
From the Evil Queen to Elsa: Camp Witches in Disney Films

By Lisa Duffy

Perhaps the most unforgettable moment in *Frozen* (2013, Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck) is the musical number “Let It Go”, in which protagonist Elsa fully unleashes the magical powers she has been attempting to conceal for the first half of the film. Not only is the number visually and aurally stunning, but the sequence marks a departure from previous Disney films: prior to Elsa, no Disney animated heroine has ever possessed this kind of power. Magical women in Disney films were either kindly helpers aiding the protagonist or, more commonly, wicked witches using their abilities for destruction. Elsa’s mystical talent – and the look she adopts once she embraces this talent – positions her as a complicated figure who is aligned more closely with villainesses than princesses, yet she serves as heroine and aspirational figure in the film. “Let It Go” is a moment of transition where she sheds her understated appearance for one that is characterised by excess. In the span of a song, Elsa transforms from reserved monarch to camp witch, placing her in a long line of over-the-top magical women in Disney history.^[1] Most importantly, her transformation in “Let It Go” points towards the instability and artificiality of femininity, a camp construct which had previously only been used to denote evilness but in the contemporary character of Elsa becomes a positive revelation.

For decades, Disney has used the figure of the camp witch to counter their wholesome protagonists. Susan Sontag places an emphasis on the “artifice and exaggeration” of camp, noting it is an “aesthetic phenomenon” which offers pleasure by way of a heightened style rather than normative ideas of beauty.^[2] Until Elsa, Disney had used the crafted aesthetic of exaggerated femininity to mark magical women as evil. “Good” female characters possess a natural beauty, one which conceals any effort taken in achieving their look. Evil women must construct their beauty, employing obvious makeup and dramatic clothing in their doomed attempt to attain a desirable femininity. Witchcraft aids in their transformations and provides another layer of artificiality as the women harness unnatural forces to secure youth and attractiveness. It is this obvious falseness which marks these figures as camp, existing outside society’s hegemonic ideals.

The female protagonists of Disney films tend to be “highly archetypal” examples of simple goodness and kindness, embodying dominant ideals of acceptability and often serving as passive figures in their own story.^[3]

While these young women will all inevitably end their films ensconced in a heterosexual romance, they eschew sexual desire and are always portrayed as chaste and virginal. Desire in Disney animated features is a destructive force, wielded only by those who exist outside social norms. Barbara Creed notes that the “monstrous figure” of the witch tends to “foreground her essentially sexual nature”.^[4] The witch’s unbridled sexuality is the root of her evil and is presented as unnatural through her lack of romantic partner. She is a solitary figure whose libidinous energy has no appropriate place to be cathected, aligning her with homosexuality. Her “monstrous femininity” is “recognizable in part through its queer representation of sexuality”, as the witch transgresses all normative readings.^[5] This provides an additional link to camp, which is employed to subvert homophobic assumptions of mainstream culture and points to the extent a queer sensibility infuses everyday life.^[6]

Amy M. Davis observes that Disney villainesses are marked as a threat by their agency, stating: “They change themselves into other things when functioning in their usual form is not working for them. They actively seek to control not only their lives but their circumstances. They are strong, fearless, and often very creative. They are mature, powerful, and independent. In short, they are everything their female victims are not”.^[7] By straying outside of gender norms, these women expose the inherent performativity of these notions, and camp becomes a way “to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality”.^[8] The implicit queerness of their camp aesthetic drives a shift in the function of the Disney witch, evolving from the outright villainy of the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, David Hand et al.) to Elsa as venerated protagonist. The progression of societal acceptance of homosexuality allows the witch to move from feared outsider to benevolent ruler.



(L) The Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and (R) Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

The Disney camp witch has existed from the very beginning, with the Evil Queen enacting murderous plots on Snow White in the studio’s first full-length animated feature film. The Evil Queen establishes the specific

aesthetic for all the magical women who will follow. She displays exaggerated arched brows and a heavily painted face, with her pale skin drawing attention to these colourful features. Her clothing is highly theatrical, with a tall cowl adding drama to the black cape which covers her regal purple dress. Her carefully constructed femininity is offset by her low, commanding voice, contrasting with Snow White's hyper-feminine high-pitched lilt. The glamorous mode serves to signal the artificiality of her femininity, designating her as camp as she flaunts a mask of womanhood. The Evil Queen's appearance is integral to the plot, as the Magic Mirror's categorisation of her as only the second fairest in the land is the catalyst that unleashes her fury. The film sets up the dichotomy of the evil of constructed beauty versus the goodness of natural beauty, which becomes essential in all of the Disney films featuring evil witches.

Equally as attention-grabbing is Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959, Clyde Geronimi et al.), who mimics the Evil Queen's aesthetic of billowing black robes trimmed in royal purple but creates an even further exaggeration of monstrous femininity, with her green skin and horned headpiece marking her as inhuman and animalistic. Both of these classical-era witches are shown as possessing some semblance of attractiveness, but their beauty is queered by its unnatural traits. Elizabeth Bell notes, "Female wickedness [...] is rendered as middle-aged beauty at its peak of sexuality and authority", calling attention specifically to the age and sexual agency of all the evil witches.^[9] They are invariably too old to be virtuous brides but too young to be nurturing grandmothers. Their excess sexual energy is not aiding in reproduction nor have they been rendered completely sexless by the ageing process, marking them as transgressive beings to be feared. Their evil status and positioning outside societal norms aligns them with portrayals of homosexuality in classical-era films, shown as something which must be stopped, and the camp aesthetic becomes an identifying marker of danger. Social order can only be returned through their death and the heterosexual happily ever after of the appropriately feminine protagonist.^[10]



(L) Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and (R) Yzma from *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000)

The notion of appropriate femininity becomes even more exaggerated in contemporary portrayals of evil Disney witches. While the Evil Queen and Maleficent were defined by a camp aesthetic, they still served as figures of outright horror, lacking the knowingness that pushes camp personalities from coded to overt. Their modern counterparts benefit from a slowly shifting openness of homosexuality, embracing not only the exaggerated construction of beauty but also a sense of irony and humorous flamboyance, which are essential components of camp.[\[11\]](#) Both Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989, Ron Clements and Jon Musker) and Yzma from *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000, Mark Dindal) embrace their full camp nature, relishing in their performance of gender ideals while displaying unruly bodies which expose beauty as a construct. The familiar arched brows, brightly coloured eyelids and crimson lips are all present, but on these witches the makeup sinks into the aging, sagging flesh of their faces, belying the reality of what lies beneath. They follow the dress code of evil by choosing black and purple as the colours of their sartorial accoutrements, but rather than a flowing, regal silhouette, the garments cling to their figures, revealing every roll of fat or withered limb which should mark them as undesirable.

However, like the classical era witches who came before them, these magical women stand as subversive symbols of sexuality, their conviction in their desirous image serving as direct affront to societal opinion. Ursula's half-human/half-octopus form recalls the animalistic nature of Maleficent, marked by an inhuman sexuality. Kerry M. Mallan calls attention to this "transgressive body", which "represents a caricature of the female form and [...] parodies the *femmes fatales* iconography".[\[12\]](#) Ursula moves with the languid motions of Rita Hayworth, undulating her hips (and tentacles) as a hypnotic invitation. She is convinced of her own desirability, confidently displaying her large body as she instructs Ariel how to attract a man. This over-exaggerated construction of femininity is embedded in her character design, which was inspired by drag queen Divine, tying her even more overtly to camp than her predecessors.[\[13\]](#)

Yzma also plays the role of flirtatious coquette, completely unaware that others might find her aging features undesirable. Her camp performance utilises the same low voice as all evil Disney women, incongruous to the femininity they are attempting to achieve. But Yzma is voiced by Eartha Kitt, whose purring vocals serve to sexualise the villain's image even further than the previous witches. Kitt's own camp status makes Yzma's camp aesthetic more explicit, working on multiple levels similar to Ursula's drag associations. Marked as even more uncomfortable than the

Evil Queen and Maleficent with their libidinous leanings jarring with their inability to conform to conventional beauty standards, the contemporary evil witches playfully reveal the absurdity of heteronormative ideals and an increased openness of the camp aesthetic.



Two versions of Elsa from *Frozen* (2013)

As gay rights continue to progress in the 21st century, the figure of the witch no longer needs to be an evil sexual outcast positioned as a threat to society. With Elsa, the magical woman and desirous figure are one and the same, but the camp nature still remains (albeit in a slightly different manner than in her immoral forebearers). The evil witches all shapeshift to aid their murderous plans, with the Evil Queen, Maleficent, and Yzma leaving behind their womanly bodies to transform into an old hag, a fire-breathing dragon, and a maniacal cat respectively. The transformation into another figure reveals the ultimate construction of their femininity. Ursula pushes this the furthest, becoming a raven-haired copy of Ariel. By tying her false visage directly to that of the protagonist, she opens up questions of the stability of natural beauty with the ease in which she adopts a costume of conformity.

Elsa uses her magic to isolate herself, rather than to intentionally and calculatedly harm a rival, so does not need to enter into the deceit of shapeshifting. However, she does undergo a less extreme transformation, tying her to princesses like Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991, Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise), Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950, Clyde Geronimi et al.) and Aurora. Yet while these protagonists rely on the assistance of others to change their appearance, Elsa uses her own magic to transform herself in “Let It Go”. She relishes in the established witch trait of agency by taking action herself, changing her coronation attire into a slinky, sparkling gown and her stiff updo into a gently tousled plait. While Belle, Cinderella and Aurora undergo a makeover to move them from ordinary to royalty, Elsa throws off royalty for glamour. Sarah Whitfield points out the tension inherent in this action, as Elsa uses her own agency to maintain conformity with the beauty standards of all Disney princesses, but this conformity is tinged by the camp markers of the evil witches.[\[14\]](#)

She eschews her former natural makeup for a smoky eye and darker lip, a sophisticated take on the look popularised by the Evil Queen and Maleficent, and her form-hugging dress aligns her with the sartorial choices of Ursula and Yzma. To further complicate the reading of Elsa's character, she begins the number clad in the black and purple colour scheme of evil but her new choice of shimmering blue dress is reminiscent of Cinderella's ballgown and Ariel's penultimate attire as she emerges from the ocean. And so, Elsa becomes a site of contradiction, displaying a youthful beauty associated with goodness while layering a constructed image of glamour on top, gesturing towards the subversive symbolism of the witches who came before her.

Bell notes that Disney villainesses "harbor depths of power that are ultimately unknowable but bespeak a cultural trepidation for unchecked femininity".^[15] Though Elsa does not display the monstrous femininity of the evil witches, she still embodies a feminine excess formerly linked to wickedness. While she maintains the chaste demeanour expected of a Disney princess, she ends the film without establishing a heterosexual romance, keeping her aligned with the villainesses. The camp aesthetic allows for "subversive readings of dominant texts", something the contradictory nature of Elsa seems to inspire, as academics and fans alike have ascribed her with queer readings.^[16]^[17] However, straying from heteronormative ideals no longer needs to be marked as dangerous and Elsa can embody the notions of camp without meeting a destructive end like other magical women. The modern Disney witch need not be evil, but camp remains a vital element of her construction.

Notes

[1] This article examines depictions of magical women who are main characters in Disney animated features. As such, it does not consider secondary characters (like Mad Madam Mim (*The Sword and the Stone*, 1963) or Mama Odie (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009)), live-action (or hybrid) characters (like Eglantine Price (*Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, 1971), the Sanderson sisters (*Hocus Pocus*, 1993) or Queen Narissa (*Enchanted*, 2007)) or Pixar characters (like the witch in *Brave* (2012)).

[2] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966/1999), 53.

[3] Amy Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 19.

[4] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 76.

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- [5] Lorena Russell, 'Queering Consumption and the Production of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*,' in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 214.
- [6] Tomasz Fisiak, 'Hag Horror Heroines: Kitsch/Camp Goddesses, Tyrannical Females, Queer Icons,' in *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture*, ed. Justyna Stepień (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 46.
- [7] Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 107.
- [8] Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and The MGM Musical* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.
- [9] Elizabeth Bell, "Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 108.
- [10] Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 125.
- [11] Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 1.
- [12] Kerry M. Mallan, "Witches, Bitches and Femmes Fatales: Viewing the Female Grotesque in Children's Film," *Papers: explorations into children's literature*, 10, no. 1 (2000): 33-34.
- [13] Nicole Pasulka and Brian Ferree, "Unearthing the Sea Witch," *Hazlitt Longreads*, accessed 8 November 2019, <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/unearthing-sea-witch>.
- [14] Sarah Whitfield, "'For the First Time in Forever': Locating *Frozen* as a Feminist Disney Musical," in *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to 'Frozen'*, ed. George Rodosthenous (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 229.
- [15] Bell, "Somatexts at the Disney Shop", 121.
- [16] Richard Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 81.
- [17] For more on queer readings of Elsa, see Whitfield, "For the First Time in Forever"; Moon Charania and Cory Albertson, "Single, White, Female: Feminist Trauma and Queer Melancholy in the New Disney," in

Youth Sexualities: Public Feelings and Contemporary Cultural Politics, ed. Susan Talburt, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2018), 129-151; Megan McCluskey, "The Internet Is Rooting for the *Frozen* Sequel to Give Elsa a Girlfriend," *Time*, accessed 8 November 2019, <https://time.com/5181160/frozen-2-elsa-girlfriend-reactions/>.

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Lisa Duffy is a PhD researcher at Queen Mary, University of London whose dissertation focuses on gender and sexuality in the fantasy spaces of classical Hollywood musicals. Her current research interests include screen musicals, dance in film (particularly dream ballets), comedy in film and television, and Disney. She has a forthcoming chapter on mental health in the musical TV programme *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* in *Quieting the Madness: Honest Portrayals of Mental Health and Neurodiversity in Entertainment Media*, due out in 2020.