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**From Hags to Heroines: The Evolution of Female Heroines
from *Frozen* and *Maleficent***

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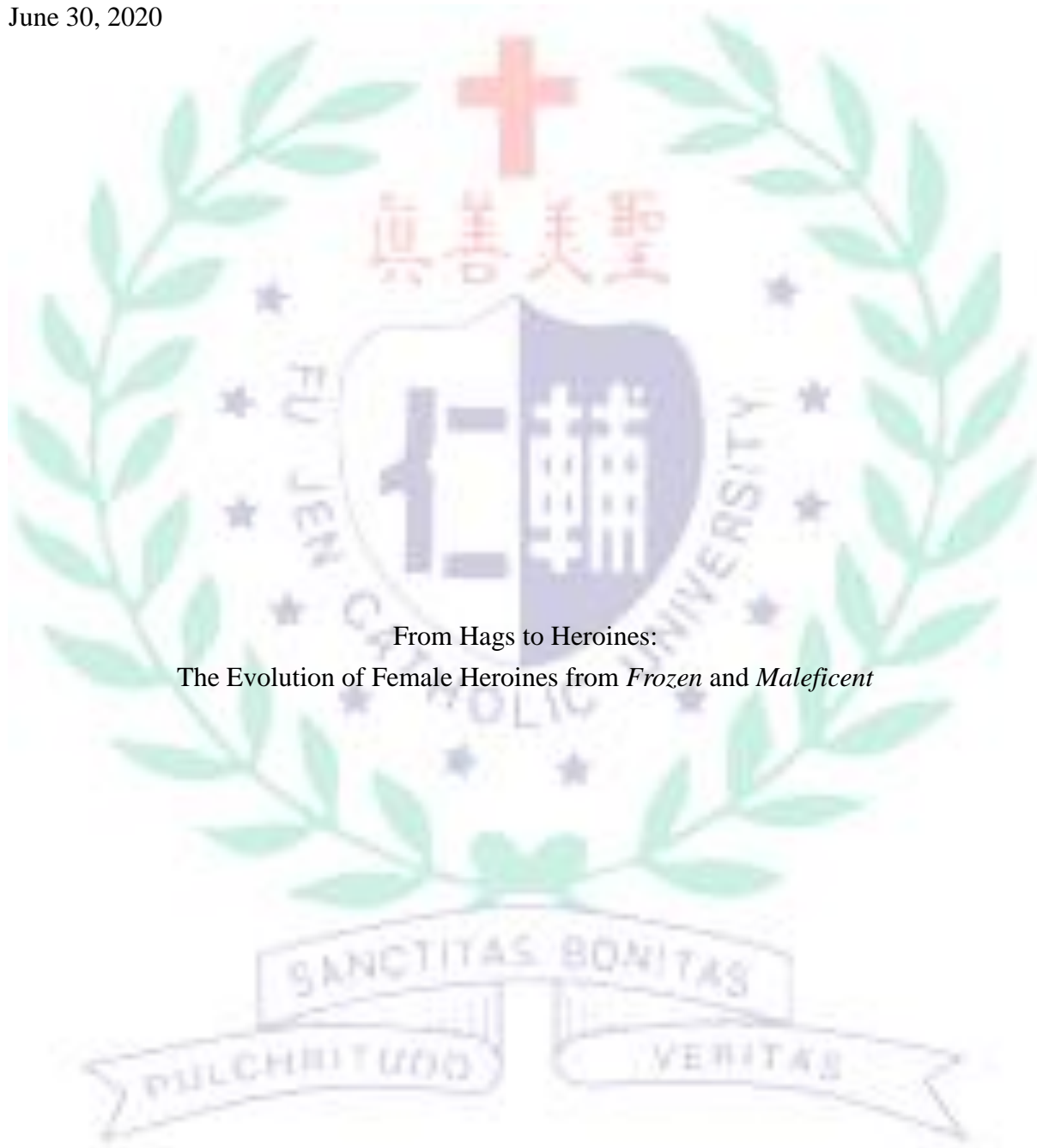
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Composition and Conversation III

Research Paper

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From Hags to Heroines:
The Evolution of Female Heroines from *Frozen* and *Maleficent*

Outline

I. Introduction with thesis statement: Disney productions are no longer a single point of view from vulnerable princesses but various prospective of female protagonists that from former hags to heroines, *Frozen* and *Maleficent* is subverting and reconstructing female images through the vivid depictions of human nature and social realities.

II. Literature Review

- A. Aging and gender
- B. Feminist ideas

III. Body

- A. Previous lives of Elsa and Maleficent
 - 1. The evil fairy
 - 2. The snow queen
- B. Female villains in Disney
- C. Maleficent in *Maleficent*
- D. Elsa in *Frozen*
- E. Feminist evolution in *Frozen* and *Maleficent*

IV. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Once upon a time, a boy named Kai and a girl named Gerda are best friends. Living as neighbors, they accompanied each other until a sharp of evil glass blows into Kai's eye, which makes him see only the evil of the world. Kai becomes very upset, so he sets out of town with his sled. Then, the evil Snow Queen lures Kai on his way to her castle in Lapland, in order to find all pieces of the evil glass. No one has ever seen Kai from that day on. Gerda is heartbroken, but with belief that Kai is still alive, she goes on a journey to find her best friend. When Gerda finally found Kai, who cannot even recognize her anymore, she calls his name, and bursts into tears, which the warm tears thaws his frozen heart. The evil glass has been washed away from Kai's eye with his tears of joy, and he can see the good in the world once again. Together, they leave the frozen palace, and back to where they belong.

Films have been thought of as a mirror of the society and culture. From the portrayal of characters, films reflect how different periods affect social construction and expectations. In fact, certain characters are easily fixed and stereotyped, in order to meet the expectations of the audience, and to portray the social and cultural identity of specific group of people. The portrayal of characters, with the help of the establishment of the plot, films present social realities to a certain degree, in which Walt Disney Animation Studio plays an important role.

For a long time, Disney animated films have been highly praised for entertaining people of different ages. However, these animated films have conveyed more than just happy ever after, which can be traced back to the 19th century fairy tales. Based on classic fairy tales from Grimm, Anderson, and even Perrault, Disney continues the basic idea and concept of western fairy tales, while creating the distinctive princess images for their own. The story above is the well-known fairy tale "The Snow Queen" published in 1844 by Christian Anderson. It was then adapted by Disney into the sensational movie *Frozen* in 2013, though many may consider it to be the first. Unlike early Disney films that proceed with the idea of heterosexual romance and social expectations of females, *Frozen* focus on the sisterly love,

and the struggle of self-identity. Similarly, the recreation of *Sleeping Beauty* as *Maleficent* in 2014, shifts the focus away from Princess Aurora, to the background and struggle of Maleficent. Because “the popularity of feminist movements, Disney princess films are developing gradually from a single narrative paradigm to the subversion of the original type, interpreted as the continuous marginalization of the male role as the articulation for female social status” (Chen 128). Disney productions are no longer a single point of view from vulnerable princesses but various prospective of female protagonists that from former hags to heroines, *Frozen* and *Maleficent* is subverting and reconstructing female images through the vivid depictions of human nature and social realities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Aging and Gender

Aging are often times associated with negative emotions and stereotypical images. “[T]he concept of aging should be part and parcel of the analysis of art, and literature in general, for to ignore this aspect of a character’s life experience is to ignore a fundamental part of human nature” (Elnahla 115). That is, the discriminated and stereotypical images of the elderly have profound effects of people’s attitude toward this certain group of people, which can be found in the mass social media. Despite the distaste for aging, it is when discrepant depictions of age on different gender that makes it problematic. At first, “ageism” is a term trying to explain man’s fear of death, Nada Ramadan Elnahla argues that age cast more shadow on women than men because of the female expectations of attractiveness. In “Gender Politics in the Projection of ‘Disney’ Villains,” Tania Sharmin, and Sanyat Satter claim female villains have been eliminated with traditional standards of femininity and beauty, while being “masculinized.” Although male villains in Disney might also be feminized, they do not seem to look unattractive, comparing to female villains. “[F]emale villainesses . . . exhibited many of the negative stereotypes of aging,” (Elnahla 116) which Sharmin and Sattar claim that by defeminize, trivialize, and masculinize, Disney gradually differentiates

villains with the beloved princesses.

2.2. Feminist Ideas

“The main point of feminism is to oppose the patriarchy in the traditional ideology, abandon the western male-centrism, reject the monopoly of speech right of men, and rebuilt the female discourse system to achieve the deconstruction of the culture centered on patriarchal system from the standpoint, expression and experience of women” (qtd. in Chen 128). In other words, the central idea of feminism is to reexamine the assumptions and discriminations of the society, and to reconstruct through exploring social equality and individual identity. Though generally referred to as feminism, the main focus of feminism at different periods might be influenced by social movements and situations. Chen mentioned the latest branch, ecofeminism that claims the natural identity of women, while striking a balance with man and nature. This is especially the case when taking a closer look to the evolution of Disney princesses, which can be divided into three stages. Stage one, under the influence of patriarchy, princesses in this stage appeared to be “beautiful and vulnerable, waiting for redemption” by the prince charming; stage two, the “adventurous, and courageous” princesses, showing their ability to be independent; stage three, princesses are not the only source as main characters, but “independent and dedicated” protagonists in search of self-identities (Chen 129). Similarly, how Maegan M. Davis categorize Disney princess animations in “From Snow to Ice: A Study of the Progression of Disney Princesses from 1937-2014,” correspond to Chen’s viewpoint. However, unlike Davis agree there are acts of feminism in both *Maleficent* and *Frozen*, Chen argues that *Frozen* is still under the inspection of man.

3. Previous lives of Maleficent and Elsa

3.1. The Evil Fairy

As mentioned above, Disney princess series can be referred to some of the classic fairy tales, which the evil fairy in Brothers Grimm's "Rose Bud," or translated as "Little Briar Rose," has been considered to be the prototype of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. However, earlier than Grimm, Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods" should also be taken into consideration, though only the appearance and actions of the evil fairy would be discussed since the theme exceeded with implications of women's sexual desire.

In both versions, the depictions of the princess as beautiful, good tempered, and grace, helps to construct the atmosphere that breaking it would be inaccurate and evil. That is, instead of portraying the evil characters directly, classic fairy tales present the female expectations to its extreme in order to differentiate the princesses from others. Although the evil fairy is characterized with magic powers that can be associated with evil back then, there is only little description of the evil fairy, which is why Perrault's story matters. In "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods," an "aged fairy" showed up, and gave a sleeping curse to the princess (Perrault 4). Though still lack descriptions of the character, Perrault's evil fairy agree with the concept of aging that might be one of the reasons that influenced how Disney portrays its villains.

In addition, the actions of the evil fairy in both stories seem in lack of purpose. The only reason that the evil fairy decided to cast a curse on the princess is because she was not invited to the birthday party, which according to Sharmin and Satter, "female characters are portrayed to "turn into" villains for very trivial matters" (55). "Not invited" does not seem to be the main reason of the curse, but there are no further explanations of the background or mental descriptions of the evil fairy. The evil fairy disappeared all in a sudden after casting the curse, once again suggesting evil characters were created to magnify the expected female traits on beloved princesses.

3.2. The Snow Queen

Disney adapted Grimm's and Perrault's fairy tales into animation films in the early 20th century, but not until 2013 did *Frozen* appeared. "All fairy tales are intended for adults, which do not meet the psychological needs of children, but serve as the psychological metaphor of the adult society" (qtd. in Chen 128). This is especially on Anderson's case since the portrayals of characters are slightly different from classic fairy tales that leads to the late adaptation of Disney. As mentioned in the introduction, many have thought Walt Disney animation takes full credit in *Frozen*. The impression of early Disney films adapted from classic fairy tales makes the audience believe that Disney only produce fixed stories with once upon a time, and happy ever after. Thus, the change of the character, theme, and specifically the plot, surprised the audience, and led to a hit. However, Anderson's portrayal of the Snow Queen is a lot more surprising.

Anderson's "The Snow Queen" contains various characteristics that implied human nature and reality, referring back to the point that fairy tales somehow reflects the society. Unlike the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty* that appeared to be unattractive, the Snow Queen is "fair and beautiful, but made of ice – shining and glittering ice," (Anderson 55) despite of being evil. However, the characteristic of having magical power still serves as one of the elements of a classic female villain. Also, the purpose of the Snow Queen's acts reflects the tradition female villain about trivial matters, which no significant purpose was stated in the entire story. At the end, the Snow Queen also vanished without a reason, leaving the audience no clues to trace; yet, the implied content of Anderson's "The Snow Queen" is more alike to what would be appreciated today.

4. Female Villains in Disney

Therefore, not surprised, the implication of the society in fairy tales are continued being used and adapted into Walt Disney animation films. However, Walt Disney adds in even more social and cultural expectations on princesses, depictions on evil characters, and makes a

distinction of the image between good and evil. Early fairy tales mostly focus on the plot instead of the characters, but Disney named their characters, including villains. One of the famous examples is Maleficent, which did not exist before in any stories. However, the names of these villains do not seem to construct their personalities. For instance, Queen Grimhilde in *Snow White* is more often being recognized as “the evil queen,” “the wicked queen,” or just “the queen.” Disney even mentioned other names in its TV series, like “Queen Chrystal,” “Elsbeth,” and “Lady Vain,” which “Disney strips her of the remnants of her humanity, leaving the audience with the adjectives ‘evil,’ ‘wicked,’ and ‘old,’ hence, indirectly equating wickedness with ageism” (Elnahla 116). As mentioned above, to centralize the attractiveness of the princesses, villains would be portrayed totally the opposite. In fact, the uncertainty of the names helps to dehumanize these villains, comparing to the normal princesses. Early Disney movies like Queen Grimhilde in *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, all followed the same rule. Especially from their appearance, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora were dressed with light and pastel colors, while villains were dressed in dark colors. Moreover, the young, fair, beautiful appearances are in contrast of older, “extremely slimmer and much less curvaceous body” (Elnahla 120).

Also, “[a]ccording to the survey conducted by Debra Bradly, it is found that as for the female villains, the top motive is jealousy/vanity (28%) and inherent evil (27%)” (Sharmin and Sattar 55). Queen Grimhilde turned evil because of the jealousy of Snow’s White’s beauty, while the reason that Lady Termaine mistreated Cinderella is unclear. In other words, the “triviality in action” from the classic fairy tales has continued to be seen in Disney Films.

However, Disney did made some changes in order to deepen the idea of good and evil for in early Disney movies, villains would eventually face death or being punished. This act deepens the stereotypes among the aging female villains, implying good will defeat evil, and evil would fail without a doubt.

5. **Maleficent in *Maleficent***

The comparison of the appearance of the early Maleficent with the recent one can be differentiated clearly. Like what has mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the early Maleficent is characterizes with magical powers, mysterious, and dark. Though still wearing in the iconic color black to be recognizable, the recreation of Maleficent in 2014, starring by Angelina Jolie, challenges the traditional concept of aging and villainy since Jolie has long been considered to be the icon of sex, beauty and attractiveness. The characteristic and personalities that used to be separated are now rebuilt, which Elnahla said that “Disney finally annihilates the relation between women and evil, old age, and ugliness” (121).

In *Maleficent*, it specifically focuses on the motivation of Maleficent’s act. That is, the betrayal of King Stefan is what triggers Maleficent in casting the curse on Aurora, breaking the traditional villainy to be trivial in actions. The curse continues, but Maleficent started to care about Aurora, even trying to break the curse in order to save her. Like *Frozen*, Maleficent goes through mental struggles of her acts, performing human nature with real struggle, which in reality, people measure their acts through careful deliberations, instead of being blind by hatred directly.

Thought of as an irony of the prince charming, Aurora did not wake up with the kiss of Prince Philip, but the true love’s kiss from Maleficent. The development of mother-daughter relationship between Maleficent and Princess Aurora, creates the plot based on motherly love. Like what has done in *Frozen*, Maleficent deconstruct the heterosexual love to mother’s love, and the stereotypes of the aging, evil women, while adding detailed background and clear purpose on the protagonist.

6. **Elsa in *Frozen***

The most significant change of Disney production would be the interpretation of the new protagonist, Elsa. As a princess, Elsa possesses magical power that has long been viewed as a representative of evil. However, after her parents died from a shipwreck, she became the

queen of Arendelle at age 21. As discussed upon, the traditional villains are often characterized with aged looks. The complicated characteristics and appearance would also break the traditional values of the society, so it is not surprising that Disney did not adapt Anderson's "The Snow Queen" until now. Like the depictions in Anderson's story, Elsa showed up young, beautiful, and graceful, with realistic personal traits as a heroine.

The trigger point of Elsa's act is her fear of her own powers, especially after Elsa injured her sister, Anna accidentally. Elsa locked herself away as a reaction of self-repression and self-denial, which her power remains unknown. However, the emotion stress causes Elsa to reveal her powers, so she ran away and built an ice castle in the mountains, hoping to live away from others. Although this outbreak causes eternal winter in Arendelle, Elsa started to acknowledge her magical powers, while seeking self-identity. "Let It Go," thus, informs the audience of the evil and the despair that Elsa has the potential to fall into, while keeping her a completely sympathetic character. "Elsa's mental struggle becomes her purpose, in order to fulfill and construct her identity" (Elnahla 124).

Though the psychological struggle of Elsa is what triggers her behaviors, the plot goes around the concept of "an act of true love." When Elsa accidentally freezes Anna's heart, Kristoff raced back to the palace, expecting the love from Prince Hans could save Anna. However, Anna freezes solid after the betrayal of Prince Hans, while trying to save Elsa from being killed by him. In the end, it was Elsa's love for Anna that saved Anna. The reconstructing of the plot from heterosexual love to sisterly love, and deconstructing gender stereotypes on characters, is the reason that makes this movie unique and creative from the original text.

7. Feminist Evolution in *Frozen* and *Maleficent*

In *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, "the line between villain and hero has blurred" (Elnahla 121). Although in *Frozen*, it was not clearly stated, Elsa's mental struggles perform human realities that the dark side and the bright side exist simultaneously. Likewise, *Maleficent* as an

antagonist in the position of the protagonist, detailed elaborated her background to reflect the complex human nature. By showing the bright and the dark side, there is no right and wrong, but only different choices.

As former villains that turned into protagonists, Elsa and Maleficent are categorized as the third stage (recent) feminism. They no longer need the salvation from any others (especially male characters), and they are able to accomplish their pursuit independently, while clear in mind of their self-identity and status. In fact, the protagonists do not necessarily have to be a princess that exist in fantasies, but can be an antagonist like Maleficent. Different appearance of protagonist like *Brave* and *Moana* also counted as the third wave of feminism, which helps to construct individual social identities. For instance, Princess Anna in *Frozen* is the comparison to Elsa, who has characteristics like beautiful, innocent, and optimistic. Likely, Princess Aurora, compared to Maleficent, possesses traditional figures as beautiful, gentle, and innocent. They both illustrated that traditional female figures should also be embraced and acknowledge. However, Anna and Aurora are still different from traditional Disney princesses.

Because of her love for Elsa, Anna stood out against the giant snow monster, trying to comfort Elsa from fear in order to save Arendelle from eternal winter; likely, after realizing her father, Stefan, betrayed Maleficent, Aurora eventually found Maleficent's wings, released them, and helped Maleficent to defeat King Stefan. Princess Anna and Aurora fit into the category as third stage feminism, which they are not only portrayed with traditional traits, but with characteristics like brave and courageous that would be categorized as hero figures back then. In addition, the marginalized of male characters in Disney also helped to construct the feminist acts. "The men only play small roles, really having nothing to do with the fate of Anna and Elsa" (Davis 50). Also, Chen stated that the "heroic image" of King Stefan "is completely deconstructed and reconstructed, which subverts the perfect image in the prototype of the fairy tale" (130). The betrayal of King Stefan and Prince Hans as minor

characters (or antagonist) implied the change from former patriarchy that women were under the influence of men power to a new era that men and women are in an equivalent status.

Although in “The Subversion of Identity from Princesses to Queens – A Cultural Study on Feminism in *Maleficent*,” Chen argues that Elsa in *Frozen* “is not a complete awakening, but a self-imposed exile from male domination based on an isolated castle from human nature” (130). However, it is not the discrimination of the residents, duke of Weselton, nor Prince Hans that cast Elsa out of Arendelle, but he fear of the power that she may not be able to control that lead her to the self-exile to the mountain. In fact, the male characters in recent Disney films serves more like sarcasm of the traditional patriarchy society. Especially, in *Frozen*, Elsa stated that “you cannot marry a man you just met,” mocking on the concept of “prince charming.”

8. Conclusion

From the two characters in *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, we see how female personalities, characteristics, or traits are portrayed, different from the original texts. The different periods of feminism helps to deconstruct and reconstruct the expectations among females, reflecting the change in the society that shows the realistic values of human nature. Recently in *Frozen II*, it is clear that Walt Disney is certainly making adjustments. Elsa gave up her crown to Anna in order to pursue her true identity as the magical spirit. However, Anna with the traditional characteristics, became the queen of Arendelle, overthrowing the patriarchy that women are under the control of men. There is no prince ready for their kiss, no princess ready to be saved. It was Anna, who saved Elsa from the ice, and a normal guy, Kristoff, who wanted to marry Anna all because of love. “No longer are we only making these stories about who is the fairest one of all; instead they are about understanding female relationships[, and] it seems like these revisions will keep progressing and developing” (Olenick).

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