



2021

Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s

Adelia Brown
Mount Holyoke College

Recommended Citation

Brown, Adelia (2021) "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 43.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-Coding from the 1950s to the 2010s

Adelia Brown

Mount Holyoke College

Abstract

Despite not yet introducing a queer main character in one of its major animated features, Disney has produced many characters that critics interpret as homosexual. Most of these characters are villains. Disney has a problematic history of queer-coding its villains, but many queer theorists argue that *Frozen* (2013) changes this pattern by queer-coding Elsa, a hero. Unfortunately, this argument neglects many of the more negative aspects inherent to the queer-coding in *Frozen*. These problematic elements become clear when compared to other Disney films with queer-coding since 1950, namely *Peter Pan* (1953) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Through analysis of these earlier films, along with the queer theory work of former Disney employee Sean Griffin, this paper illustrates how Elsa's triumphant coming out narrative displays many problematic similarities to queer-coding in more homophobic Disney films. In comparing Elsa's queer-coding to that of Captain Hook and Ursula, disturbing similarities suggest that in 2013, Disney retained many of the homophobic views that influenced its queer-coding in 1953.

Despite not yet introducing a queer main character in one of its major animated features, Disney has produced many characters that critics interpret as homosexual. Most of these characters are villains. Disney has a problematic history of queer-coding its villains, but many queer theorists argue that *Frozen* (2013) changes this pattern by queer-coding Elsa, a hero. How heroic is Elsa, though? *Frozen's* queer representation loses its shine when viewed in light of other Disney films with queer-coding since 1950, namely *Peter Pan* (1953) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Elsa's triumphant coming-out narrative displays many problematic similarities to queer-coding in more homophobic Disney films. In comparing Elsa's queer-coding to that of Captain Hook and Ursula, disturbing similarities suggest that in 2013, Disney retained many of the homophobic views that influenced its queer-coding in 1953.

In the early 1950s, when *Peter Pan* was released, Disney strove above all else to position itself as a family-friendly corporation. According to Sean Griffin, a former Disney employee who focused on queer studies, Disney in the '50s focused on "representing itself as an upstanding moral organization" that parents could trust to influence their children's moral development (Griffin 3). This meant conforming to the moral leanings of the general, movie-attending public, which at the time, expected very little controversial content due to the restrictions of the Production Code. The Code, which regulated objectionable content in motion pictures, sought to ensure movies portrayed "correct standards of life" (Motion Picture Association of America 6). Intuitively, Griffin continues that this meant "gender and sexuality are portrayed more

benignly” than they were in the 1940s (Griffin 41), when Disney enforced its family-friendly image less strictly. Did all types of gender and sexuality warrant this treatment? Griffin reveals the answer in his introduction. Disney “consistently posited and reinforced [...] an image of American middle-class heterosexual courtship” (Griffin 4). Griffin argues that despite claiming to downplay sexuality, Disney neglected to downplay heterosexuality. It accomplished this by portraying heterosexuality as morally pure and innocent. Theoretically, this implies that Disney could also portray homosexuality so long as it portrayed it as morally vile and corrupted. Griffin provides evidence of Disney exploring taboo topics by controlling the way audiences interpret them. Apparently, “Disney’s reputation was so carved in stone within American culture that, at least once, the studio was able to transgress the Production Code” by displaying naked buttocks (Griffin 46). The public had enough faith in Disney’s morality that they automatically interpreted the scene as innocent and morally pure. It follows that Disney could also display homosexuality such that audiences would interpret its motives as morally pure: by characterizing the homosexuality as corrupted.

Many read Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* as a queer-coded homosexual man. Hook comically exaggerates Father’s more feminine tendencies. Father stumbles about without a confident masculine gait, while Hook glides girlishly across the floor (*Peter Pan*). Father worries a little too much about his cufflinks, while Hook dresses with impeccable style. Hook’s costume also reflects femininity, complete with loose long hair, a flowing cape, a pink shirt, and a bushy feather in his hat. Griffin observes that despite this clothing’s femininity, it also resembles traditional masculine clothing of the time period (Griffin 76). Hook’s cape hangs too tight and low, but a nice jacket over a clean undershirt appeared masculine. Hook’s pink, bushy feather

appears feminine, but an impressive hat had a place in masculine fashion. In addition to exaggerating Hook's femininity, the costume exaggerates his masculinity. This portrays feminine men as a warped and comical version of masculine men. Hook's feather further emasculates him in relation to his femininity. At the beginning of the movie, the feather represents feminine masculinity. Despite its pink and fluffy appearance, it serves as a phallic status symbol for Hook. Later in the movie, Peter Pan shaves the feather, effectively emasculating Hook's phallus. Rather than replacing it with a more masculine symbol, Hook simply loses the object, as well as the masculinity behind his feminine style. Griffin argues that "how theatrically [Hook performs his] gender roles [suggests that] the naturalness of [his] gender can be called into question" (Griffin 73). Indeed, Hook's performance of masculinity retains enough elements of femininity to resemble just that: a performance.

By intrinsically tying Hook's queer-coded traits into his villainous traits, the film encourages a negative interpretation of homosexuality. Griffin initially argues that Hook could serve as positive representation for the gay community, but a closer look at the film, as well as Griffin's own evidence, paints a darker picture (Griffin 73). Griffin later states that Hook is "using his cultured dandyism to hide his evil designs" (Griffin 76). This interpretation directly ties Hook's femininity into his villainy. Indeed, the same costume that covers Hook's femininity with masculine elements simultaneously covers Hook's piracy with proper elements. While the other members of Hook's crew wear torn, casual clothing, Hook's clean and dapper cloak creates the illusion not only of masculinity, but of propriety. His performative masculinity hides his femininity and his villainous acts at the same time, implying a connection between the two. The villainous actions themselves also tie into homosexuality, as Hook, in Nico Lang's words,

“preys on young boys” (Lang). Lang’s word choice emphasizes that Hook does not merely “hunt” young boys; the word “preys” suggests a sexual interpretation. Rather than immediately killing the Lost Boys when he has them tied up, Hook asks them to join his crew and live with him (*Peter Pan*). Barrie, the author of the original Peter Pan story, prompted much critical argument regarding “whether or not there was anything sexual about [his] affection for [...] boys, and the question has never been settled to anyone’s satisfaction,” according to Constance Grady. This means that each adaptation of Peter Pan, of which there have been many, must choose a way to handle a villain whose origin involves potential pedophilic homosexuality. Rather than hiding this potential leaning in the character, as one would expect a family-friendly company to do, Disney chose to highlight the behavior, taking pains only to portray it as villainous. Disney could portray queerness without risking their moral reputation, so long as that queerness involved objective harm and unquestionable evil. This becomes further apparent when considering Disney’s different responses to queer tendencies in a hero as opposed to a villain (Griffin 41). Peter Pan has historically been portrayed as a feminine character, with many adaptations even going so far as to cast a woman in the role, but Griffin observes that “Disney’s Peter Pan is one of the most masculine versions of the character, a definite attempt to downplay the genderbending.” Peter Pan’s voice actor is male, and his costume lacks the feminine flourishes of Hook’s. The feather in his cap is red and pointy, with no fluff to be found. Despite highlighting Hook’s femininity, Disney took pains to hide Peter Pan’s. This implies that in the 1950s, queerness could only occur in a Disney villain, not in a Disney hero.

By the late 1980s, Disney stopped prioritizing their family-friendly image at the cost of all else. Griffin explains that “the driving motive for the company was no longer ‘What would Walt have done?’ but ‘What will make a profit for the company?’” (Griffin 106). This meant prioritizing profit over Walt’s moral ideals. In practice, this likely explains the “in-jokes and sly winks that most children would not catch or understand” that Griffin later observes during this period (Griffin 146). Parents buy tickets, so Disney began appealing more to adults, which naturally involved a loosening of its family-friendly moral code. Disney began “encouraging a camp reception” (Griffin 145), which directly contrasts the trusting reception they encouraged in order to skirt the Code in the ‘50s. Rather than encouraging audiences to interpret all images in the most innocent light possible, Disney began leaning into the humor of less innocent interpretations. This could potentially open the door to different, less negative types of queer-coding or representation.

In creating Ursula for *The Little Mermaid*, designers drew inspiration from a drag queen, which led to more overt queer-coding than in *Peter Pan*. Codirector John Musker, who helped to design Ursula, explicitly stated that he “really [tried] to get some of Divine’s big, campy, overweight diva” across in the character (Acuna). Divine was a famous drag queen during this time period, and his campy, diva traits, far from incidental, were inherent to his drag identity. This means that the film explicitly codes Ursula as not just a celebrity who happened to do drag, but as a recognizable drag queen. Ursula’s appearance supports this. She is overweight and physically imposing, her hair forms a mohawk, and she wears bright red nails and heavy makeup. Her movement also resembles Divine’s, as she shakes her hips and sashays through purple mood lighting reminiscent of a drag show. Her speech resembles that of a drag persona,

as well. She says, “they weren’t kidding when they called me, well, a witch” (*The Little Mermaid*), which creates a pun on the word “bitch.” This resembles typical drag language much more than typical Disney language. Thirty years earlier, even implying non-family-friendly language like this would be taboo. Ursula’s verbal emphasis on “the importance of body language,” along with the suggestive shaking of her hips, also ties into drag while brushing the risqué (*The Little Mermaid*). The implication that Ariel should move her body as Ursula does for the purpose of attracting Prince Eric draws attention to sexual body parts, something Disney would not abide in the ‘50s. Perhaps if a Disney film could now create puns on immoral language, it could also positively or neutrally portray queer-coded characters.

On the contrary, despite Disney’s reduced moral responsibility, Ursula’s queerness still ties directly into her villainy and evil. Her desire to become a queen serves as her primary motivation, which connects drag queens to villainous behavior. Furthermore, her example victims in “Poor Unfortunate Souls” include a conventional heterosexual couple that she corrupts (*The Little Mermaid*). This reflects the way she tries to separate Ariel and Prince Eric. Ursula consistently fights against the positive ideal of heterosexual romance. Near the end of the movie, she does this by donning a kind of drag, impersonating a more feminine woman. Showing Ursula, a masculine character, don a more feminine appearance for the purpose of evil connects crossdressing and drag with evil intentions. She laughs maniacally as she transforms, emphasizing the villainy of dressing up as a feminine woman. When her disguise dissolves at the wedding, she turns back into her masculine self, with rolls of fat bursting out of the wedding dress. A bigger, masculine character emerging from a feminine dress resembles a negative perception of drag queens, and the dark lighting and horrified reactions portray the

behavior as evil. The wedding in particular also emphasizes Ursula's corruption of the heterosexual union. Ursula does not simply fight against the heroes; she fights against their heterosexual family structures. This positions her queerness as inherent to and part of her villainy.

In the 2010s, gay representation became an issue of contemporary discussion, but Disney still had not included any explicitly gay characters in a major animated feature. Renee Davidson observes that in 2013, "when Disney movies do allude to queer sexuality, including same-sex romance, this is usually in the context of a joke-- a comical accident that leaves all parties disgusted and mortified" (Davidson). This implies that although Disney still portrayed homosexuality as humorous and crude, the homosexuality it ridiculed was overtly defined rather than coded, or at least coded in a way that was more obvious to the audience given the prevalence of gay representation as an issue. Davidson emphasizes Disney's pattern of "ridiculing" homosexuality, but also remarks that "the company doesn't shy away from attempts to profit from queer consumers" (Davidson). This represents a natural progression from the campiness of Disney in the late 1980s. Disney could include references to the queer community to appeal to queer fans, while still emphasizing the moral lowness of the queer community to appeal to families with traditional moral values. Most often, this still took the form of queer-coded villains. Regardless, gay audiences began "to queer their favorite Disney characters" (Davidson), including the heroes. It makes sense that Disney would play into this new tendency, so as not to lose queer viewers; however, the company still could not take a definitive pro-gay stance without risking ire from its more traditional audiences.

In *Frozen*, Elsa displays queer-coded traits, despite functioning as a hero. Kierran Petersen points out commonly acknowledged “parallels between the kingdom’s rejection of the magical powers [...] and society’s rejection of homosexuality” (Petersen). This positions Elsa as a gay person living in a homophobic society. Indeed, the emphasis of closing doors in an attempt to “keep her powers hidden away from everyone” (Petersen) liken Elsa’s hidden powers to the metaphor of homosexuality being “in the closet.” The juxtaposition between Anna and Elsa during “For the First Time in Forever” contrasts Anna’s heterosexuality to Elsa’s ice powers, comparing Elsa’s ice powers to homosexuality. Anna sings “a chance to find true love” over Elsa singing “conceal, don’t feel, don’t let them know” (*Frozen*), suggesting the thing Elsa conceals relates to her chance to find true love. “Let It Go” also contributes to this reading, as according to Petersen, “many equate [it] with the experience of coming out and accepting one’s sexual orientation” (Petersen). Elsa “lets go” of her restraint because “now they know” (*Frozen*), mirroring the way a gay person stops restraining themselves once others already know they are gay.

Unlike in previous films, Elsa’s homosexuality pertains to her status as a hero, not as a villain. Ryan C. Robert “argues that the film has given LGBT youth a character with which to empathize” (Petersen). This sets Elsa apart from previous queer-coded characters, whose status as villains discouraged the audience from empathizing with them. Like Ursula, Elsa serves as an obstacle to Anna’s heterosexual romance. This ties her behavior into queerness, and it initially seems villainous; however, because Hans takes on the role of the villain, thwarting his romance with Anna actually positions Elsa’s queerness as heroic. Elsa consistently supports and strives for family values, something previous films pitted queer-coded characters against. Elsa says “I

don't wanna hurt you" to her heterosexual parents (*Frozen*), explicitly denying animosity between her queerness and their heterosexual relationship. She also names Kristoff "the official Arendelle ice master and deliverer" not despite but because of his heterosexual relationship with Anna (*Frozen*). Throughout the movie, Elsa unwaveringly supports the "good" characters, including their heterosexuality. Fittingly, *Frozen* "attracted more than the usual amount of controversy for a kids' cartoon" (Petersen), according to Caitlin Dickson. More parents worried that *Frozen* condoned homosexuality, which suggests that Elsa represents a more positive portrayal of homosexuality. Rather than including homosexuality only to punish and vilify it, *Frozen* queer-codes a heroic character who survives to get a happy ending.

Still, Elsa displays a fair amount of villainous queer-coding, despite her position as one of the film's heroes. Fittingly, a troll claims "there is beauty in [Elsa's ice powers] but also great danger" (*Frozen*); likewise, the film portrays Elsa's queer-coded powers as heroic, but also dark and dangerous. Elsa was originally intended to be "a villain and pure evil" ("Elsa from *Frozen*"), according to producer Peter Del Vecho, and much of her queer-coding was likely established during this phase of development. This would explain why Disney suddenly included a positive example of queer-coding despite the popular controversy surrounding gay representation. In fact, Ron Clements, codirector of *The Little Mermaid*, points out the "connection" between early Ursula sketches and early Elsa sketches (Acuna), which emphasizes the similar brands of queer-coding in their original character designs. Like the way *Peter Pan* emphasized Hook's predatory behavior towards boys and *The Little Mermaid* emphasized Ursula's use of crossdressing to destroy the wedding, *Frozen* emphasizes Elsa's queer-coded ice powers as a source of danger to the straight characters in the film. She heroically hopes Anna will "be safe

from” her, but Anna admits that “actually [she is] not,” and neither is the rest of the town (*Frozen*). The ice powers that queer theorists compare to homosexuality genuinely endanger the entire community. Anna, who serves as the heterosexual romantic lead, also serves as the face of Elsa’s destruction. Her injury at Elsa’s hands provides the inciting incident for the plot, and her frozen heart, inflicted by Elsa later on, establishes the driving time pressure for the film’s final act. In the end, Elsa does participate in the happy ending, but her seemingly uplifting realization that “love will thaw” positions ice, which represents her queerness, directly opposed to love (*Frozen*). Although Elsa’s ice powers seem to represent homosexuality, a kind of romantic love, the nature of ice presents homosexual love as cold and opposed to “true” love. Only “true” love can save Anna from the corrupted love of Elsa’s ice powers. Despite surviving to a happy ending, Elsa receives no love interest, not even a heterosexual but queer-coded one. Rob Price describes *Frozen* as “a timid step in the right direction,” but acknowledges that it “still sticks to plenty of societal standards” (Petersen). Indeed, Elsa fulfills heroic roles never before filled by queer-coded Disney characters, but the one heroic role she does not fulfill is that of the love interest—arguably the most relevant role for providing positive gay representation. This half-hearted step in the right direction reflects Disney’s attitudes in the early 2010s. Although Elsa’s queer-coding avoids the overtly negative, Disney did not take an explicitly positive stance on homosexuality.

Comparing Elsa to queer-coded villains of the 1950s and 1980s reveals that by the 2010s, Disney had taken a more positive approach to gay representation, but still failed to discard many of the homophobic tendencies behind its previous queer-coded characters. *Peter Pan* portrayed Hook’s homosexuality as both ridiculous and condemnable. *The Little Mermaid*

portrayed Ursula's queerness in a campier fashion, allowing the movie to condemn it while still temporarily reveling in it. In *Frozen*, Disney made progress by queer-coding a hero, and many critics applauded what they considered a positive portrayal of homosexuality. Indeed, *Frozen* represented a more positive portrayal than any Disney film before it but still retained much of the company's previous homophobia. Throughout the years, Disney appears to steadily move towards increasing acceptance of homosexuality, but it moves no faster than the box office comfortably allows.

Works Cited

Acuna, Kirsten. "How 'The Lion King' codirector, a drag queen, and one of Disney's greatest animators helped bring The Little Mermaid villain to life." *Insider*, 2019.

Davidson, Renee. "Why are there no gay Disney characters?" *Salon*, 2013.

"Elsa from Frozen was meant to be an evil queen with an army of snow monsters." *BBC, Newsbeat*, 2017.

Frozen. Directed by Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.

Grady, Constance. "How the fantasy of Peter Pan turned sinister." *Vox*, 2017.

Griffin, Sean P. *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*. New York University Press, 2000.

Lang, Nico. "Disney's long, complicated history with queer characters." *Harper's Bazaar*, 2017.

Motion Picture Association of America. *A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures, 1949*. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Peter Pan. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wilfred Jackson, Walt Disney Pictures, 1953.

Petersen, Kierran. "Disney's Frozen and the 'gay agenda.'" *BBC*, 2014.

The Little Mermaid. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 1989.