, bringing down its very walls. This all shows that Elsa no longer wants to be confined or to seek the approval and acceptance of others. Nevertheless, she is also quick to send people away and close the door on them as she does to Anna and her companions. Even worse, she nearly kills a man, trying to push him out the doors of her balcony. She will not hide who she is anymore, but part of her still believes herself to be a monster and thus a danger to society. She will not try to "pass" for an average woman any longer, but she will not join the rest of the world. Her "coming-out" remains incomplete. She has accepted that she cannot be an average woman, but she is still ashamed of her difference. She believes it is right for others to reject her as she is a danger to society: "I belong here, alone, where I can be who I am without hurting anybody" (Buck & Lee, 2013).

This only changes once Anna sacrifices herself for her. This solitary act of complete love and acceptance is the one that finally breaks down Elsa's defenses. Elsa realises that she must learn to freely love and accept love in return: "Love, of course" (Buck & Lee, 2013). It is the only thing that will allow her to control her powers. This is

the turning point which allows her not only to love herself, but to share herself with others as symbolised by the last opening of the gates. The happy ending to Elsa's fairy tale does not come in the form of the traditional heterosexual marriage to a prince on a white horse but in the guise of love and acceptance. Elsa loves herself and is loved for herself. She informs her sister that the gates will never be closed again as we see her skating on the ice rink she created for the citizens of Arendelle within her castle grounds. The gates are shown to be wide open. Her difference becomes celebrated rather than feared by her people and her family as the story draws to a close.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

As previously discussed, the experience of "coming-out" is often culturally seen as central to the queer experience (Sedgwick, 1990). Unlike other minority groups for whom "coming-out" is a fringe experience, most queer people have a "coming-out" story (Sedgwick, 1990). For many that story is an important life event, a marker in one's life. There is a life before and after "coming-out." The most well-known metaphor for this event is the opening of the closet door (Sedgwick, 1990). One "comes out" of a metaphorical closet.

It is therefore significant that the main metaphor for Elsa's journey is the opening of doors. At different key moments of her story, images of doors closing or opening take central stage. Doors are always present for Elsa. The text points to their opening and closing, and the animation also draws attention to them.

It is not difficult to see the similarities between Elsa's story and a "coming-out" narrative. She is a young woman who was born different and made to feel ashamed of herself. She believes herself unworthy of love and acceptance and believes that her love



for another girl (her sister) is dangerous. She learns to hide her difference and encloses herself behind the gates of her castle, shutting everyone out. When her difference is revealed, she is met with fear and apprehension. Slowly, she learns to love herself and later discovers that she is deserving of love and that her love is not dangerous but healing. She finally finds happiness in people who love her just as she is and leaves the gates of her castle always open.

While Elsa might be coming-out of castle gates rather than a closet, there is no doubt that her experience resembles that of a queer woman who comes out to face rejection but later finds love and acceptance. Her story is in many ways a very queer narrative. This “coming-out” metaphor is made more obvious by the change in Elsa’s appearance before and after her powers are revealed. Indeed, after escaping Arendelle, Elsa celebrates by changing her looks, trading her conservative dress for a more sensual and feminine one.

## **Chapter 6: Be the Good Girl You Always Have to Be: Elsa and the Queerness of Gender**

### **6.1 Introduction**

While *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) does not have many female characters, the focus of the narrative is on two women and their relationship. Moreover, Elsa's story is a very gendered one as her repeated line of dialogue, "Be the good girl you always have to be" (Buck & Lee, 2013), would attest. It is the story of a powerful woman who does not use her powers to win wars or defeat evil warlocks, but instead learns to control her feelings so her powers can be put to a more pro-social (read nurturing) use. As previously stated, it is not the goal of this study to determine if Elsa is a feminist or faux-feminist character; nevertheless, if I am to look queerly at her character and "look lesbian" in her direction, I must touch on the film's portrayal of her as a gendered being as well as examine her relationship with the only other important female character in *Frozen*, her sister, Anna.

### **6.2 From Drag to Riches: Camp Gender Performance in *Frozen***

Anna reacts to seeing her sister for the first time since learning about the latter's powers with "Wow! Elsa, you look different" (Buck & Lee, 2013). With regard to her appearance, Elsa always appears feminine. With her slender figure, long blond hair, large eyes, and elegant dresses, her looks tend to be stereotypically feminine. However, her appearance and demeanor do evolve throughout the film, and this transformation is brought about by the unveiling of her powers, seeming to indicate that both are linked. Her appearance and demeanor are then connected to this part of herself. Her powers are a part of the inner self she is revealing. If Elsa's story can be interpreted as a metaphor for

“coming-out,” then it makes sense that this transformation shows us something about her gender performance. Whether there is a difference in the way Elsa expresses her gender before and after her “coming-out” is then crucial to our understanding of her character as queer. It is thus helpful to look at the difference between the way she acts and dresses before and after this event.

At her coronation, Elsa’s appearance is feminine. She wears a dress with a long trail, her hair is up in a sophisticated chignon, and her slender hands are covered by dainty silk gloves. However, the colours she chooses to wear are dark and sombre. Almost no hint of skin other than her face is revealed, every inch of herself is covered. She walks with her back straight, her head held high, keeping her arms close to herself. She does not smile and talks very little. She keeps her emotion inside, always under tight control. She seems tense, rigid, and cold, attributes which are not stereotypically feminine. Elsa’s sister, Anna, on the other hand, reflects a more typical feminine appearance, with her bright green dress and her cheerful and warm demeanor. Anna smiles and laughs easily and moves with an almost childlike lack of self-consciousness. Anna jumps, dances, twirls, and cannot stop talking. She expresses her emotions freely, declaring her love for Prince Hans in a matter of hours and sharing her anguish over the loss of her sister’s friendship. This contrast between the sisters serves to amplify the fact that while Elsa dresses in a way that reflects a feminine performance of gender, she also has some masculine attributes. Her tight rein on her emotions, her preference for dark colours, and her rigid movements are expected ways of expressing a preference for a masculine gender role. Similarly, her taciturn behaviour and the way she covers every

inch of her body are less expected of a woman. It can then be argued that at her coronation, Elsa mixes feminine and masculine gender expressions.

However, much of this undergoes change after she reveals her powers. Once Elsa escapes Arendelle and breaks into song, Elsa transforms herself as if she is shedding her skin. Her dark dress becomes a sparkling pastel blue gown. While before her skin was covered, suddenly she reveals her neck and décolletage. A slit in her dress exposes one of her legs. Elsa also lets down her hair, letting it fall in a braid on her shoulders. Her movements become less rigid – her hips undulate as she walks on high heels (whether this article of clothing is new is impossible to tell as her feet were previously covered by her gown), and she opens her arms wide as if embracing the world. Elsa becomes livelier; she runs, jumps, shouts, and smiles. Although ice surrounds her, she looks warmer, more attainable. Her new frock, which allows a lot more of her skin to be seen, combined with her more sensual way of moving give her a more sexual appearance. This seems to link Elsa's powers with a sexual awakening. Her sex appeal is here on full display as if she has been keeping a tight rein not only on her emotions, but on her sexuality as well. Elsa's femininity is exaggerated in a way Anna's is not. By comparison, Anna is always more modestly dressed, childlike in her ways of expressing herself. She shows almost no self-consciousness, blurting out what she thinks and feels without thinking. Her dresses do not cling to her hips and legs but flow around her in a demure fashion. She is never sexualised in the way Elsa is.

Elsa's exaggerated femininity from this point on marks her as a *Femme*. A femme can perform her gender in a way that is so over the top as to make it obviously artificial, as for example, going out to a gay bar in a pink dress and tiara (Doty, 2000;

Whatling, 1997). Glinda from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), with her ballgown and sparkling crown, has been deemed a femme for this very reason (Doty, 2000). Over exaggerating femininity, it can be argued, is evidence that this gender expression is a performance, a game of dress up, and consequently queer (Eves, 2004; Vannewkirk, 2006). Femmes' way of doing femininity has been deemed more aggressive and overtly sexual as compared to traditional femininity (Eves, 2004). Moreover, it has been described as such: "There is an emphasis on glamour and showing up the artifice of gender that has parallels with a drag aesthetic" (Eves, 2004, p.491). It is a camp way of doing femininity (Vannewkirk, 2006). Camp is a celebration of excess, and in a way, this shift on Elsa's part from a rigid, conservatively dressed femininity to one that celebrates glitters and clingy clothes can be called camp (Sontag, 1964). That is, Elsa's new-found preference for sparkling pastel gowns sets her apart from the rest of the female characters who, like Anna, never quite go to this extreme. Her more sexual aspect, which follows this exaggerated femininity, contributes to mark her as more dangerous than her sister. Elsa's sexuality does not appear passive, it is overt and obvious. It is more *Femme* than Anna's stereotypically innocent sexuality (Eves, 2004). This combination of femininity and sexuality contributes to her queerness. She displays her sensuality on her own terms, she does not wait for a man to awake her sexuality. The film does not objectify Elsa, but, nonetheless, her sexuality shines through. The animators do not linger on her exposed legs for a male gaze. Because she is not objectified, however, she becomes more threatening than her sister. Men chase her in order to tame her and keep her locked away where she cannot be a danger to them. Elsa disturbs because of her powers, which are linked through the animation with her sensuality. A powerful Elsa is also a sexy Elsa. She

is dangerous, thus, partly because she is sexual and yet unattached to a man. Her powers/sexuality are a danger to men because they exist outside of their control. They might even exist in rejection of them as made clear by the text: “Last time I introduced her to a guy, she froze everything” (Buck & Lee, 2013). Elsa’s power/sexuality does not exist within the heteronormative order as it is not an object to be control by males, it instead exists in opposition to that order and is a threat to it. It is queer.

Thus, while subtle, Elsa’s transformation is one which can be called queer. Before she reveals her powers, Elsa mixes feminine and masculine gender performances, while afterward, she instead exaggerates her feminine attributes. Her transformation is also a sexual awakening. So, while her appearance becomes more traditionally feminine to the point of verging on the camp and on the queer, her sexuality becomes more aggressive, less controlled and less passive. This campy femininity and aggressive sensuality combine into giving her the appearance of a *Femme fatale*. The fact that Elsa’s powers and sexuality exist outside of male powers add to the queerness of her femininity. Thus, Elsa’s queer femininity becomes associated with her powers which terrify the other characters. But why is her queer femininity so horrifying to the kingdom of Arendelle?

### **6.3 That Perfect Girl Is Gone: Lesbianism and the Women-Centric “Bad Girl”**

The queer woman scares patriarchal powers. As we have seen, she is the stuff of its nightmare and must be brought down. But why is that the case? Caroline Sheldon (1984) would answer that it is because our societies rely on the heterosexual family unit to function. Capitalism requires workers that are trained to accept a certain hierarchy of power since childhood (Sheldon, 1984). As Judith Butler explains it:

As Foucault and others have pointed out, the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests. Feminist cultural anthropology and kinship studies have shown how cultures are governed by conventions that not only regulate and guarantee the production, exchange, and consumption of material goods, but also reproduce the bonds of kinship itself, which require taboos and a punitive regulation of reproduction to effect that end. (Butler, 1988, p.524)

Thus, heterosexuality, because it permits reproduction, allows societies to function as expected. In this system, men learn to substitute power over their own fate by having power over women and children (Sheldon, 1984). Meanwhile, women are expected to prioritise their husband and children over themselves and everything else (Sheldon, 1984). Gender hierarchy then exists to serve the heterosexual order (Butler, 1990).

Lesbians disrupt these expectations by refusing to exist within this heterosexual unit and by prioritising their relationship with other women (Sheldon, 1984). Sheldon (1984) here even argues that lesbianism is a repressed part of women, a part of themselves that does not exist to serve the interest of their husband or children and that must be pushed down for society to function as it does. A lesbian can then be understood as a woman who stops repressing this part of herself and instead prioritises herself and her relationship to other women (Sheldon, 1984).

This configuration of the lesbian sees her as primarily a woman-identified woman, one who exists outside of male power, one who refuses to be subordinated, one for whom bonds to other women are central, and one who defines herself on her own terms

(Sheldon, 1984). Applied to Elsa, it is easy to see how she would fit within this understanding of the lesbian. Elsa is a powerful woman who exists outside of the spheres of male powers. She is a Queen without a King. Her very lack of romantic interest in the film makes her difficult to attach to the heteronormative order (Whatling, 1997). She is the most powerful woman in the land both because of her magic but also because of her political title. Elsa is, however, a problem to many. The threat that she is meant to represent to male spheres of powers is made clear from the very start of the film, when we meet a group of men mining ice (a metaphor for Elsa herself), singing “Beautiful! Powerful! Dangerous! Cold! Ice has a magic, can’t be controlled. Stronger than one! Stronger than ten! Stronger than a hundred men!” (Buck & Lee, 2013) Elsa’s powers exceed male forces. She is stronger than a hundred men and cannot be controlled. According to the men of her kingdom, her strength and agency make her a danger to them. Her abundance of power is seen as dangerous, something which she must repress, and her relationship to Anna (a woman) becomes the first thing she is forced to sacrifice by her father. The patriarchal power in Elsa’s life, her father, sees her magic and her bond of sisterhood to Anna as threatening. His solution is for Elsa to repress who she is and cut off ties with her sister, which she does to her great detriment. It seems that Arendelle’s society agrees with her father, for as soon as she is revealed to be supernatural being, Elsa is labelled a monster. Moreover, Anna’s fiancé questions Anna’s desire to see her sister, believing it is unsafe for her to see Elsa, and a visiting Duke looks at Anna with suspicion. Her blood relation to Elsa makes her as a possible threat, something Anna is quick to disavow. After all, if Elsa could hide her “deviance,” who is to say that the same is not true of her sister: “Are you a monster too? Is there sorcery in you too?” (Buck &



Lee, 2013) The closeness of the women's ties is then perceived by the male characters as either suspicious or dangerous to Anna, the powerless and, therefore, pure and good woman.

Thus, societal pressure exists to repress Elsa's lesbianism; nevertheless, it still shines through. Elsa's powers become too difficult to hide. She comes to accept who she is and refuses to conform to the expectations put on her. Elsa's journey is one of self-discovery and self-love: "The fear that once controlled me can't get to me at all. It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through (...) I'm free" (Buck & Lee, 2013). Repressed most of her life, after escaping from Arendelle, she comes to take joy in her own powers and she becomes a self-defined woman who exists outside of male spheres of power. From that point on in the narrative, Elsa pointedly refuses to ever be subordinated again. "That perfect girl is gone" (Buck & Lee, 2013), she proudly declares. By saying this, she is acknowledging the pressure she was under to be a "good girl," here understood to be a woman who represses her own powers and lives an isolated life for the sake of maintaining societal order. By breaking free from her chains, Elsa embraces her lesbianism. She becomes a powerful self-defined woman.

Still, Elsa's lesbianism is not solely focused on her powers and independence but also on her bond to her sister, Anna. The importance of this relationship to her character also adds to her queerness. Elsa does, indeed, make her relationship with another woman central to herself.

#### 6.4 “Hey Mister! She’s My Sister:” “Snow White and Rose Red,” *Frozen*, and Sisterhood

While “The Snow Queen” (Andersen, 1845) mainly focuses on the relationship between Gerda and Kay, two friends of the opposite gender, *Frozen* (2013) instead refocuses the story on the relationship between two sisters, Anna and Elsa. One is quiet, poised, and shy, while the other is cheerful, clumsy, and outgoing. In many ways, these characters resemble the heroines of the Brothers Grimms’ tale “Snow White and Rose Red” (1815), two sisters, one, quiet and reserved, Snow White; the other, outgoing and energetic, Rose Red. Although the Grimms’ fairy tale about these two sisters ends with them both married to two brothers, their relationship is at the forefront of the plot (Warman, 2016). Moreover, while they are both married at the end of the tale, we are told that they are never separated but continue to live together (Warman, 2016). Their sisterly bond is not replaced by ties to men (Warman, 2016). The importance given to their sisterly love, which overshadows their love for their respective princes, gives a queer feel to the tale (Warman, 2016). By implying that the love shared between women can be more important than a heterosexual romance, the tale is opening the door to queer possibilities (Warman, 2016). Allowing the possibilities that two sisters may love each other as deeply as any heterosexual couples also allows the possibilities that two women who are not related may love each other just as much.

Similarly, while Anna and Elsa do not share that many scenes, their love for each other is at the forefront of the plot. We are first introduced to them as children amusing themselves together, as Anna comes to wake Elsa in the middle of the night to entice her to play with her. The intimacy between them is the first thing the movie showcases.

Before introducing us to Elsa's powers, *Frozen* shows us that these two characters are close. In Anna's own words, these two are "best buddies" (Buck & Lee, 2013). The experience of hurting Anna is what provides Elsa with the motivation to become a recluse, and it is the loss of Elsa's friendship which is most traumatic for Anna. The song "Do You Want to Build a Snowman?" (Buck & Lee, 2013) sang by Anna to Elsa, expresses how for the former the loss of their shared intimacy has become a life long wound. This loss explains her obsession with finding someone else to love her as Elsa used to in order to heal.

The relationship between the sisters is central to their characters and motivations. Anna's love for Elsa fuels her desire to find and rescue her just as Elsa's love for Anna adds to her desire to stay away for fear of hurting her. Furthermore, it is the love between them that breaks Anna's curse and allows Elsa to figure out how to control her powers. Anna spends a great deal of her time thinking and talking about true love, which she expects to find with a man. True love is for the majority of the plot assumed to exist between a heterosexual couple by the characters. First, Anna, Olaf, and Kristoff believe that Hans' love will save Anna, and later, they believe much the same thing concerning Kristoff's love for Anna, but, in the end, their assumptions are proven wrong. Elsa is instead shown to be Anna's true love, in a complete reversal of heteronormative expectations. Finally, the movie ends, not on a wedding or a romantic kiss between Kristoff and Anna, but on a playful moment between the sisters, showing that this relationship was the central one.

This relationship is very important to Anna and Elsa's characters and drives much of the plot. What is more, both sisters are implied to share a love comparable in power to

the one normally shared between heterosexual couple in previous Disney movies, such as *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Their love can break a curse. Furthermore, although Anna finds romance with Kristoff, the movie ends with both sisters still living together; the arrival of a man does not supplant their bond. Therefore, much like Snow White and Rose Red, Anna and Elsa's bond allows for queer possibilities. The centrality of this female relationship opens the door to the idea that two women may share a love just as deep and valuable as that shared between a heterosexual couple. Loving another woman can here change who you become and motivate your actions. It can drive the plot of a story, and it can be the true love and happy ending of a fairy tale. Thus, while I do not want to imply that Anna and Elsa's relationship is in any way romantic, I do believe that their story, like "Snow White and Rose Red," brings out the possibility of a queer romance. Their love is an open door which challenges heteronormative assumptions about the importance of female love and relationships.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In some strange way, it is perhaps Elsa's abundance of femininity which makes her so queer. Once free to express herself and her powers, her appearance changes from a more conservative femininity to a campier and more sensual one. Elsa's transformation is linked through her appearance to a sexual awakening. Yet that awakening is not dependent on any man; it even seems to exist in opposition to them. Elsa's sexuality and powers thus become a threat to the heteronormative order and become queer. Her independence and powers (both supernatural and political) make her dangerous to societal orders as Elsa cannot be controlled by men. In order for societies to function as they do, they demand that women sacrifice themselves for the interest of their husband

and children. A woman like Elsa stands in the way of this, both because of her independence from men, but also because of her close tie to a woman. Indeed, Elsa will not sacrifice her own interest for that of a husband or a child, but she will do so for another woman, her sister Anna. The close bond between the sisters contributes to making *Frozen* (2013) a queer story. Although there is no romantic (incestuous) attachment between Anna and Elsa, the importance of their love for each other to the plot opens the door to queer possibilities. If the love between two sisters can be strong enough to break a curse, if it can be central to a woman's life and to the plot of a story, then it leaves open the possibility that the love shared between two women who are not related can be just as strong. Thus, Elsa, a fiercely feminine woman, a *Femme* who lives independently from any man but not independently from a woman, can be read as a queer woman. In this way, *Frozen* allows us to see queer possibilities in its narrative even if these possibilities are still kept silent by the text.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7.1 Past Research

Queer research into children's literature is relatively new, and most of it is still focused on LGBT children's literature (Prickett, 2012). Some body of work exists on books and films for children which were not primarily aimed at a queer audience (Abate & Kidd, 2011; Baker, 2010; Charania & Albertson, 2018; Greenhill, 2015; Kapurch, 2015; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Turner, 2015), but there is still more work to be done. The erotophobia surrounding the discourse of childhood makes it difficult to study the topic (Abate & Kidd, 2011). Indeed, some scholars have spoken about the opposition they have met while speaking about their research (Doty, 2000; Robinson, 2004).

Nevertheless, queer studies of children's literature have slowly but surely been breaking grounds. For example, some scholars have started looking at fairy tales and their adaptations for the queerness of their content (Baker, 2010; Charania & Albertson, 2018; Greenhill, 2015). Among their findings, they discovered that villains, both in traditional tales and modern filmic adaptations, are more likely to be coded as queer (Baker, 2010; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Indeed, villains are more often gender transgressive than the heroes (Baker, 2010). What is more, these characters stand in the way of the heteronormative happy ending (Baker, 2010).

For this reason, the present research has looked at Elsa from the Disney film *Frozen* (2013), an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (1845). Elsa is not a villain in the film, however; her character was based on the villain of the original tale. Moreover, "The Snow Queen" (1845), itself has been read as queer, and

much speculation exists about its author's sexuality (Greenhill, 2015). This gives any adaptation of the tale an added queer credential.

Thus, this analyses looked queerly at the film with the help of three lenses of analysis: the first is Alexander Doty's queer reading, a reading strategy where a text is read without heteronormative assumptions (Doty, 1993); the second, Clare Whatling's "looking lesbian" strategy is a kind of queer reading which puts queer female viewers' views and desires at the forefront of its analysis (Whatling, 1997); finally, the third, Judith Butler's theory of gender performance understands gender as a cultural construct and not as a biological fact (Butler 1988;1990). In it, gender is seen as existing in the repeated actions of its actors and not in the actors themselves (Butler, 1988).

## **7.2 Findings**

The Disney film *Frozen* (2013) has gained a large queer following over the years (Bell, 2016; Dockterman, 2016; Hunt, 2016). The song "Let It Go," sang by its main character, Queen Elsa, has become a "coming-out" anthem (Dockterman, 2016), and the twitter hashtag #GiveElsaAGirlfriend became so popular that it prompted a response from the actress behind the role of Elsa (Bell, 2016; Schnurr, 2016). The aim of this study was thus to examine *Frozen* (2013) and more specifically the character of Elsa through a queer lens to better understand this phenomena.

To this end, I first analysed the film with the help of my intertextual knowledge to unearth some of its queerness. To do so, I used Clare Whatling's notion of the extra-filmic (Whatling, 1997). In her book *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (1997), the film scholar discusses the impact of extra-textual information on the fantasy life of the viewer. She theorises that viewers do not consume media in a vacuum, but

instead bring with them their own set of intertextual knowledge which influences their understanding of the film as much as the film itself (Whatling, 1997). Whatling argues that knowledge of an actress' sexuality outside the film (in her example, Jodi Foster) can change the way film-goers read the character she plays (Whatling, 1997). Similarly, queer scholars like Anne E. Duggan (2013) and Jennifer Orme (2015) looked at fairy tale films with queer actors and/or directors and contended that the presence of queer actors or directors gives these films a queer double meaning. My own analysis expanded upon this idea and I maintained that an actor does not need to be queer themselves to have acquired an importance in queer culture. In my view, if an actor has acquired a large queer following over their career, this association is sufficient to give their work a queer double meaning. In the case of *Frozen* (2013), I argued that knowledge of Broadway star Idina Menzel's (the actress behind Elsa) previous work also contributes to the queerness of Elsa's character. Indeed, the actress began her career by playing a bisexual character in the musical "Rent" (Larson, 1996). In this way, from the very start, she has been associated with queerness. She went on to play the Wicked Witch of the West in the musical "Wicked" (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003). The character of the Wicked Witch of the West as she appears in both the film *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) and the musical "Wicked" (Schwartz & Holzman, 2003) has been interpreted as queer (Doty, 2000; Wolf, 2007). Moreover, Idina Menzel guest starred in the youth television series *Glee* (Murphy, Falchuk, & Brennan, 2009-2015), a series with a large queer following. Thus, the actress has acquired a certain queer credential, a fact which might colour our view of her character of Elsa.



Knowledge of Idina Menzel's career, however, provides only a partial queer reading of Elsa's character. Intertextual knowledge of the figure of the monster can also inform our reading of her. As Elsa is labelled a monster within the film, it is interesting to look at the queer history of the monster figure (Benshoff, 1997). In his book *Monsters in the closet: Homosexuality and the horror film* (1997), Harry M. Benshoff argues that monsters are metaphors for queer sexuality which must be repressed by society for the nuclear family to survive. The monster is thus a threat to the family unit. As I contended in my analysis of *Frozen* (2013), Elsa is similarly framed as a threat to the heteronormative order or, at least, she is perceived as such by the other characters. Indeed, her magical abilities are revealed to us just as she refuses to give her consent to her sister's marriage. Moreover, once all the characters discover her powers, we are treated to a scene which showcase parents and their children cowering in fear in front of her. Therefore, Elsa, like the monster figure, is seen as a threat to the heteronormative order. Moreover, there is a particular monster with whom Elsa shares much in common. That figure is, of course, the lesbian vampire.

Elsa's sexual and feminine appearance, like the vampire's, is associated with her dangerous magical powers (Weiss, 1993). As Elsa lets go of her inhibition and embraces her powers, her appearance changes. She becomes more feminine and more overtly sexual, just like the vampire whose *Femme Fatale* looks are associated with her supernatural abilities (Weiss, 1993). Moreover, Elsa's powers, like the lesbian vampire's, are linked to symbols of femininity and castration (Weiss, 1993). Elsa therefore shares similarities with the vampire in her looks and the symbolism attached to her powers. Furthermore, *Frozen*'s characters and plot also have much in common with the lesbian

vampire film. Both Elsa and the vampire are surrounded by a familiar cast of characters (the hero and the ingenue) and their stories follow a similar pattern. Thus, the two supernatural creatures stand in the way of the heteronormative romance plot of their respective stories, leading to a fight between them and the hero over the heroine (Weiss, 1993). However, Elsa's story has a happier ending. The vampire dies at the hand of the hero who rescues the damsel-in-distress; however, Elsa is instead rescued by the damsel-in-distress from the false-hero. Intertextual knowledge of the lesbian vampire's villainy thus helps bring out some of the queerness of Elsa's character. However, it is not necessary to look outside of the text to read *Frozen* in a queer way. Indeed, *Frozen*'s narrative itself can be understood as a "coming-out" story.

The experience of "coming-out" has become culturally central to the queer experience and the metaphor that has been used to refer to this event has, of course, been that of the closet (Sedgwick, 1990). One "comes-out" of the metaphorical closet. Thus, stories about queerness revolve around the act of divulging some secret part of the self. They are stories about "coming-out" of the closet (Sedgwick, 1990). With this understanding of queerness, it becomes obvious that Elsa's narrative can be understood as a "coming-out" story. One only needs to look at the film's use of the symbol of the door to understand how Elsa's story can be seen as a metaphor for "coming-out" of the closet. Indeed, it is striking to see how much *Frozen* (2013) uses images of doors and how many times it makes references to them. Thus, Elsa's story starts with her being locked out behind a door because of her difference and ends with her embracing her difference and opening the gates of her castle. Throughout the narrative, the film uses doors to symbolise Elsa's journey towards acceptance of her difference. Therefore, doors

can clearly be understood to be a metaphor for the figurative closet. Elsa is, here, a young queer woman going through the difficult process of “coming-out”. This metaphor is further reinforced by the animation through Elsa’s change of appearance.

Once she lets go of her inhibition and lets her powers show, Elsa’s appearance changes from a more conservative femininity to a campier and more sensual one. Her transformation links her empowerment to a sexual awakening. Indeed, as she accepts her powers, she becomes more obviously feminine and sexual. In this way, Elsa comes to resemble a *Femme*. *Femmes*’ way of performing femininity is more exaggerated and often verge on camp (Vannewkirk, 2006). However, Elsa’s sexual awakening is not dependent on any man. It can even be argued that it exists in opposition to them. Therefore, Elsa’s sexuality and powers exist in opposition to the heteronormative order and become queer. Her status as queen coupled with her magical abilities contribute to making her dangerous to societal orders as Elsa cannot be controlled by men. She exists outside of their circles of power. Moreover, Elsa has made another woman central to herself instead of a man. Indeed, much of Elsa’s motivation within the film centers on her desire to keep her sister Anna safe from herself. The closeness between the sisters adds to the queerness of *Frozen* (2013). Indeed, although their love is not romantic, the strength and importance of their bond to the narrative allows the viewers to imagine queer possibilities. By engaging with the idea that a woman might make another woman central to herself, the film allows the viewers to imagine a narrative where two women’s romantic love might be central to its plot.

Thus, *Frozen* (2013) and its main character Elsa can be read as a queer. Although this queerness remains silent, it is palpable to those who care enough to look. Disney's box-office success relies on a very queer narrative, whether it is ready to admit so or not.

### **7.3 Area for Further Research**

This study's focus is extremely narrow. It only attempts to do several queer readings of one particular character in one fairy tale adaptation. *Frozen* (2013) is a very queer film and Elsa is a queer character, but more could be said about the film's queerness beyond her character. What is more, much research remains to be done on the topic of the Walt Disney Company and queerness. Indeed, *Frozen* (2013) is far from being the only recent Disney movie that can be looked at from a queer point of view. Indeed, films like *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014) *Tangled* (Conli, 2010), and *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012) also make use of queer themes that are worth exploring in more depth. Moon Charania & Cory Albertson (2018) as well as Katie Kapurch (2015) have looked at the queerness of these films, yet more research is warranted. Moreover, while there was a study on the queerness of male villain in animated film (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003), I believe that with the rise of Disney's live-actions remakes, one needs to be done on female villains. Male villains are more common in today's animated films (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003), but that was not the case of earlier films, and as those are being remade by Disney, it would be worthwhile to see if there are any changes in its portrayal of female villains like *Maleficent* (Disney, 1959; Stromberg, 2014), *Lady Tremaine* (Branagh, 2015; Disney, 1950), *the Queen of Hearts* (Burton, 2010; Disney, 1951), and *the Evil Queen* (Disney, 1937; Kitsis & Horowitz, 2011). Finally, the fact that

the first overtly queer character in a Disney film (LeFou from *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017)) is a villain is probably worth a closer look.

Much is to be discussed when it comes to Disney and queerness beyond *Frozen* (2013). But fairy tales do not belong to Disney; explicitly queer retellings for young adults exist such as *Kissing the Witch* (Donoghue, 1997), *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (Gaiman, 2015), and *Ash* (Lo, 2009). Moreover, although not retellings, the fairy tale genre has been used to tell queer stories in picture books for young readers (*King and King* (De Haan, 2003), *Prince and Knight* (Haack, 2018), *The Prince and the Frog* (Pike, 2018)), and in graphic novels for preteens (*The Prince and the Dressmaker* (Wang, 2018), *Princess Princess Ever After* (O’Neil, 2016)). These new retellings make use of the subversive side of the genre, a genre which is otherwise rather oppressive (Zipes, 1997, 2012). The present study does not touch on LGBT fairy tales and the way they subvert heteronormative expectations, although this would make for a rich area of research.

Another element that this analysis does not touch upon is audience reaction. Fairy tales do not exist in a vacuum. Some studies exist which look at children and queer people’s reactions to fairy tales and their queerness, yet it is still a rather new field of study and the scholarship on this is small (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Maier, 2017).

Finally, fairy tales are not the only source of queerness in children’s literature, something that has not been addressed here. Girls’ book like *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908) and *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868) have served as a rich source of queer readings (Abate & Kidd, 2011; Robinson, 2004). As both have been remade several times recently (Caswill, 2017; De Pencier & Walley-Beckett, 2017; Leslie, & Harrison,

2016; Niederpruem, 2018; Phipps & Marsden, 2017; Terciero, 2019), I believe it worthwhile to study how these adaptations have touched on or ignored the queerness of their original texts.

Thus, the present study has a very narrow focus on one particular character in one particular film. Queerness in children's literature is a much broader topic that is only starting to be touched upon. There is much more work to be done. This study of the queerness of Elsa is only a small part of it; a beginning rather than an end.

#### **7.4 Final Thoughts**

Canada legalized same-sex marriage in 2005, being the third country in the world to do so (Perper, 2017). As of now, twenty-six countries have made same-sex marriage legal (Perper, 2017). Approval of these unions have also been on the rise, jumping in the United States from a 27% approval rating in 1996 to 67% in 2018 (Gallup, 2018). This is especially true of young Americans, aged 18-29, who in 2017 reported a 79% approval rating (Pew Research Center, 2017). What is more, millennials in America are more and more likely to identify as queer. The percentage of young people who identified as LGBT has indeed moved from 5.8% in 2012 to 8.1% in 2017 (Madhani, 2018). In Canada, the results are similar. Approval for same-sex marriage moved from 41% in 1997 to 74% in 2017, with young people leading the way with an 82% approval rating among 18-25-year-olds and 86% for 25-34-year-olds (CROP, 2017). Our world is changing.

However, while these statistics are encouraging, they are only one part of a much wider picture. While approval of same-sex marriage has been on the rise in the United States, so has the number of reported hate crimes against people who identify as LGBT (Dashow, 2016). In between 2015 and 2016, hate crimes against LGB people has

increased by 2%, while for Trans people the statistics were far worse with a 44% increase in hate crime (Dashow, 2016). This might be due to the Trump administration's transphobic policy plans that first tried to ban trans people out of the military and now want to define them out of existence (Green, Benner, & Pear, 2018; Richards, 2018). Moreover, as the FBI does not require local law enforcement to report these kind of crimes, the only data we have was given on a voluntary basis and might not truly reflect how much the change in presidency has affected this community (Dashow, 2016). In Canada, things do not look much better. Hate crimes targeting LGBT people are steadily decreasing, yet most of these incident (60%) were physically violent (Egale: Canadian Human Rights Trust, 2017). Most disconcerting, in 2010, most victims and perpetrators were between the age of 12 to 24, making the topic particularly important to youth (Egale: Canadian Human Rights Trust, 2012).

In the world of youth culture, things are slowly but surely changing too. I have mentioned the growing number of queer fairy tale books targeted at young people and children previously, but now even big corporations like Disney and Netflix are joining in (Min, 2017; Mumford, 2017; Nguyen, 2018). Indeed, recently Disney has delivered its first gay character in a film and its first openly gay main character on the Disney Channel (Min, 2017; Mumford, 2017). Meanwhile, Netflix's adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908) (*Anne* (De Pencier & Walley-Beckett, 2017)) and the comic books, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2014-) (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Forrest, Lindenberg, Barry, 2018-)) also offers several queer characters (Nguyen, 2018, Yandoli, 2018).

Young people and their parents' attitude towards queerness are changing, yet violence against LGBT (especially youth) remains very worrisome. Meanwhile, youth culture is very slowly opening its door to queer sexuality. For these reasons, it is becoming more and more important to study how children's literature talks about, uses (exploits?), and portrays queerness. This study of *Frozen*'s (2013) Elsa is only a small part of this much bigger discussion. Nevertheless, even if the focus of this analysis is narrow, it remains true that by allowing Elsa to truly "come-out" and giving children around the world their first queer Disney princess, the Walt Disney Company would give many people hope (Bradley, 2018). That would not be a small victory. But whether Disney will deliver such a princess in its coming sequel to *Frozen* (2013) remains to be seen.



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