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„So, you see, the story is not quite as you were told – Gender ideology in the character construction of female Disney antagonists with focus on *Maleficent*"

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Browsing through my parents' home-video collection, one will come across a video from 1997, which shows me at the gates of Disneyland Paris, jumping vividly at the prospect of entering the 'happiest place on earth'. I was wearing a princess dress from one of the Disney boutiques and I could not wait to meet my childhood idols: the Disney Princesses. It is perhaps needless to say that these characters have always held a certain charm over me since my childhood.

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1 Introduction

"Sword of Truth, fly swift and sure. Let evil die and good endure!"(Sleeping Beauty, 1959)

One of the key ideas promoted by the films of the Walt Disney Studios is that ultimately, good will inevitably conquer evil. The narratives leave little room for interpretation or ambiguity: In the end, the audience can be sure that "[g]ood is rewarded, evil is punished" (Wasko 129). This narrative pattern sets up a binary contrast between the hero or heroine, who functions as a role model for viewers to strive after in order to reach their happy ending, and the antagonist on the other end of the morality spectrum, who is bound to be defeated and surely meets their unfortunate fate, thereby teaching viewers about the social consequences of unacceptable behaviour (Davis *Girls* 18). This plot formula has proven to be a goldmine for Disney: With an estimated net worth of about 122.18 billion U.S. dollars (*Fiscal Annual Financial Report* 33) and a viewership of more than 100 million subscribers on the company's streaming service Disney Plus alone (Stoll n.p.), Disney has made itself a household name for family entertainment. In addition to financial success, however, these numbers also point to Disney's influence on Western society. Since the 1930s, the Disney film canon has become cultural currency. Children are almost expected to be familiar with the company's most renowned feature-films, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Frozen* (2013) (Carson 233) and many adults even consider it their social duty to introduce younger generations to these texts (Wasko 1). Thus, it is not surprising that Disney remains one of the most prominent sources for media targeted at young audiences to this day and that the cultural messages transmitted in their films such as the superiority of good over evil constitute key principles in Western cultural discourse (Wills 5). Conversely, however, it may also be argued that Disney is in a social position to utilise their corporal power to educate young audiences along the guidelines of their corporal identity in an almost monopolistic position (Giroux 20). Importantly, Disney not only teaches audiences that it pays off to show moral behaviour in order for good to triumph over evil; their media also demonstrate very specifically what it means to be 'good' or 'evil' through their characters' performances (Bowman 82). Hence, it is necessary to understand Disney as an instrument for reinforcing social norms and for passing them on to its viewers (Byrne & McQuillan 58).

Despite the company's undisputed influence, Disney's output was not subjected to close scrutiny, both in academic and public discourse, for a long time. Starting in the early 1930s, the Walt Disney Studios have produced stories, characters and songs "not only popular but

beloved" (Wasko 1) by their audience and Disney remains a vital part of growing up for many generations by evoking happy feelings of nostalgia. In addition to considerable commercial success for the company, this status has also led to the development of Disney's reputation as a source for harmless, 'safe' media content for children and adolescents and consequently, further investigation into the cultural meanings communicated through the company's output was long considered unnecessary (Bell, Haas & Sells 4, Bryce & McQuillan 59). While it is an open secret today that nothing about Disney's corporal identity and animation is accidental or coincidental, many were reluctant at first to provide criticism of the company's films (McLeod 4), not to mention in academic discourse, where research on Disney was long derided as simple entertainment "only for children" (Bell, Haas & Sells 2). In fact, Disney's enormous commercial success was even seen as evidence for its cultural insignificance (Mollet *Smile* 110). The company itself contributes to the myth of innocence and purity, not only with explicit advertisement labels such as "pure Disney imagination" (Bell, Haas & Sells 2), but also through regulating their brand identity carefully with trademarking and retaining critical content (Davis *Heroes* 10, Pallant xi). Yet, as noted by Giroux, "recognition of the pleasure that Disney provides should not blind us to the realization that Disney is about more than entertainment". Instead, he emphasises that "[m]edia conglomerates such as Disney are not merely producing harmless entertainment […]; nor are they removed from the realm of power, politics, and ideology" (4).

Similar to Giroux, numerous scholars have noted critically that Disney media are to be taken seriously for they convey a number of cultural meanings to audiences (Bell, Haas & Sells 4, Wasko 138). One of the earliest examples for academic research into Disney was Richard Schickel's *The Disney Version* (1968), a critical autobiography of Walt Disney which, however, still widely advocated the opinion that Disney's productions could be passed off as harmless entertainment (Kunzle 11). Starting from the 1990s, however, the body of academic work examining Disney feature films from a critical perspective has grown considerably, with more and more renowned scholars forming the academic field of Disney studies and raising awareness for the cultural messages encoded in the company's output, including Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells with *From Mouse to Mermaid* (1995), *The Mouse that Roared* (1999) by Henry Giroux, Amy M. Davis' *Good Girls and Wicked Witches* (2006) as well as Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney* (2020). Although these authors and their colleagues approached Disney content critically from different viewpoints, for example feminist, postcolonial and psychoanalytical perspectives, they agree that a critical investigation of

Disney's cultural impact is imperative and intend to raise awareness for its potential influence on their viewers (Byrne & McQuillain 1).

For determining which cultural messages are transmitted to audiences, it is necessary to analyse which themes and beliefs are presented as potentially desirable or moral in the Disney feature films. The company's content is arguably charged with a set of cultural meanings, which reflect Disney's value system (Wasko 127). While there has been critical examination of Disney's values from different angles in scholarship, gender has emerged as one of the most prominent topics in Disney film studies and a considerable body of literature has been accumulated to this point, which examined the company's value system regarding gender and sexuality (Davis *Girls* 16, Giroux 100). One of the key insights put forward was that Disney promotes a narrow and traditional perspective on gendered performance, especially for female characters (Davis *Heroes* 12), and presents conservative values such as the nuclear family and heterosexual romance as goals for happiness and signals for morality (Wasko 127, Davis *Girls* 126). Partly, these beliefs can be traced back to Walt Disney himself; however, the company's content would not have reached its present level of success had it not managed to cater to viewers' preferences and adapt to contemporary audiences (Wills 4). With this corporal power, the term 'Disney' extends beyond a person, a brand, or an entertainment empire; instead, it denotes an ideology, which teaches its audience important 'truths' about life and how to reach one's happily-ever-after according to the Disney way of life (Bell, Haas & Sells 2).

After the extensive analysis of Disney heroes and heroines, scholarship has recently turned to the representation of another central group of characters: the villains (Grizzard 481, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 2). Understanding the narrative significance and the practice of character construction in the antagonist is critical when analysing Disney since, especially in early productions, the villain drives the plot considerably (Davis *Girls* 107). In this endeavour, previous research examining the portrayal of antagonistic characters has illustrated how villains are mostly characterised through their non-conformity to traditionally binary notions of masculinity and femininity (LiVollmer and LaPointe 92, Putnam 148). This MEd thesis will take up this argument and extend it by investigating the intensity of the gender-bias in the portrayal of female Disney villains with an analysis of one of the most notorious antagonists in Disney history: *Maleficent* (*Sleeping Beauty* 1959 and *Maleficent* 2014). While Maleficent constitutes only a supporting character in the animated film, portraying pure evil, therefore allowing for a clear juxtaposition with the protagonist *Aurora*, she is awarded the role of the main character in the live-action remake. The audience learns about her painful backstory and

the reasons for her behaviour. With this transformation, the viewers' understanding of the story and potential ramifications on character perception change considerably (Schlögl & Zagalo 158). Consequently, it is imperative to understand what other sociocultural modifications are involved which regulate the audience's impression of the character so significantly. The aim of this MEd thesis is to examine the extent to which character construction is affected by traditional gender roles and how it is possible to reshape the representation of the character's morality in the life-action remake, even though both films ultimately present the same storyline.

Certainly, it should be acknowledged that Disney's stories and characters have changed considerably since the production of the animated film *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, which is especially true for the depiction of female characters (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1219). For example, while early Disney princesses still embodied the archetype of the damsel in distress, who waits for her prince to save her from the wicked, middle-aged woman, today's protagonists display a much higher activity level. Similarly, also the villains have been developed into complex characters (Wasko 143). With the company's recent work, Disney claims to adopt a more feminist stance and to contribute to the empowerment of women by showing strong female lead characters. Indeed, especially their live-action remakes differ significantly from the original films regarding the gendered performance of their female characters (Schlögl & Zagalo 157). Consequently, Disney has been praised for adapting its long-established, partly problematic depictions of women and approaching them with a more feminist mindset (Wendranirsa 77). However, Wasko remains cautious with the assumption that Disney's more recent productions are free from gender stereotypes, simply because they put an active female character in the lead. Instead, she stresses that this development needs to be examined more thoroughly (145).

Based on Wasko's argument, this MEd thesis will examine how Maleficent's performance differs between the original film and the live-action remake. It will be attempted to determine whether the (non-)conformity to gender roles still represents an indicator for a character's role as a hero/heroine or a villain. In the media, the live-action remake was advertised as a progressive reading of the Disney classic *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), arguing that it portrays a strong female antagonist, who is in charge of her own story (e.g. Hornaday n.p.). While Maleficent's change from a supporting character to the protagonist of the film can certainly be attributed to societal changes and audiences' evolving feminist attitudes, gender-biased representations have been shown to be imperative in the construction of villains to this day (Putnam 148). Therefore, this MEd thesis will argue that Maleficent's recent portrayal is still

shaped by notions of traditional femininity and that her portrayal as the protagonist is, to some extent, only palatable for the audience through her depiction as a soft, feminine villainess.

The following MEd thesis will be organised in four chapters. Beginning with the presentation of theoretical work, which forms the basis for the following analysis, the first section discusses Disney's role as a culturally educative medium as well as ideology as a sociocultural tool which shapes society's understanding of 'appropriate' behaviour, especially with regard to gender. The subsequent chapter will examine Otherness as a psychological mechanism to mark evilness as well as the villain as an archetypal representation of an evil character in fairy tale narratology, thereby providing an understanding for the narrative function of the antagonist. Furthermore, this section will encompass a discussion of previous literature on the so-called "quillains" (i.e. queer-coded villains, McLeod 1) and the gender bias in the representation of antagonistic characters in media for children. The final two chapters constitute the analyses of the two texts. After a contextualisation of the films' production, which is necessary to gain a deeper understanding for the meanings communicated (Davis *Girls* 116), both the character Maleficent and the christening scene will be analysed in more detail. Finally, overarching ideological themes of gender-biased performance and Otherness presented by Disney through Maleficent's performance are to be identified.

Primarily, this paper attempts to provide support for the argument that compliance to traditional gender roles and heteronormative love are still considered an ideal in Disney animation despite the company's self-appointed image of inclusivity and diversity. Thus, this MEd thesis attempts to further the work on the gender bias in the portrayal of Disney characters. Furthermore, Disney studies are still sometimes belittled and deemed irrelevant in academic circles (Byrne & McQuillan 59). McLeod acknowledges this issue and invites other researchers to join the academic discourse in Disney studies in order to counteract this attitude: "The more scholars begin to speak out about these texts, whether in a positive or negative critical light, the more the idea that the study of Disney lacks legitimacy and academic rigour will be dismantled" (4). This MEd thesis follows McLeod's call and attempts to contribute to the normalisation of analysing Disney texts in an academic context.

2 Understanding the Ideology behind the Magic of Disney

Since his company's first major commercial successes in the 1930s, Walt Disney's reputation has been embellished with numerous positive attributions, among them the label of the venturesome entrepreneur, the clever strategist, and the fearless innovator. First and foremost, however, the public persona of Walt Disney is still seen as the benevolent storyteller, who wishes to entertain young audiences and to teach them important lessons about life (Wasko 10). The first chapter of this MEd thesis will explore the question how Disney achieves to exert such significant influence on audience's cultural knowledge through the seemingly well-intentioned lessons provided by their films (Wills 5). After considering the individual's perspective, it will be investigated how messages about gender presented by Disney media are negotiated culturally and perpetuated socially in the form of gender ideology.

2.1. Animated Film as Societal Edutainment

The cultural impact of animated film, a genre primarily targeted at very young audiences, was long dismissed in an academic context for it was argued that these films only appealed to society's wish for simple escapism anyway, hence not requiring further investigation (Bell, Haas & Sells 2, McLeod 4). Certainly, one of Disney's key elements for success is that their films are amusing for their audience and that viewers enjoy watching them. Therefore, for generations of audiences, Disney first and foremost represents a source of genuine entertainment and an opportunity for escapism. However, specifying what makes Disney's output so enjoyable for its spectators apart from pure diversion and beloved characters, Davis stresses that for a film to be commercially successful, the themes and the characters must seem relevant for its viewers and be orientated to contemporary social norms (*Girls* 16). One of Disney's key strengths is that their corporate identity and their films' social messages align neatly with the cultural values idealised by American and European mainstream audiences (Wills 31). Thus, one reason why Disney is so popular is that the films are adapted to what their audience wants to see and that they stimulate identification processes among viewers with the plot, the themes and, crucially, the characters (Davis *Girls* 17). Even though modern Disney films differ considerably from their animated classics, largely no longer conforming with the lifestyle of contemporary audiences and potentially appearing outdated, the Disney film canon remains highly popular decades after the texts' first release and the ideas presented in the films still seem to resonate with their audience (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 35, Buckingham 286). Hence, there seems to be a special charm about these films which lets

audiences forget that they were produced very strategically in order to appeal to audiences (Zipes *Enchanted* 17).

However, Disney's feature films do not provide mere amusement: They also constitute a key tool for social instruction (Giroux 84), thus functioning as "cultural influencers" (Rutherford & Baker n.p.). Research has long acknowledged the role of multimedia content for the generation of factual knowledge in addition to traditional sites of learning (Liu & Elms 3). Increasingly, however, scholars also emphasise the role of animated film as a tool for the cultivation of knowledge and the negotiation of social norms:

> *Animated films, like any other cultural artifact, teach us 'valuable' lessons. […] In a basic sense, the narratives embedded within these recent stories provide children (their primary target audience) and even adults with audio-visual reinforcements of ideologies concerning gender roles, the importance of conquering one's fears, the rewards of hard work, or the benefits of team effort, making these stories powerful agents of socialization* (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 34).

Hence, animated film entails more than classic entertainment. Mass media such as films, television and other cultural texts "represent to individuals certain learned conceptions of how the world functions. People learn how to relate to others (and even more importantly to themselves) by identifying with characters or narratives presented in popular culture" (Griffin xix). With repeated consumption of such messages, audiences will eventually integrate these ideas into their socio-cultural knowledge (Bowman 81, Carson 238). Having argued the powerful role of animated film for cultural negotiation, Disney's status as one of the most successful producer for children's media has particular significance: Due to their wide availability and their popularity in Western society, the company maintains "a powerful hegemonic hold over children's literature, family entertainment, mainstream taste, and Western popular culture" (Byrne & McQuillan 2), thus making it a key player in the production and negotiation of dominant social norms and values in an almost monopolistic position (Wills 5).

Certainly, the process of teaching important lessons of life through entertainment was not introduced with animated film, let alone by Disney. In fact, Disney's early corporate identity was influenced significantly by the fairy tale, which equally serves an educative function for passing on sociocultural knowledge (Brode 37, Zipes *Enchanted* 19). There are notable parallels between Disney and the fairy tale regarding established narrative patterns, tropes and, crucially, archetypal characters (Davis *Heroes* 7). Some researchers even argue that Disney represents a modern version of an American fairy tale (Mollet *Smile* 111), which has resulted in the prevalent phenomenon that Disney's adaptations are often understood as the dominant

version of the original texts with audiences sometimes even being unaware that these tales already existed long before Disney (Davis *Girls* 12, Zipes *Enchanted* 23). This has led to serious objection from fairy tale scholars, one of Disney's harshest critics being Jack Zipes, who argues that while it lies in the nature of the fairy tale to transform over time, Disney capitalises on the genre and exploits it to enwrap their corporal ideology into a delightful story (*Breaking* 22). Rather than providing a genuine retelling of the original tales, Disney stands accused for adjusting their output strategically to the values of "Disney culture" (Wills 5): Disney's powerful messages such as love conquering hate, the value of friendship and the importance of overcoming one's fears in order to succeed have been promoted with such ponderosity that they have been naturalised as universal principles in Western discourse, communicated through the company's output as well as their corporate identity beyond the films, for example in their theme parks. By extension, Disney's corporal philosophy has influenced profoundly how Western society negotiates cultural life. Living in "Disney culture" means that the 'Disney way of life' is accepted as absolute, often without consumers acknowledging that what they believe to be universal actually represents Disney's corporal ideology (Giroux 20).

Even though more recent films have been adapted to contemporary audiences' demands with state-of-the-art animation techniques and modernised characters, Disney's cultural philosophy has remained largely consistent since the company's beginnings; in fact, many of the values and qualities fostered by Disney's output today can still be traced back to Walt Disney's own conservative upbringing. Except for selected propaganda shorts produced during World War II, Disney feature films are predominantly informed by Victorian-era social values (Wasko 127). Even though the United States had cut its ties with the United Kingdom politically at the time of Queen Victoria's reign, she remained a fascinating personality for many Americans and there was heavy demand for Victorian commodities such as ceramics and textiles. In addition to material trade, however, there was also considerable cultural exchange, resulting in the US population adopting Victorian-era values as the ideal way of life until well into the 20th century (Howe 508). Primarily, this included qualities relating to entrepreneurial spirit such as responsibility and individualism, but also a prudent lifestyle, selflessness and decency were promoted. Importantly, the Victorian era also held specific expectations with regard to gender, celebrating ideas such as heterosexual love as the epitome of happiness, the importance of family life and the separation of the sexes into the public and the domestic sphere (Fera 38). Disney, himself being known an ardent patriot and conservative, adopted these ideas for his films, not only because they corresponded with his own beliefs but also because they aligned

with the beliefs of many Americans and the concept of the American Dream, the notion that self-reliance and hard work would ultimately pay off and one could achieve one's aspirations if one was willing to work hard enough, which informs American culture to this day (Mollet *American* 4). One may argue that Disney's classic characters, often royalty and from a different historical background, were not palpable for his target audience; however, by equipping them with a value system which glorified those qualities shared by many Americans at the time, the characters became more tangible for viewers because they could relate to the fictional figures through their shared belief system (Cashdan 33, Fera 44).

In order to pass on their cultural messages successfully to their audience, Disney relies on three key strategies, all of which are based on the concept of stereotyping. According to Hinton, the term stereotype refers to "overgeneralized (sic!) attributes associated with the members of a social group […] with the implication that [the trait] applies to all group members" (2). Stereotypes are only occasionally expressed overtly, especially due to consumers' reluctance to admit that stereotypes might affect their behaviour (Dyer *Stereotypes* 11). Instead, stereotyping more often operates indirectly on a subtle level (Hinton 4) in that the individual is prompted to form a subconscious bias based on the "thought patterns of the ruling culture" (Griffin xx). Disney passes on their cultural messages on a similarly subtle level: Rather than enforcing behavioural norms explicitly, the company's output presents social expectations indirectly with character construction and the films' narrative patterns, thus perpetuating their cultural messages through social interaction (Wasko 141). By continuously awarding only those characters who comply with Disney's dominant values, for example through their adherence to traditional gender role portrayal, with a happy ending, the audience forms a subconscious bias for the concept of 'good'. In contrast, characters who do not follow established norms are isolated from society, punished and potentially even destroyed, thereby shaping viewers' conceptualisations of those values which have no place in society (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 11). By embedding complex social ideas into a story with lovable characters and catchy songs, Disney obscures the ideological messages in their texts and camouflages the fact that their films instruct viewers accordingly (Bell, Haas & Sells 3).

As a second strategy, Disney's presentation of cultural messages relates to Dyer's understanding of stereotypes as an indicator for a society's shared values and beliefs (*Stereotypes* 14). Considering the full Disney film canon, it is striking that the films largely promote similar social values as desirable, which leads to the illusion that 'good' and 'evil' constitute straightforward categories, which are always discernible in the same way, not only

in the magical realm of Disney but in general. Zipes summarises this sentiment as: "What is good for Disney is good for the world" (*Breaking* 39). By presenting these ideas as straightforward, almost as common-sensical, Disney suggests that there is "general agreement" (Dyer *Stereotypes* 14) in society concerning certain aspects of life, thereby presenting their cultural messages as universal while they are, in fact, constructed (Giroux 69). This practice of stereotyping as general consensus and the resulting formation of a shared belief system create the impression of community between Disney and its viewers (Dyer *Stereotypes* 14): As long as one agrees with the values presented in their films, one automatically belongs to the charming Disney community. In order to keep up this close social bond, audiences are also less inclined to dismiss the cultural messages presented to them – after all, what is true for the rest of the Disney community must also be true for the individual (Cashdan 33).

Finally, Disney heavily employs simplification processes, thereby reducing complex social discourses to straightforward categories. Many ideas, often controversial in their nature (e.g. 'good' and 'evil') are typically presented as a black-and-white binary (Norden 166). This practice is central in the formation of stereotypes: Dyer emphasises that stereotypes predominantly rely on "a few immediately recognisable and defining traits" (*Stereotypes* 13), which are to make a complex character easily identifiable in their specific role. Despite appearing inherently absolute, these stereotypical depictions of characters are always limited in what they show, thus narrowing down an individual's portrayal to selected, overexaggerated features. This biased but limited representation emphasises individual details but leaves out a character's other traits, hence skewing the audience's perception (Dyer *Stereotypes* 12). This simplification process in animated film has been criticised heavily because it reduces complex individuals and plotlines to oversimplified stereotypes, thereby creating a problematic bias in representation, which suggests monocausal correlations between traits in complex individuals (Wellman 12). Though presumably well-intentioned in order to enable Disney's young audiences to grasp the essence of the stories and characters more easily (Bettelheim 9), such reduced complexity also leads to what Hastings refers to as "moral simplification" (83): A polar dualism such as 'good and evil', 'princess and villain' or simply 'us and them', which will be explored in more detail later in this MEd thesis, does not allow for subtle deviations, let alone variation or fluidity (Carnes 13). Instead, there is still "conscious effort to produce children's movies with no alarming moral ambiguities" (Hastings 84). For this reason, many scholars struggle with the idea that Disney can be equated with the traditional fairy tale: According to Zipes (*Breaking* 39), texts by authors such as Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Hans

Christian Andersen created opportunity for genuine reflection and sometimes even ended tragically, which is not compatible with Disney's practice of providing straightforward, predictable content aimed at simple delight and visual action. Notably, recent Disney films also include more surprising character arcs and plot twists, such as the unexpected villains *Hans* from *Frozen* (2013) and *Assistant Mayor Bellweather* from *Zootopia* (2016) (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 2). However, even though the scope of Disney's dichotomies seems to be broadening, the use of stock characters persists (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth Lugo 37) and the Disney formula for the happy ending remains unambiguously simple: Good conquers evil and the protagonist, who conveniently follows the traditional Disney values, finds happiness (Zipes *Tsunami* 9).

There is considerable debate among scholars to what extent children truly accept the themes presented in Disney films (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1910). Despite frequent concerns that viewers unquestioningly incorporate cultural messages into their social knowledge, a substantial amount of research argues that audiences watch films in an active way, accepting those messages which resonate with them and glossing over those which do not (Davis *Girls* 27). These findings reflect Stuart Hall's deliberations, who explains that media cannot simply impose cultural messages on audiences, but that these meanings only emerge out of the interaction and negotiation between the semiotic workings of the text and the audience's reception (353). Davis argues that such active spectatorship is certainly also at work in the consumption of Disney feature films, yet advises caution by noting that Disney's audience is still very young and, thus, may internalise messages from movies more gullibly than adults (*Girls* 27). Even though children consciously approach Disney characters with a grain of salt (Robinson et al. 522), there is considerable evidence that visual media exert great influence especially on young viewers by appealing to their imagination: With the colourful imagery, the joyful songs and the happy ending, Disney ensures that children enjoy what they see, thus capturing them fully in the film while concealing the social messages encoded in the text (Davis *Girls* 28, Martin & Kazyak 319, Zipes *Breaking* 38). Especially girls seem to engage with the 'lessons' presented in Disney texts actively and include them into their cultural knowledge of what constitutes acceptable gendered behaviour (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1921), which scholars view as a reason for concern given the "limited and static image of girlhood" fostered by Disney media (Golden & Jacoby 299). Although children can voice their observations about characters' gendered performance explicitly (Hine, Ivanovic & England 6), they also incorporate these social messages into their tacit knowledge, which comes to the surface in "bodily acts" (Adloff,

Gerund & Kaldeway 13), such as the inclusion of social scripts from Disney princess films in pretend play (England et al. 567, Golden & Jacoby 303) and higher levels of female stereotyped behaviour in young girls (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1922). As a result, there is evidence that Disney characters seem to impact young audiences' understanding of gender substantially by functioning as role models, which underscores the need to uncover these cultural messages in order to understand which ideas children are confronted with.

Nevertheless, Disney's influence on their viewers does not end with individual viewers adapting their behaviour to what they learn from these films. The company's powerful status for the production and negotiation of social norms also impacts how society understands complex cultural issues. For example, Disney texts continuously depicting female characters as passive damsels in distress not only affect the demeanour of young girls watching the films, but they also create a specific image in society how acceptable femininity should be performed (Xu 329). In the following section, it will be examined how these ideas transition from the individual to a social group and how they are negotiated culturally so that they come to be naturalised as universal 'truths', as it is done so successfully by Disney (Giroux 96).

2.2. The Concept of Ideology

In order to present a comprehensive account of this complex topic in this MEd thesis, the following section will be based on selected original works of authorities from the field of cultural studies as well as notable anthologies.

The term 'ideology' has undergone considerable change and encompasses different meanings today. In everyday life, ideology usually refers to the explicit beliefs which shape the principles and aspirations of a particular group, particularly in socio-political or economic discourse (Bailey & Gayle 29, Thompson 1, Williams 111). A second understanding of the term ideology is based on Marxist literature. In their seminal work *German ideology*, Marx and Engels refer to ideology as distorted knowledge, which intends to cover up true relations of power and the dominance of the ruling social class and presents its social order as taken for granted (Storey 3, Williams 108). The authors separate scientific knowledge, which is based on the conditions of real life, from ideology as an abstract system of beliefs, which only poses as an illusion of knowledge (Bailey & Gayle 35). According to Marx and Engels, coercive ideologies prevent individuals from understanding the true conditions of their lived experience (Tyson *Critical*

54), hence producing "false consciousness" (Hawkes 7) and only supporting the perpetuation of the social and economic advantage of the bourgeois group (64).

Although it will be argued later in this chapter that ideology indeed often serves to sustain asymmetrical relations of power, several aspects of this conceptualisation have been questioned in scholarship, two of which will be addressed here: First, Thompson notes that ideology does not simply circulate in a vacuum as a set of abstract ideas but stresses the relation between ideology, power and language (2): For him, ideology is constructed in social interaction and in the representation through spoken and written text, including film. Secondly, scholars have argued that it is no longer meaningful to restrict the operation of ideology to social classes and to speak of the one single dominant ideology which is imposed automatically on the rest of society by the ruling class. In fact, Marx and Engels themselves modified their assumptions in later works, acknowledging that a purely mechanistic construction of meaning does not represent an exhaustive explanation for the complex workings of ideology (Storey 3). Instead of a rigid framework, Longhurst advises cultural scholars to envision an intersectional system of ideology on different layers of power and marginalisation such as gender, race and social class (36). Subsequent Marxists elaborated on Marx and Engels' work, one of them being Althusser. He argues that ideology is consistently reproduced through the institutions of the "Ideological State Apparatus", for example the family, the education system, the government and, crucially, the media (Storey 78). Instead of imposing cultural meanings on others, ideology is perpetuated through interpellation and subsequent negotiation of these cultural messages between the individual and society: Institutions address, i.e. interpellate, individuals in a certain way so that they take on their allocated subject-position and conform to rules of socially acceptable behaviour in this role. Hence, ideology is not forced on individuals hierarchically but negotiated actively (Hawkes 119, Thompson 92).

Based on these deliberations, this MEd thesis assumes that ideology functions not only in a socio-political or economic context but that it has greater impact in the construction of cultural knowledge. Introduced into the English language around the close of the 18th century, the word *ideology* originally referred to a "science of ideas", a rational discipline which intended to explore the construction of knowledge (Williams 107). In this understanding, all knowledge emerges from a particular social interest. In fact, this perspective implies that even the most basic assumptions such as scientific facts include ideological components because they were constructed in social interaction at some point (Mannheim 2). Instead of thinking about ideas as being fixed to political parties or social classes, cultural meanings are rooted in interaction

between individuals through language, both verbally and non-verbally (Thompson 2). Consequently, ideology is defined as

> *a system of interdependent ideas (beliefs, traditions, principles, and myths) held by a social group of society, which reflects, rationalizes (sic!) and defends its particular social, moral, religious, political and economic institutional interests and committments. Ideologies serve as logical and philosophical justifications for a group's patterns of behaviour, as well as its attitudes, goals and general life situation*. (Theodorson & Theordorson 195 qtd. in Bailey & Gayle 26)

This definition emphasises that ideology represents a reflection of a group's entire social knowledge, ranging from complex knowledge to simple everyday beliefs about appropriate behaviour or even 'common sense' (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 118).

Two crucial implications emerging from this definition should be acknowledged at this stage: Firstly, ideology operates below the level of consciousness in the form of taken-for-granted beliefs.

> *Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies. 'It's natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women' is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief* (Tyson Critical 54).

Therefore, by disguising itself as social order or common sense, ideology is deeply embedded into daily practices and hardly ever questioned in everyday-life (Bailey & Gayle 25). In fact, Eagleton stresses that ideological credibility is most effective when it remains unseen (116). From the perspective of cultural studies, this practice is known as myth: According to Roland Barthes, the intention of myth is to naturalise what was, in fact, constructed by ideology (128). In his seminal essay *Myth Today*, he extends Saussure's semiological model by another level, which allows for the consideration of ideology: Myth incorporates both denotation, Saussure's original level of signification and literal sign, and connotation, thereby bringing in a socio-cultural layer of meaning, which underlies all semiological systems (Barthes 111). Barthes' central point is that readers consume myth, believing that what they see is a universal truth, while in fact, the relation between denotation and connotation is only naturalised through cultural negotiation (128). In a similar way, ideology is 'learned' on a covert level and hardly ever taught explicitly. Information about the organisation of society is acquired through examples and casual observations in everyday life, thus forming a framework though which the

world is perceived (Marchak 2). This practice of subconscious instruction is particularly prominent in Disney's texts: The Disney ideology is passed on and integrated into audience's cultural knowledge through implicit references and allusions such as character performance and, hence, culturally negotiated as the way how life works rather than appearing as open indoctrination (Giroux 20).

The second implication of this definition is that ideology does not merely reflect those beliefs and values which a social group has constructed for itself, but that it also reinforces these ideas as hegemonic 'truths' (Bailey & Gayle 26). Hegemony refers to the practices through which a dominant group maintains its power. This is achieved by presenting the benefit of the dominant group as the only reasonable interests and negotiating these cultural messages in society through ideological institutions such as the education system and the media (Hawkes 114). Hence, ideology serves as a crucial tool to sustain asymmetrical power relations (Thompson 4): When the same ideas are persistently rationalised as the only legitimate way of thinking or appropriate way of behaving, these ideas are subconsciously naturalised as valid (Hall 49). In Disney films, this privileged position is inhibited by the protagonists: In the pursuit of their happy ending, Disney's hegemonic 'lessons' are exclusively taught from their protagonists' perspective, thus compelling the audience to adopt this view as well. Crucially, it is only the dominant group (i.e. the heroes and heroines) who is in the position to construct the ideological framework for a population. Hence, it is also their ideological viewpoint which is consistently reinforced. On the other side, this process also leads to an ideological dynamic in which the interests of marginalised groups, often exemplified by antagonistic characters, are often neglected and passed off as insignificant, potentially even harmful for society (Bailey & Gayle 27).

2.3. Gender Expression as Ideological Practice

Already before birth, the announcement 'It's a boy!' or 'It's a girl!' constitutes the first performative expression of a person's sexual identity. Frequently, this declaration foretells a strict path: "blue versus pink, trucks versus dolls, rough and tumble versus docile and sweet" (Gansen & Martin 84). When the child becomes older, the process of gender policing continues, most visibly in social institutions such as the family and the education system (Canale & Furtado 68, Chatillon, Charles & Bradley 217, Gansen & Martin 85, Tyson Critical 103). Importantly, cultural norms of what constitutes masculinity and femininity are also influenced by the portrayal of gender in popular media with television and cinema serving as particularly powerful tools for the conceptualisation of hegemonic gender roles (De Laurentis 18, Gadzekpo

& Smith 259, Kim 156). With subtle, internalised messages about what is appropriate performance for girls/women and boys/men respectively, they function as an effective socialisation agent for reinforcing the gender binary and promoting conformity to these regulations (Patterson & Spencer 74).

The assumed existence of 'proper' demeanour and appearance for men and women highlights the ideological elements of gender, which is referred to as gender ideology (Duerst-Lahti 160). According to Bettis et al., "[g]ender ideologies are beliefs people hold that tell them how to think, act, and be a girl or boy, woman or a man" (216). The question what is 'typically' masculine or feminine has sparked interest in scholarship for a long time, resulting in a plethora of research trying to determine universally 'male' and 'female' traits and qualities (e.g. Broverman et al. 1972, Williams & Bennet 1975). One critical similarity between these early surveys was the identification of two broad dimensions for gendered performance, subsumed under the terms of communion and agency: While communal traits were typically associated with femininity (e.g. nurturing, emotional, submissive, …), agentic attributes are traditionally linked to masculinity, including features such as rationality, strength, assertiveness, leaderships and cognitive competence (Tyson *Critical* 81, Webb, Chonody & Kavanagh 1352). However, what these findings primarily illustrate is that there is a consistent and prescriptive role image for men and women, including implications about their physical abilities, qualifications and responsibilities in society (Six-Materna 122). Crucially, such beliefs have far-reaching ramifications beyond the prescription of 'appropriate' attributes for men and women. For example, beliefs about women's allegedly limited career ambitions have long been used to justify social inequalities including the gender pay-gap or women's exclusion from equal access to leadership positions (Cranny-Francis et al. 2).

Instead of perceiving these 'typically' masculine and feminine attributes as a reflection of cultural developments, beliefs about gender are linked firmly to the human body (Cranny-Francis 5, Duerst-Lahti 161). Social inequalities and the division of labour are presented as a natural outcome of "biological differences between the sexes" and justified as "part of our unchanging essence as men and women" (Tyson *Critical* 81). According to this attitude, differences between men and women should emerge naturally during one's biological development (Tyson *Critical* 81). Still, although children display gendered behaviour from an early age, for example through their choice of gender-typed toys and same-sex playmates (Gansen & Martin 84), Fausto-Sterling argues that girls and boys only voice these preferences after they have acquired an understanding for gender as a schema (ch. 9). Hence, the argument

that children seem to follow gender-compliant behaviour naturally from a young age is indicative of the power of gender socialisation rather than biological essentialism: Men and women usually perform traditional masculinity and femininity not because they are inherently inclined to do so through biology but because they are "socially programmed" (Tyson *Critical* 81) to do so.

Several theoretical frameworks provide explanations for how gender ideologies are acquired, one of the most notable being gender schema theory (Bem 603). This approach argues that in early socialisation, boys and girls unconsciously imitate caregivers and other close attachment figures in their personal life and on the media (e.g. in Disney films), thereby forming basic conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity (Bettis et al. 216, Hine, Ivanovic & England 3). Individuals then use these observations as a basis to infer general tendencies about acceptable gender performance (Gansen & Martin 84). Crucially, the acquisition of this knowledge is influenced by a "correspondence bias […]: When individuals commonly observe women performing nurturing activities in caretaking roles as mothers, nurses, and teachers […], people assume that women tend to be nurturing and caring" (Eagly & Wood 1). Similarly, when masculinity is exclusively experienced with qualities such as strength and reason, observers take over these beliefs. In this way, traditional forms of gender expression are not only passed on to younger generations, but also reinforced as the hegemonic standard, the 'normal' way of performing gender (Bailey & Gayle 27).

The representation of gender represents perhaps one of the most discussed topics in Disney studies (Giroux 98). On multiple occasions, the company's output has been shown to revert to traditional assumptions about gendered behaviour for their characters' construction, through which they teach their audience 'appropriate' behaviour for men and women respectively in a patriarchal society (Bowman 81, Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1921, Giroux 100, Sharmin & Sattar 53). Disney presents specific aspects of gendered behaviour as more valuable than others, thus offering almost recipe-like instructions how to achieve one's happy ending as a man or a woman, while other forms of gender expression are hardly ever awarded with the same valorisation (Bowman 81). Especially female characters are portrayed in a rather rigid gender framework, showing them as either strictly good or bad (Wasko 142). In this context, the hyper-feminine portrayal of the Disney princesses has been examined extensively in the literature (Sharmin & Sattar 53). Due to their popularity, these characters "have become a directing force of young [...] girls'" cultural knowledge (Bruce 7) and commonly serve as role models for young female spectators, who emulate after the princesses (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1921).

Simultaneously, Disney's princess culture has been met with criticism in academic discourse despite its popularity (England et al. 567, Herbozo et al. 31, Golden & Jacoby 305, Lacroix 214): England et al. performed a quantitative analysis in which they examined the frequency with which Disney princesses displayed gendered behaviour. After a comprehensive analysis of films from 1937 to 2009, the scholars concluded that the characters' performance was extremely limited, mainly presenting women as submissive and emotional and reducing their plot arc to being saved from danger or finding love (567). These results are echoed by multiple scholars in the field of Disney studies, who take issue with the princesses' problematic portrayal, demonstrating how the films excessively promote unrealistic beauty standards (Golden & Jacoby 305, Herbozo et al. 31), encourage paternal approval rather than genuine autonomy (Stover 5) and portray minors in a sexualised way (Lacroix 214). Yet the great majority of analyses in this field focuses on gender role portrayal, criticising that the princesses' performance of gender upholds limited, stereotypical ideas of femininity (Davis *Snow* 51, Garlen & Sandlin 957, Higgs 65, Stover 8, Sumera 41): The characters are usually delicate, gifted in dancing and singing, find fulfilment in domestic work and maternal tasks and long for love and marriage (Byrne & McQuillan 62). The problematic issue about these representations of female gender identity is that they are neither coincidental nor isolated: "Similar messages are consistently circulated and reproduced to varying degrees, in many of Disney's animated films" (Giroux 100), thereby perpetuating rigid gender stereotypes and reinforcing a one-sided portrayal of femininity.

Perhaps the most detailed analysis of female Disney characters was conducted by Amy M. Davis. She analysed Disney's texts in their historical and social context and concludes that the princesses' gender role portrayal is significantly influenced by American ideals, which are then reflected in the qualities displayed by the heroes and heroines. For the princesses, this is particularly evident in their styling, personality and behaviour (116). This idea is corroborated by other researchers, who equally illustrate how the portrayal of gender in Disney princess films reflects gender norms circulated in mainstream society at the time of production (Higgs 63, Stover 5). Consequently, the princesses are understood as "allegories for the dominant representations of accepted femininity at the time of each film's production" today (Higgs 63). Especially early characters such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Aurora* (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959) are depicted as passively but gracefully waiting for their prince (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 94, Zipes *Breaking* 37). There is no other option for them: Their agency is restricted to the "damsel in distress" (Higgs 63). In more recent films, Disney films

arguably depict a more active, empowered image of femininity as well as trajectories outside romance for their heroines (Hine, Ivanovic & England 12). However, even though Disney has adapted their latest protagonists to contemporary audiences since the so-called *Disney Renaissance* starting in the late 1980s, modern princesses are still predominantly characterised by their physical beauty, their role as caregivers and their wish for male approval, may that be a romantic interest, a father or a male friend (Byrne & McQuillan 66, Davis 209, Giroux 99). With this persistent portrayal of 'good' femininity as obedient, nurturing and innocent, Disney's animated texts reassure the audience that traditional values are still in place despite social changes (Stover 5) and naturalise stereotypical femininity (Bowman 82, Griffin 49).

In answer to Simone de Bouvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1), scholarship traditionally distinguished between the concepts of sex and gender: Sex was identified an individual's stable biological constitution as male or female based on anatomy, hormones and physiological components, while gender referred to the socially variable, cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity (Bettis et al. 216, Storey 160). Although de Bouvoir's argumentation has been supported by notable scholars in the field (e.g. Butler 1999), caution must be exerted: The definition of sex as 'clearly' male or female implies the existence of discrete categories for the expression of one's identity with only two potential manifestations (Fausto-Sterling ch. 1). As argued by Preeves, "so embedded is our belief that there are only two sexes and two corresponding genders, that intersexed infants have been routinely, quickly, and often without their parents' knowledge or consent, surgically altered to physically resemble either a male or a female" (32 qtd. in Tyson *Critical* 109). This shows that despite presenting itself as straightforward and unambiguous, the myth of two neat categories of sex is inconclusive (Butler 143). In fact, researchers have noted that despite the dualism of sex being consistent in most cultures, the precise comprehension of what constitutes male and female biology varies considerably and several societies even acknowledge the existence of only one or multiple sexes (Duerst-Lahti 82, Tyson *Critical* 106). Importantly, however, such a binary construction of sex also exerts influence on society's expectations of the gendered body: Hegemonic beliefs assume that sex and gender should align unambiguously, i.e. male with masculine and female with feminine (Gansen & Martin 84). Taking this restriction into account, gender expression is equally limited to only two 'acceptable' manifestations, male/masculine and female/feminine, thus not allowing for social variation and fluidity (Carnes 13, Chatillon, Charles & Bradley 219, Lindsey 4). And to quote Tyson, "if you're not one or the other of [these categories], then there must be something wrong with you" (*Critical* 105). Importantly,

this idea of 'wrong' is mainly negotiated socially: While we receive social rewards for conforming to established gender regulations, those who disobey the 'code of gendered conduct' and whose gender is not "intelligible" or even "incoherent" (Butler 23) with their sex, face the danger of ridicule and social disadvantage as well as stigma and repulsion (Eagly & Wood 2), a tendency which will be argued later is crucial for the depiction of villains (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 93). Therefore, the ideological component of gender lies in the way how certain forms of performing gender in relation with one's assigned sex are considered appropriate, while others are dismissed as an unnatural deviation from the social norm.

Having argued that neither sex nor gender are 'natural' categories, Butler reformulates de Bouvoir's statement as follows: "[O]ne is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born female, one becomes female" (33), thereby stressing the performative aspect of gender and its mere naturalisation through consistent reiteration (15). However, she continues: "But even more radically, one can if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man" (33). With this addition, Butler was one of the first scholars to acknowledge that human gender expression cannot be grasped by simple dichotomies such as man/woman and masculine/feminine. In fact, the latest conceptualisation of these supposedly opposing categories is a continuum rather than a binary (Tyson *Using* 177). This is one of the basic propositions of queer theory, a field of study which emerged in the 1990s: In contrast to gay and lesbian studies, scholars of queer studies focus on the deconstruction of monolithic sexual identities and extend their debates beyond binary oppositions (Scarborough 9). By challenging taken-for-granted beliefs about sexuality and gender, scholars of queer studies examine how sexual identity is constructed socially (Carnes 14). Essentially, they argue that sexuality and sexual identity are dynamic, therefore impossible to fit into rigid dichotomies or categorisation systems (Lindsey 40, Tyson *Critical* 334). Historically, the term 'queer' represented a pejorative term, which was to insult and pathologise homosexuality. With the literal understanding of the word as 'strange', it was implied that everything 'queer' was the opposite of a viable human being (Cranny-Francis et al. 74). During the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement, people reclaimed the expression, both as a signal of empowerment (Carnes 8) as well as to "acknowledge and discuss the wide range of expression of sexual desire, a range that includes but goes beyond 'gay' or 'lesbian'" (Griffin xx), hence functioning as a label for all forms of sexual orientation except relationships between biological men and women. Nevertheless, 'queer' not only constitutes an umbrella term for different concepts related to the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. 'gay', 'lesbian', …), all of which come with their own cultural and social

meanings (Doty xvii). Instead, the term is also used to describe a person's identity, which goes beyond established conceptualisations of normative gender expression (Griffin xix).

Similar to 'male' functioning as the universal of humanity while 'female' is considered deviant in a patriarchal system (Bailey & Gayle 103, Gadzepko & Smith 257, Tyson *Critical* 87), scholars increasingly also examine queerness as an 'opposite' of heterosexuality, which maintains its ground as the only legitimate, 'proper' form of sexuality and gender expression (Risman 28, King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 46). The belief that heterosexuality constitutes the standard of sexuality has been reinforced over centuries through a discourse referred to as heteronormativity (Tyson *Critical* 110). It is considered the norm that a biological man, who displays masculine demeanour, must automatically be in search of an equally heterosexual woman and vice versa (Bettis et al. 217). Consequently, heteronormativity exerts significant regulatory power:

> *"Heteronormativity structures social life so that heterosexuality is always assumed, expected, ordinary, and privileged. Its pervasiveness makes it difficult for people to imagine other ways of life. In part, the assumption and expectation of heterosexuality is linked to its status as natural and biologically necessary for procreation."* (Martin & Kazyak 316)

Crucially, heteronormative beliefs not only prescribe the choice of an acceptable sexual partner; individuals are also expected to keep up a strict performative code to continuously affirm their masculinity or femininity, hence conforming clearly with the roles for male and female gender expression (Bell 15). Traditionally, a person who remained in their prescribed gender role (e.g. a biological man taking on masculine characteristics) could maintain social privileges, even though they may have fostered non-normative relationships (Carnes 7). It was mainly the inversion of gender roles, which was judged negatively (Griffin 52). This dynamic is still at play in contemporary society: There is considerable evidence that "gender role violations" such as men wearing feminine clothing and make-up still evoke negative reactions, even if no explicit information about sexual orientation is given (Blashill and Powlishta 160). This shows very plainly that heteronormativity not only functions on the level of sexual orientation directly but that it also interferes with discourses about the gendered body. While an unambiguous gender identity, ideally aligning with a person's assigned sex, represents a desirable achievement in society and the social norm, queerness and all 'deviant' forms of non-binary gender expression are considered unacceptable (Carnes 47, Riegel 57).

Research has shown that children have acquired significant knowledge about the heteronormative regulations of sexuality by the time they enter the school system, which can be ascribed, among other factors, to media consumption (Martin & Kazyak 317). Considering Disney's carefully crafted image as an institution of high moral standards and a source for innocent entertainment, reading their films for messages about sexuality might appear questionable at first (Wasko 144). However, one must remember that despite withholding explicit sexual content, "Disney *has* consistently posited and reinforced an image of sexuality in films […] and countless other Disney texts: specifically, an image of American middle-class heterosexual courtship" (Griffin 4). Romance between the hero and the heroine has served as a key part of the Disney formula ever since Snow White took off with her prince to his castle. Also Disney's poster child Mickey Mouse has found love with Minnie Mouse and their life as a 'typical' American middle-class couple represents the focal point in many Disney shorts (Griffin 6). The heterosexual Disney love story often forms the primary narrative in the films and serves a transformative, almost magical function (Martin & Kazyak 327): It can break spells (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991), cause sociopolitical changes (*Aladdin* 1992) and even stop wars (*Pocahontas* 1995). This portrayal of Disney characters embedded into narratives which call for a heterosexual union to reach a happy ending fosters a highly biased perspective of love and exaggerated gender role portrayal, suggesting that "happy heterosexism" seems to be the "path to contentment and goodness" (Putnam 147). Griffin refers to this dynamic as Disney's "heterosexual paradigm" (5): The company promotes the idea of compulsory heterosexuality so vigorously that consumers often fail to realise that Disney's construction of sexuality and gender as "heterosexual courtship" (4) also represents a cultural construct (Griffin 49). By promoting ideas such as heterosexual love, traditional labour division and adherence to gender-normative regulations as natural and mundane, Disney's outcome legitimises the practices of patriarchal ideology as the way how society works while making derogatory comments on alternative forms of gender representation, as will be the focal point in the subsequent chapter (Giroux 49, Patterson & Spencer 75).

3 Representing 'Evil'

Across human societies, storytelling has served as a crucial tool for the socialisation of young generations since the beginning of modern civilisation. By enwrapping important lessons of life into a relatable narrative, children and adolescents have been introduced to society's cultural knowledge (Zipes *Enchanted* 19). Typically, the most exciting and interesting of these stories are rooted in social conflict, which is triggered and propelled by one of the most infamous archetypal characters: the villain (Forbes 19).

In order to gain deeper understanding for the role of the Disney antagonist, it is imperative to comprehend the basic conceptualisation of evilness in story narration. For this reason, the following section will first introduce the concept of Othering, which forms a crucial base for the production and audiences' readings of antagonistic characters. Proceeding from there, this chapter will explore the construction of the villain, outlining their binary contrast with the protagonist and their vital narrative function for the plot. Eventually, the final part of this section will forge a bridge between the antagonist's portrayal and gender ideology by investigating Hollywood's practice of representing wickedness through gender-transgressive performance.

3.1. The Aberrant Other

From a linguistic perspective, many words are only understood when placed in juxtaposition with their opposite (Hall 234): 'Small' becomes meaningful in relation to 'big', 'near' to 'far' etc. And despite common expectations, even a complex concept such as 'heterosexual' was only developed after the emergence of the term 'homosexual' at the end of the 19th century, simply because until this point, there was no need for such a designation, for the only concept of sexuality existing for society for a long time was heterosexuality (Cranny-Francis et al. 18). Such simplified binary categories are helpful to classify impressions of people, objects and phenomena systematically quickly and conveniently (Dyer *Stereotypes* 12). In fact, research has shown that individuals are quick to form such binary categories based on different, partly even ambiguous, criteria (Schmid-Mast & Krings 33). Crucially, this classification process does not merely assign attributes, but it also enforces the subtle formation of a hierarchy with people evaluating members of their own group, i.e. those who are more similar to them, as superior over those outside the group (Turner, Brown & Tajfel 200). When this so-called "in-group favouritism" (Turner, Brown & Tajfel 187) intersects with ideological power, this process is referred to as Othering.

Othering denotes the process of essentialising and stigmatising a certain group as 'different'. One group is presented as the standard, often casually referred to as 'normal', while the Other constitutes a deviation from this norm, therefore an 'abnormality' (Hall 235). Othering was originally conceptualised in the context of postcolonial studies with the work of Edward Said. In *Orientalism*, one of the seminal texts of postcolonial theory, he illustrates how the Western discourse on the East has created a separation between the East and the West, i.e. the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. As Said argues, "[t]he Orient was a European invention" (1) and its identity was essentially constructed as an opposite to Europe: While the West is attributed positive features such as being civilised, progressive and rational, the Orient is represented as inferior and reactionary through attributions such as being mysterious and barbaric, hence corroborating Western dominance (111).

Social groups use Othering in order to define themselves. Therefore, identity (both individual, but also on larger scales, e.g. nationality) is constructed through "what we are in relation to what we are not" (Mandracchia 23). Crucially, Othering often makes use of stereotyping in that it reduces complex social matters into a hegemonic 'we' as the reference point and a marginalised 'them' with all its deficiencies and shortcomings (Riegel 52). Thus, in addition to separation, Othering triggers an evaluation process in which one group is awarded a superior position over the other, as famously illustrated by Derrida, who proposes that even in seemingly neutral opposites, one is considered superior over the other (Hall 235). For example, 'white' constitutes the dominant position to 'black', 'men' to 'women', 'masculine' to 'feminine' and 'heterosexual' to 'queer'. The intersection between the Other and social power is manifest in the discrepancy of control between the dominant and the marginalised group: Only the privileged class is in the position of "defining the reality of the world" (Akita & Kenney 51), while the Other is defined and interpreted through the lens of the dominant group, who controls and legitimises its superiority (Bailey & Gayle 102).

With this imbalance of social power, an attribution as Other does not simply mark an individual as different from the dominant group. Instead, Otherness is often associated with additional, negative connotations such as immorality, indecency and evilness (Gross & Woods 5). Following Kristeva's concept of the abject, Iris Young proposes that the presence of such an Other may even lead to physical reactions of aversion in those who perceive themselves as the norm (177), which Kjeldgaard-Christiansen refers to as "moral disgust" (68). This practice is critical for the construction of fictional characters and has been shown to be of particular importance in the horror film genre in the figure of the villain: According to R. Wood, the true

aim of the horror film is not the straightforward creation of fear, but the "struggle for recognition of all that our civilization (sic!) represses or oppresses" (79). What creates 'horror' is not the 'monster's' appearance or their behavioural profile, but the fact that their portrayal deviates from sociocultural norms and evokes feelings of alienation and unease among viewers (Wood 79). The labelling as a 'monster' furthermore dehumanises an individual who thereby stands in binary contrast with humanity (Adkins 10). The lack of recognition for this monstrous Other stretches to a point that society cannot accept the existence of such an individual, but demands it to be rejected, isolated and potentially even destroyed (Ellioth-Smith 10).

Davis argues that Disney shares many core characteristics with the horror genre, such as the chaos triggered by a monstruous Other and the restoration of order through the hero or heroine (Davis *Girls* 22). Furthermore, as stated in the previous section, Disney frequently makes use of ideologically loaded, simplified dualisms such as 'good' and 'evil' and 'us' and 'them' (Norden 166). For these reasons, the consideration of Otherness is imperative when analysing the company's output. In fact, a considerable body of research has already been accumulated investigating Disney's representation of Otherness, yet primarily examining the company's output from a postcolonial perspective, for example in *The Little Mermaid* with its opposition between the mystical Caribbean Ocean and the rationality of the European city on the surface (Sells 80), the offensive nod to Asian cultures with the Siamese cat duo in *Lady and the Tramp* (Akita & Kenney 50) as well as the representation of Native Americans as "noble savages" in *Pocahontas* (Harvey 69). The scholars come to the joint conclusion that Disney reinforces dominant Western discourse as the universal standard, while representations of other cultures are constructed as alien deviations from this 'normality'. Despite romanticising the exotic charm of foreign societies in many cases, Disney presents Western civilisation with its traditions and norms as the common reference point, thereby implying European and North American cultural supremacy (Di Giovanni 107). Going beyond that, Zipes argues that gender should similarly be considered a source for Othering in Disney's output: He criticises that depictions of women, often the product of exclusively male animation teams, construct female characters as mystical deviations from the male norm (*Happily* 71). Extending Zipes' argument beyond a binary understanding of gender, this MEd thesis will examine to what extent Disney's construction of villains comments on Otherness with regard to the transgression of traditional gender norms.

3.2. The Narrative Function of Villainy

Despite initially branded as 'Disney's folly', Disney's first full-length animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 resulted in overwhelming financial success for the company and still represents a significant milestone in animation history (Pallant 14). However, apart from establishing Walt Disney as a notable filmmaker, the release of *Snow White* also introduced the fairy tale genre into Hollywood cinema and created a benchmark for Disney's future output such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1992) and *Tangled* (2010), all of which represent adaptations of traditional fairy tales. It is not by coincidence that the Disney fairy tale's popularity among American audiences rocketed during the time of the Great Depression when viewers longed for escapism and nostalgic utopia. Financial hardships and high unemployment rates let people resort to stories in which a happy ending was never far and in which familiar social regulations were reliably re-established by the end, regardless of how extenuating the circumstances seemed to be (Mollet *American* 222). These texts offered a positive outlook on life for many and provided optimism with the "triumph of the underdog" (Mollet *Cultural* 168) as one of Disney's key principles in their narratives. Primarily, however, the formulaic structure in the fairy tale provided nostalgia for earlier times and predictability in times of economic upheaval (Zipes *Enchanted* 2). The fact that audiences found security in the fairytale is not surprising given that the fairytale mainly depicts a conservative view on universal topics such as heroism or community life, reflective of earlier, potentially easier times and hardly ever challenging established social norms (Bradford 181).

Among other areas, fairy tales provide a rich source of information about traditional gender roles and one's status in society as a man or a woman in that they resort to a 'storybook patriarchy' (Zipes *Enchanted* 19). Men mainly serve as the powerful, dominant saviour while women are primarily represented as beautiful but weak, submissive damsels in distress, highly dependent and hardly ever successful when they act on their own (Parsons 137). Due to this rigid organisation of the gender hierarchy, the fairytale promotes an extremely narrow notion of acceptable gender performance and, by extension, also comments on related factors such as family life, the distribution of power and norms of how to be a successful individual in a patriarchal society (Zipes *Happily* 67). Still, despite the adamant organisation of the fairytale society, there are selected individuals who are compelled to disregard social norms, thus bringing about utter chaos: the villains. Not adhering to the rules of their community and defined by negative attributes such as maliciousness and ill will, these characters set up a

conflict in the narrative and with that, they constitute a critical element of Disney's texts (Zipes *Evolution* 3).

Viewers' judgements on whether a character belongs in the category of 'good' or 'evil' are predominantly made on the basis of a character's morality (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Structure* 68): If actions are perceived as morally acceptable, viewers will presumably develop affection for the character while, on the other side, a character's deviance from society's dominant ideas about morality tends to inspire negative feelings in audiences (Zillmann 53). Crucially, Eden emphasises that judgements of morality are mainly rooted in spectators' understanding of a character's appropriateness in their behaviour, meaning the extent to which they adhere to dominant cultural norms negotiated in society. As long as the character obeys the hegemonic code of conduct, their actions are almost automatically perceived as morally intelligible while a deviation from these regulations extends to an evaluation of their (im-)morality (188). These deliberations point to the intersection between villainy and the concept of ideology: When judging a character's morality, audiences compare what they see against the dominant ideological framework they have been socialised with. Eventually, the spectators integrate these messages about good and bad into their cultural knowledge, thus lending legitimacy to these ideas since after all, they have been presented with another piece of 'evidence' of what they already know (Bailey & Gayle 27).

Interestingly, antagonist characters are mainly defined through their contrast with the protagonist (Davis *Girls* 107). With such a binary construction as the opposite of the protagonist, a character who the audience relates to and probably identifies with, the villain as the Other evokes feelings of repulsion and even hostility (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Social* 1218). While the protagonist strives for prosocial ideals such as harmony and justice, thus inspiring sympathy in the audience, the villain intentionally performs actions which they hope will lead to others' misfortune, thereby provoking antipathy in viewers through cold-blooded evilness (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Structure* 72). This great evil power essentially also legitimises the hero or heroine's efforts to destroy them; otherwise, these 'good' characters would certainly never intend to harm anybody given their prosocial nature (Bergstrand & Jasper 231). In contrast, villains use their disproportionate power to manipulate, exploit and sabotage others for their own pleasure:

> *They have no respect or consideration for nature and other human beings, and they actually seek to abuse magic by preventing change and causing everything to be transfixed according to their interests. The marvellous protagonist wants to keep*

> *the process of natural change flowing and indicates possibilities for overcoming the obstacles that prevent other characters or creatures from living in a peaceful and pleasurable way* (Zipes *Enchanted* 22).

Crucially, such messages about unethical behaviour and callous deviance can also be detected by very young viewers: Children acquire their understanding of morally (im-)proper behaviour primarily through their readings of contemporary film, i.e. the performance of the 'good' in contrast to the 'bad guys' (Tobin 3), between whom they then differentiate rather clearly based on simple cues such as a character's physical appearance and behavioural profile (Obiols-Suari & Marco-Pallarés 5).

Three narrative functions of the villain archetype are noticeable in the Disney fairy tale. Firstly, it is mainly the antagonist who sets up the conflict in the narrative (Davis *Heroes* 187). The villain and their evil actions often initiate the stories, for example *Cruella DeVil*, who plots to steal the puppies in *101 Dalmatians* (1961). Without the antagonist, the rest of the Disney society would simply lead a calm but fairly eventless life. Thus, evilness is representative of the instability of the "natural order" (Forbes 19) in society, which is constantly under threat due to malicious powers. Still, with the hero or heroine inevitably triumphing over wickedness, existing norms are reinforced and presented as the hegemonic standard to which society returns for its happy ending (Davis *Heroes* 188). Forbes even speculates that the villain's potential to generate drama constitutes one of the reasons why some viewers find the antagonist so appealing since they "would [also] like to enjoy that sort of power" (18). The second function of the villain is to provide reason for individual growth in the hero or heroine. Many protagonists in the Disney universe start as unfinished versions of themselves and do not dare to fulfil their dreams yet because of external reasons. However, the villain is destined for the creation of chaos, thus setting up a quest for the protagonist. Their existence is needed as a plot device without which the efforts and development of the hero or heroine would be redundant (Mollet *Cultural* 168). It is only through the antagonist and their evil plans that the protagonists surpass themselves and steps into the role of the hero or heroine (Wasko 127). Finally, the Disney villain also represents an antithetical role model for what is perceived as anti-American values (Mollet *Cultural* 168), hence serving as a teaching tool for the audience (Torres Begines 51 qtd. in Brugé & Llompart 113). The happy ending is only achieved when evil is defeated and society returns to its ordinary state. Therefore, the antagonist's fate demonstrates the gruesome consequences of not conforming with society's rules and regulations: The villain's inevitably tragic ending, either in isolation, punishment or even fatal destruction shows what

awaits those who choose deviance over conformism and who fail morally in society (Kim 161). This layer of the narrative extends beyond the text itself, in that it subtly teaches the audience which social values are to be considered repugnant and, in turn, which are to be embraced (Forbes 19).

In early Hollywood cinema, it was particularly the evil witch, who dominated spectators' understanding of female antagonism. As a central literary character, the witch represents sin and immorality while she also functions as a symbol for empowerment and capable femininity due to her great potency (*Les Sorcières* 2:20). Hostile feelings towards transgressive femininity symbolised by the witch go back far beyond the beginnings of Hollywood cinema: During the European witch-hunts, older women, especially spinsters and widows, served as the prototype for this character. While acceptable femininity was embodied by purity and asexuality, the middle-aged single woman, no longer dependent on the adherence to patriarchal rules, was feared for being able to express her sexuality actively, which was interpreted as a reliable cue for her moral degeneration, weakness and evilness. Hence, the witch's danger was rooted in her authority over her body and her autonomy from social norms (Shun-Hasiang Shih 51). This imagery of the wild and independent woman enjoying sexual relationships – allegedly even with the devil – informed the construction of the literary character (*Les Sorcières* 2:56). Crucially, later representations withdrew the witch from her hypersexualised image and foregrounded her terrifying nature, while her physical appearance as an older woman persisted. These depictions led to the traditional fairy tale image of the witch as a hideous, evil hag, whose maliciousness is signalled by features of old age such as a hump and wrinkles (Shun-Hsiang Shih 51).

Starting from the mid-20th century, films increasingly portrayed the witch in a remodelled light. With the first steps into the feminist movement, women's status in society was reformed and many felt empowered to enter the public sphere. Thus, challenging patriarchal norms was no longer automatically equated with ill will. A similar shift of perspective took place in the image of the witch: With new social opportunities developing for women, also the fictional character no longer constructed the witch as a vile creature, but she had the chance to prove herself through benevolent actions. In fact, the trope of the modern 'good witch', who is often considerably younger than her wicked counterpart, even awarded the character with prestige and constructed the witch as an admirable role model (Engelbrecht 25). However, the workings of patriarchy are still noticeable in this new image: Firstly, also the good witch was frequently portrayed as incapable of love as long as she is at the height of her magical strength. Films

promoted the idea that although women were no longer limited in their strength, they still needed to decide between their magical powers and a happy life in conformity with gendered expectations, thereby upholding patriarchal hierarchies. Thus, it was implied that a woman could only find happiness by giving up her powers, thus once more juxtaposing the mighty but unhappy woman with the bliss of domestic life (*Les Sorcières* 17:54). However, even if the modern witch decided not to enter a romantic relationship, to stay independent and to display self-confidence against men, her performance could be accepted as respectable if she still engaged in classically female-coded nurturing behaviour. For example, *Mary Poppins* refuses romance in her own life, but still acts as an affectionate nanny for children (Davis *Girls* 231). With the witch's 'contribution' to society and her efforts to preserve patriarchal standards, she is acknowledged as a moral character even though technically, she is as uncontrollable as her evil predecessors. What sets her apart, though, is that she actively chooses not to manipulate the social order but instead, happily takes her place within it (Bell, Haas & Sells 213).

3.3. The Villain in the Celluloid Closet – Representations of Queerness in Antagonists

When it was announced that the live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) should include a queer character, international uproar went through the Disney community: While some praised the company for this development and waited for the first openly gay character to make its cinematic debut, others were deeply concerned that depicting queerness in a film targeted at children would corrupt young viewers' beliefs about romance (Mumford n.p.). In general, the past decades were characterised by heated discussions whether fictional LGBTQ+ characters' sexuality should be addressed in productions for children and adolescents (Munro 182) while heterosexual displays of love were hardly ever rendered with the same level of scepticism and repulsion by the public (Griffin 4). There are two interesting aspects to note here: Firstly, Disney chose a traditionally villainous character, *Le Fou*, for their first openly queer character, which aligns with Hollywood's long-standing practice of depicting LGBTQ+ characters in a negative light (McLeod 18). Secondly, opposite the concerns prior to the film's release, the scene in question does not feature any explicit signs of queer affection (in contrast to the frequent kissing scenes between heterosexual couples), but only alludes to the character's sexual orientation implicitly. As will be shown in the subsequent section, such 'hidden' queerness constitutes a powerful strategy to show young audiences as explicitly as possible that they are confronted with a vile character at the moment.

In the time of early Hollywood cinema, a significant crisis of masculinity emerged: With the Great Depression hitting the American economy severely, many men who had formerly supported their families as breadwinners felt increasingly at risk of losing their jobs or found themselves on the streets searching for work. Thus, men became similarly dependent on others' financial backing, as had traditionally been the social situation of women (Lugwoski 4). On the other side, many women had gradually entered the workforce in the years preceding the Depression in jobs deemed appropriate for women such as waitresses and clerks. Ironically, these fields proved to be more secure during America's economic plummet and women were less at risk from unemployment (Lindsey 145). Hence, American society found itself in a climate of greater public visibility of femininity and increasing levels of acceptance for women's new roles, while many men felt their dominant status to be at threat (Lugowski 4). It was at this time when the sissy entered the cinematic stage. This stock character is defined as an extremely effeminate man, defined by features of traditional feminine beauty such as makeup, a slender body and a spruce appearance (Kim 159). Also the sissy's typical mannerisms including high-pitched giggling and elegant gestures represented an exaggerated cliché of male effeminacy (Lugowski 4). Crucially, however, the sissy hardly ever constituted the object of female affection, much less showing any sexual interest in women himself, which audiences could only interpret one way: Although it was never stated explicitly, the sissy clearly represented a stereotypical depiction for male homosexuality (*Celluloid* 8:11). With these subtle but unambiguous allusions, the sissy reflects society's belief that homosexuality, being a manifestation of moral degeneration, was signalled through one's appearance and performance (Kim 159).

Despite his comedic purpose, the sissy was not considered a character to identify with, much less one to strive after; after all, as Russo famously begins his ground-breaking work *The Celluloid Closet*, "[n]obody likes a sissy" (1). Male homosexuality was traditionally linked to not being perceived as a real man, which, considering the socioeconomic climate during the 1920s, constituted a major concern for men at that time. Being referred to as a sissy represented an insult because it implied that an individual had "no value as a real man" (Kim 159). Instead, the sissy's homosexuality was depicted as a flaw for comic relief (Kim 157) and, more importantly, as a strategy to affirm male viewers' masculinity (*Celluloid* 7:42). On the other side, lesbianism never carried the same cinematic stigma as the sissy since the expression of female sexuality was generally frowned upon, whether it was a display of heterosexuality or homosexuality (Russo 1). In fact, allusions to lesbian relationships were partly even considered

an erotic "extension of the male myth" and the tomboy, despite her androgynous gender performance, was admired rather than repelled due to her charisma (Russo 2).

As noticeable with the sissy, Hollywood cinema during the Great Depression was not necessarily reticent regarding the depiction of socially controversial topics and characters, even including the first lesbian kiss on camera in the film *Morocco* (1930). Only some time later, however, this development of depicting homosexuality on the screen was to come to a halt with the introduction of the Federal Production Code in the early 1930s. In an effort to amend Hollywood's tainted image, this regulation system, also referred to as Hays Code, identified a range of topics which were to be banned from the screen, among many others including sexuality, nudity and violence as well as any implications of these themes (Gaines 42). Naturally, 'sexual perversion', including homosexuality, stood at the very top of the Code's list (Kim 159). Still, homosexuality did not vanish completely from Hollywood cinema. In fact, numerous films managed to circumvent the Federal Production Code, still displaying allusions to same-sex relationships (*Rope*, 1948, *Ben-Hur*, 1959) as well as characters reminiscent of the sissy, who were read as gay through their mannerisms, for example by having an inclination for feminine-coded interests or by holding up their pinky finger while drinking (*Lover Come Back*, 1961, *Celluloid* 35:58). Such a portrayal of cinematic characters with traits traditionally interpreted as queer without ever stating explicitly that they are is referred to as queer coding. Despite clearly exhibiting stereotypical behaviour commonly read as queer, these characters never truly leave their "celluloid closet" (Russo 1), thus only alluding to their queerness on an underlying level (Kim 156).

These more or less subtle allusions to queerness and depictions of queer-coded individuals in Hollywood cinema certainly did not go unnoticed by the authorities of the Hays Code. Jay Presson Allot, screenwriter of *Cabaret*, assumes that the Code administration often simply did not recognise gayness on screen if it was only hidden well enough (*Celluloid* 19:00). While this may be true in some cases, the distinct representation of queerness in films from that period hints at a more convincing reason for the sheer vastness of queer-coded characters despite the Code's restraint: In order to be deemed acceptable on screen, gender transgression had to be portrayed in an utterly negative light (Kim 158). One strategy for this was to present homosexuality as the cause for a character's failure and frustration in life. These individuals were portrayed as sad, lonely creatures, who never accomplished their happy ending. While they could redeem themselves through genuine remorse, reflected when characters cryptically referred to 'the biggest mistake of their life', they were hardly ever immune to imminent

demise, mainly in death. This promoted the idea of queerness as a cardinal sin, which requires supreme sacrifice in order to make atonement (*Celluloid* 57:28).

The second method for circumventing the Hays Code was to depict queerness in the role of the villain. Originally, the term 'queer' was used to refer to negative traits such as evilness and alienation, thus suggesting that the queer individual is also characterised by personal shortcomings and moral degeneration (Dyer *Culture* 6). Crucially, Li-Vollmer & LaPointe explain that this ominous implication directly refers to notions of gender ideology: "In a culture with firmly naturalized (sic!) constructions of gender, gender transgression may also cast doubt on a person's competence, social acceptability, and morality" (91). The queer-coded villain symbolises the combination between the 'sexually deviant' and the 'morally deviant' (Kim 156). Consequently, the construction of villains and their representation as evil suggests to audiences that a departure from accepted forms of gender-normative behaviour and appearance is to be rejected (Forbes 19). This pattern of homosexuality depicted as an atrocity was retained widely into the 1960s and beyond. Films maintained the practice of painting queerness as cold-blooded ferocity even after the Hays Code had lost its influence and to some extent, this representation still informs stereotypes and subconscious beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community today (Kim 158): With this constant equation of queerness and sin, it is implied that individuals who dare to transgress gender boundaries also do not recoil from disobeying the moral principles of humanity (Kim 157). While the standard for humanity was heterosexuality, queerness was constructed as "an idea of impulses that the individual has no choice over having" (Dyer *Culture* 3), only 'happening' to those who are not morally strong enough to restrict themselves from their primitive instincts. In the context of queerness as villainy, the visibility of queer-coded female antagonists also led to a new image of transgressive femininity. Even though female characters were never represented with the same level of ridicule as the sissy, sexual deviance was still prominently presented as a crucial step into demise. Especially female attempts of homosexual seduction were often portrayed as a manifestation of the queer woman's insanity and immorality on the screen (Dyer *Culture* 6).

Li-Vollmer & LaPointe were among the first to examine villainy in children's media in connection with sexuality and gender. In their analysis, they confirm that the notorious "villain-as-sissy" (96) archetype is also manifest in texts for young audience. An excessive display of feminine markers is read as a transgression of gender norms, which points to a character's moral shortcomings. With this practice, evilness is not only targeted at the hero or heroine but also at social regulations in general. Finally, the authors conclude their analysis by stating that

> *[o]ur queered readings of these films revealed that they serve as sites of contest between normalcy and deviance. It is clear to us that the various aspects of gender transgression uncovered by a queered analysis work together to create a unified gender performance that reinforces norms and informs audiences of standards. (105)*

Other scholars later echoed LiVollmer & LaPointe's deliberations. However, while Li-Vollmer and LaPointe examined male-read villains from different literary and cinematic productions (including *Lord Voldemort* and *Darth Vader*), Putnam focused her analysis on Disney villains and placed special emphasis on the examination of female gender transgression. She argues that Disney's "mean ladies" (147) are predominantly portrayed as transgendered characters, defined by markers of defeminisation which serve as a stigma for their maliciousness (148). For example, the evil stepmother from *Cinderella* (1950) lacks motherly features, while the stepsisters are clumsy and appear awkward with their large noses and feet, especially in contrast to the delicate Cinderella, who clearly embodies the perfect princess archetype. While the basis of these depictions is not unique to Disney and the figure of the ugly villain has been employed in traditional fairy tales for much longer, Putnam argues that the female antagonists' transgendered features and the distance from femininity were added by the portrayal in Disney (152).

The far-reaching consequences of this equation between queerness and villainy have been mitigated in society for some time. Firstly, queer visibility and societal diversity, regardless of the role a character played, was widely interpreted as a valuable achievement for the LGBTQ+ community, which had traditionally been underserved of representation in cultural texts (Kim 156). Furthermore, it was claimed that the employment of predictable stock characters simply represents a common practice in media for children, which is to allow young audiences to grasp the core message of the story and to identify the villain without ambiguity (Nikolajeva 123, Vujin and Krombholc 24). While these arguments may be valid to some extent, Putnam rightfully criticises how the consistent equation between villainy and queerness naturalises the idea that a violation of heteronormativity is synonymous with morally deviant behaviour:

> *By creating only wicked characters as transgendered, Disney constructs an implicit evaluation of transgenderism, unequivocally associating it with cruelty, selfishness, brutality, and greed. […] [I]t is the noxious combination of transgendered characteristics with these characters' evil plots and exploits that makes this spicy blend so unpalatable once clearly recognized—and yet, that combination goes unrealized by most viewers, whether child or adult—accepted without examination, reinforcing the heterosexism of current contemporary culture.* (149)

With the firm connection between villainy and non-normative gendered identities (and heroism and gender-normative performance respectively), another binary in the contrast between hero/heroine and villain is set up: In addition to obvious opposites such as good/evil and moral/immoral, the continuous characterisation of the villain as gender-bending also implies a contrast between heterosexuality as a cue for morality and queerness as a signal for evilness (McLeod 14). Firmly linked to this portrayal, 'queer' becomes synonymous with the villain's shortcomings such as maliciousness, weakness and moral depravity, which casts a similarly negative light on the term (Patterson & Spencer 75). The distinct representation of queerness as villainy teaches viewers through subtle instruction what is (in-)adequate gender expression for men and women: With their queer expression of gender, the villain appears unsettling for the audience because the character's performance goes against the ideological framework of gender which viewers were socialised in and which they are familiar with, thus provoking feelings of social repulsion and potentially even fear (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 50). With queerness being so inherently linked with evilness, viewers are prompted to dissociate personally from the villain, so that heteronormativity and patriarchal regulations in the form of the socially abiding protagonists are consistently reinforced as the only rightful way of gender expression (Davis *Girls* 24).

The authors mentioned above have certainly laid an essential ground-stone for the analysis of antagonistic characters and the representation of their gender expression. However, McLeod points out critically that scholars traditionally focused their analyses largely on a binary understanding of gender, not taking into account queer studies' notion of gender as a spectrum. Accordingly, she interprets the portrayal of villains not so much as a stereotypical image of homosexuality or transsexuality; instead, she coined the term 'quillain', a neologism between the words queer and villain, thereby emphasising the queer coded portrayal of villains across different media (v). Therefore, following McLeod's work, this MEd thesis will analyse the construction of Disney antagonists from a non-binary understanding of gender and read them as queer rather than clearly gay, lesbian or transgender (11).

4 Maleficent as the Personification of Evil (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959)

To investigate the impact of gender roles in character construction, a comparative analysis of two Disney feature films, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Maleficent* (2014), was carried out. Disney characters are usually fairly predictable and follow a certain "Disney formula for stock characters", such as hero/heroine, sidekick, mentor and, importantly, the villain (Wasko 126). This MEd thesis analyses the extent to which gender-normative attributes and performance impact a character's portrayal and whether a character's intended role changes through modifications of their gendered performance. In order to do so, the character Maleficent, who is a vital part of both texts, is examined from a gender and queer studies perspective. In the animated film, Maleficent unmistakably functions as the villain and represents pure evil. On the other side, the live-action remake foregrounds the character by turning her into the protagonist, which changes the dynamic of the film and paints a more complex image as "both hero and villain" (*Maleficent* 1:28:08). The aim of this analysis is to compare the character's portrayal in the different films with regard to gender and to identify overarching characteristics for 'villainous' performance in their sociocultural context.

The reason for selecting the source material was that both films depict the character Maleficent in a similar plotline, albeit functioning in different roles. Such a character transformation is unique in the Disney canon so far[1], with other live-action remakes largely abiding to their original texts (e.g. *Cinderella* 2015, *Beauty and the Beast* 2017, *Aladdin* 2019). The changes made from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Maleficent* allow for a direct comparison between the character's different forms of construction. The sample material constitutes an example for transfictionality, which means that although the texts share certain elements such as a common setting and characters, they ultimately present a different story (Ryan 361). Certainly, the two films narrate the same fairy tale but as argued by Schlögl & Zagalo (159), they approach the plot in significantly different ways. Rather than showing the palace's perspective from *Sleeping Beauty*, which one could also label as the dominant class in this world, the remake presents Maleficent's story from her own viewpoint, i.e. a formerly marginalised perspective, and explains the reasons for her actions (Movie Youtube 1:47). After the character analysis, a closer examination of the christening scene will be carried out. This "iconic moment" (Movie Youtube

[1] One may argue that Disney's *Cruella* (2021) with Emma Stone equally presents the notorious villain from *101 Dalmatians* (1961) as the protagonist and heroine of her own story. However, what distinguishes *Cruella* from *Maleficent* is that it presents Cruella DeVil's childhood and adolescence and not the same temporal timeframe as the original film, while *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent* are set in the same context.

5:16) is particularly interesting because it represents one of the only scenes which is almost identical in the animated film and the live-action remake. With this second analysis, it can be investigated whether differences in character performance are also reflected by cinematographic choices (Schlögl & Zagalo 158).

In *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent embodies a purely malevolent character, not even refraining from hurting a child. This depiction marks her as the personification of evil and a true antagonist in the story: After years of waiting for a child, King Stefan and Queen Leah finally present their daughter Aurora to their people. For her christening, they invite the three good fairies, Flora, Fauna and Merryweather, each intending to bless the princess with a magical gift. However, they are interrupted by the arrival of the evil witch Maleficent, who was not invited to the christening. Eventually, Maleficent places a curse on the princess, announcing that Aurora would prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die before her sixteenth birthday is over. Merryweather uses her blessings to modify the curse, declaring that instead of dying, Maleficent's spell could be broken through true love's kiss. Sixteen years later, Aurora has grown into a beautiful young woman. On her birthday, she meets Prince Philip, not knowing that he is intended to be her future husband. In the evening, the fairies take Aurora to the castle for her birthday celebrations. Maleficent appears and lures Aurora away into a castle tower, where the princess pricks her finger. To break the curse, the fairies rescue Prince Philip, who has been abducted by Maleficent, and equip him with the Sword of Truth and the Shield of Virtue. When Maleficent realises that Philip has escaped, she erects a wall of thorns around the castle and transforms into a dragon in order to stop him from breaking the curse. Maleficent and Philip battle until he throws the sword into Maleficent's heart, thereby bringing about her death. Eventually, Philip breaks the curse by awakening Aurora with a kiss.

4.1. Contextualisation of Production

During World War II, women collectively entered the labour market for the first time in order to fill the roles of the men in military duty (Gaines 44). Identification figures such as Rosie the Riveter were employed for motivational purposes, glamorising women's service by linking fierce determination with a flawless appearance and many felt hope that change was about to begin for women (Mollet *American* 23). However, this development was only temporary. The post-war era was characterised by an ideological climate in which, despite certain liberations for women, female independence gave way to more traditional notions of femininity once again. After the war had ended, there was considerable effort to restore previous social norms with a

clear separation between the sexes and many people nostalgically longed for pre-war times (Davis *Girls* 116). However, economic involvement during wartime had also triggered the wish for social change in American women, resulting in a "conflict between nostalgia and progress" (Mollet *Cultural* 25): Although the domestic sphere remained an imperative part of women's ambitions, a restriction to the private domain was no longer justified for many and they strove after opportunities outside the home (Lindsey 150).

Still, prevailing beliefs about women's established role as the housekeeper and her new role as the consumer could not stand the pace of these social changes. Although career opportunities opened up increasingly, it was a common concern that women could step into competition with men at the workplace or neglect their socially assigned duties as housewives and mothers (Mollet *Cultural* 23). Ideas about 'natural' differences between men and women were promoted fiercely during the post-war-era, thereby attempting to legitimise women's restriction to the domestic sphere (Davis *Girls* 116, Engelbrecht 22) and resulting in a "back to the home' ideology" (Lindsey 150). The media contributed to this myth of domestic bliss by portraying women as prudent suburban housewives, caring mothers and happy consumers in women's magazines, advertisements and, crucially, in films (Gadzekpo & Smith 254). Consequently, it is not by accident that numerous movies of the 1950s constructed their heroines as young women with an allegedly natural inclination for domestic work and the wish to be the ideal housewife and mother (Davis *Girls* 117). Despite the fact that many film studios gradually began to challenge the Hays Code, which lost had influence during the 1950s, Disney pursued their traditional course, thereby continuously reaffirming its reputation as a brand for family-safe entertainment on a film market, which provided more and more risky content. Consequently, what kept Disney's brand safe "was not just their initial adherence to the Hays Code back in the 1930s and 40s", but also that the studio upheld these values, which many Americans still cherished and wanted to pass on to their children, in their later films (Davis *Heroes* 8). Mollet explains that "[t]his creates an important link between the 1950s and the 1930s in terms of an ideological discussion of Disney fairy tales. Normality in the post-war period, for many Americans, was a return to the 1930s" (*Cultural* 23). Hence, it is not surprising that Aurora's portrayal reflects conservative values reminiscent of much older films: As a young woman entering the reproductive age, skilled in singing and dancing and engaging happily in cleaning, she embodies the ideal woman of the post-war era (Bell, Haas & Sells 111).

The 1940s and 50s also saw the rise of a new genre in cinema: the Film Noir. In contrast to the comic relief provided by genres from earlier periods such as the screwball-comedy (Renzi 129),

the Film Noir tried to capture the despair, deceit and imminent doom, which many people felt after World War II (Dixon 3). One of the prominent archetypes in this genre is the femme fatale (Grossman 4). This character is marked by her outstanding beauty and natural charisma; simultaneously, however, the 'dangerous woman' strategically uses her abilities to manipulate society and to precipitate unsuspecting men into ruin (Bell, Haas & Sells 115, Dixon 5). Grossman argues that the threat posed by the femme fatale can be read as a "projection of male anxiety" (41): The danger of this character stems from her unpredictability and the lack of authority men have over her, thus reflecting common social concerns at the time (Place 50). This symbolic shift in power naturally went against the idea of American society in the 1950s (Bell, Haas & Sells 115). While it was certainly considered desirable for women to be a distraction for men, this distraction should be out of pure intention and without ulterior motifs (Davis *Girls* 122), which does not apply to the femme fatale, who seduces her environment to push her own agenda. Furthermore, the thought of women not following men's decisions and instead, trying to deceive them in order to subvert their power was inconceivable (Grossman 8). The portrayal of the femme fatale was heavily influenced by classic Hollywood actresses such as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, who had set the tone for a revolution of glamorous femininity with their extravagant, masculine styling and their edgy facial features and who served as an idol for many women at the time (Brode 172, *Les Sorcières* 5:47). However, the motif of the femme fatale is mainly a warning to audiences: While her appearance and authority may certainly be captivating, "these deadly women are also doomed women" (Bell, Haas & Sells 116), excluded from a happy ending and therefore not an ideal to strive after for viewers.

Certainly, the dark motifs of the Film Noir are not representative of the joyful, optimistic world of the Disney fairy tale. The grim characters embody anti-American values such as jealousy and resentment and thus, without doubt represent evilness (Mollet *Cultural* 39). Still, with the early female villains, the femme fatale found her way into the Disney universe in the motif of the witch as the seductive vamp (Bell, Haas & Sells 116, Brode 172). Instead of following the stereotype of the classic fairy tale witch as an unattractive hag, the first Disney antagonists are painted as elegant, self-confident and authoritative women, who are only interested in destruction and self-aggrandisement (*Les Sorcières* 6:15). Even though her appearance changed, this portrayal of the witch still reflects suspicion towards transgressive and mighty femininity by holding on to the early imagery of the independent, mature woman as an immoral

individual (Shun-Hsiang Shih 51): Since no husband or father is present to put her into place, she is not confined to patriarchal regulations and, what is more, she cannot be controlled by masculinity (*Les Sorcières* 7:43). This conceptualisation of the witch signifies disregard for the established social order, which contradicted American ideals of femininity at the time and turned the vamp into an unpredictable, evil force, who was prone to bring chaos into the orderly gender hierarchy of patriarchy (Fera 41).

Although first deliberations for making a film based on Grimm's fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* began in 1951, the final product was not released until 1959. These delays were caused partly by Walt Disney's other projects, particularly the opening of Disneyworld in Florida (Mollet *American* 37); primarily, however, the production of *Sleeping Beauty* proved difficult for the Walt Disney Studios because after *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, the producers were afraid that another film about a princess based on a European fairy tale would not stand out enough. Consequently, the company employed Eyvind Earle, a renowned artist who was famous for his modernist, graphic interpretations of pre-Renaissance art, to design the backgrounds for the animation. His drafts ultimately determined the visual overall aesthetic of the film, which is considered the characteristic feature of *Sleeping Beauty* today and marks the film as a milestone in Disney history: Instead of the cartoon style employed in earlier Disney films, *Sleeping Beauty*'s aesthetic was intended to be static, and conservative (Sean Dudley 9:15). This decision significantly impacted character design. The animators' main objective with the characters was to draw them realistically, therefore employing live-action models to capture human movement as authentically as possible (Sean Dudley 23:58). The portrayal of Maleficent, created by Disney animator Marc Davis, was influenced by Earle's aesthetic as well as Eleanor Audley's performance as voice actress and life-action reference for Maleficent. Audley, an artist who had already worked with Disney as *Lady Tremaine* in *Cinderella*, had been cast as Maleficent at the recommendation of Walt Disney himself and served as a key inspiration for the animation team (Darcy 65). Marc Davis even pointed out that Audley's acting was responsible for several of Maleficent's characteristic expressions and mannerisms, which were ultimately included in the animation: While earlier drafts show her as an old hag reminiscent of the Evil Queen's disguise in *Snow White*, Audley prompted Davis to construct the character as the powerful, elegant vamp known today (Sean Dudley 29:30). Nowadays, Maleficent holds the position as the leader of the 'Disney Villain Squad', a marketing line similar to the Disney Princesses but targeted at adults (Mandracchia 229) and represents one of the most notorious antagonists in the Disney universe (Darcy 62).

4.2. Character Analysis

As evident from her telling name composed of the Latin words 'malus' and 'facere', which translates to 'doing evil', Maleficent embodies the image of the malicious witch in *Sleeping Beauty*: She is repeatedly associated with evil actions, from minor mischief such as ruining Flora's roses to grave offenses, the most terrible of them being the deadly curse on the baby Aurora, which initiates the conflict of the story. From the beginning to the end of the film, Maleficent is painted as a purely malevolent character, without remorse, much less redemption.

The Appearance of 'Evil'

Maleficent's physical appearance is characterised by a number of features which mask her femininity. Firstly, this is most apparent with her headpiece, which covers her hair and keeps Maleficent's hairstyle a secret. Pergament explains that "[a]lthough hair is a physiological phenomenon, it is also a social one" (43), meaning that in addition to individual preferences, hair also conveys social messages to one's environment (Weitz 668). Especially long, luscious hair is commonly associated with positive traits such as health (Frost 277), youthfulness, beauty and, importantly, femininity (Matz & Hinsz 569). According to Fink et al., quality and length of female hair even play a crucial role for assessing women's attractiveness with participants justifying their judgements explicitly with the aforementioned connotations (4). Therefore, Maleficent's representation without visible hair suggests that she does not possess any of these positive qualities: As a villain, she is not supposed to be considered beautiful or youthful. Instead, the lack of hair conceals her femininity and implies physical unattractiveness, both for the male characters in the film as well as the audience (Sharmin & Sattar 54). On the other side, the decision not to show Maleficent's hair also functions as a display of power: While long hair potentially represents an asset for finding a partner, it may have the opposite effect in professional contexts: Long hair has traditionally been interpreted as a sign of naivety or even simple-mindedness (Warner 360), an idea which is still prevalent today: As shown by Weitz, long hairstyles on women frequently create suspicions of incompetence, especially in career-related contexts (278). Therefore, such an active effort to defeminise one's performance can be read as an endeavour to assert one's qualification. This behavioural pattern is prevalent among women entering male-dominated fields, such as politics (Beard 54) or comedy (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 5) and may also be valid for Maleficent's appearance. The decision to hide Maleficent's hair emphasises her competence (in her magical powers) and social authority in contrast to the other female characters, especially the naïve and innocent protagonist Aurora.

Interestingly, covered or short hair constitutes a dominant motif among female Disney villains, most famously embodied by the Evil Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, 1937), Lady Tremaine (*Cinderella*, 1950) with her matronly updo and the sea-witch Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989) with her styled, short hair.

In addition to hair, Maleficent's body shape represents a contrast to traditional standards of femininity in the 1950s. From her face and willowy hands with long, fine fingers, which are the only visible parts of her body since the rest is covered in a bulky black and purple cloak, it can be inferred that she must be emaciated. While thinness generally represented a beauty ideal across 20th century Western society, Maleficent's meagre appearance and her sharp facial structures with her prominent chin do not conform with the softness expected from female bodies (Herbozo et al. 22). Instead, her body shape is defined by sharp angles, which is a characteristic feature of Disney villains (Artz 118). Even though the film's general aesthetic was inspired by angular shapes, other female characters exhibit a softer physique such as Aurora with her delicate silhouette and the fairies with their plump, grandmotherly bodies (Bell, Haas & Sells 109 & 118).

All in all, it is striking how Maleficent fails to conform with standards of feminine beauty (e.g. with her body shape and her subtly masculine chin) and refuses to show her feminine side actively, for example with her bulky clothing and her headpiece. Maleficent's defeminising features juxtapose her with the heteronormatively attractive body of the protagonist Aurora (Herbozo et al. 30), thereby implying that individuals who do not align with gendered expectations of beauty do not have redeeming qualities about them (Wellman 12). Even more importantly, however, Disney often uses physical appearance as a cue for a character's morality (Golden & Jacoby 303): By awarding their 'good' characters with equally good looks, Disney equates attractiveness with other positive attributes such as friendliness, good will and righteousness (Rutherford & Baker n.p.) and "perpetuat[es] the idea that women need to be physically attractive to be of value in society" (Shawcroft et al. 359). In turn, Disney's strategy to make their female villains unattractive through defeminisation (Sharmin & Sattar 55) not only signals to audiences that deviant behaviour is visible in the form of a grotesque, almost estranged physical appearance, which was a common belief in 1950s Western society (Davis *Girls* 117), but it also implicitly conveys the idea that non-conformism with traditional beauty standards makes an individual less worthy as a member of society (Bowman 89).

Still, Disney is eager to present their audiences with intriguing characters (Giroux 96) and Maleficent is not an exception to that. Despite certain attempts of defeminisation, her grotesque portrayal also displays elements of excessive hyper-femininity, which results in the almost "drag queen-esque look" (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Difficult* n.p.) employed for many of the female Disney villains (Griffin 73, Helmsing 67). Maleficent's appearance is characterised by strong makeup with overly arched eyebrows, heavy eyeshadow and bloodred lipstick, prominent jewellery as well as an accurate manicure with red, filed nails. On the one hand, such deliberate efforts to enhance one's femininity were appreciated as a return to glamour and classical womanhood after World War II (Lindsey 150). On the other hand, however, these features also emphasise Maleficent's need for excessive beauty labour, especially when putting her into contrast with the naturally attractive Aurora: While the young woman embodies genuine beauty, the middle-aged Maleficent is no longer awarded with natural good looks; instead, she must rely on 'aids' such as heavy makeup and jewellery to achieve a similar effect, thereby endorsing Disney's tendency to equate mature age with villainy while goodness is symbolised by adolescent bliss (Engelbrecht 28). Consequently, a closer look at Maleficent's portrayal reveals that she not only fails to meet traditional beauty standards in the first place, but she also attempts to deceive her surroundings by posing as a 'real' woman (Griffin 74). However, the irony of the female villain is that even with all the hard work she puts into her looks, she is still disqualified from genuine femininity (Brode 125). Because of that, all she will ever accomplish is to look like a distorted caricature, while only good (who conveniently always conforms to gender norms) is endowed with natural beauty (Herbozo et al. 31).

Also apart from her beauty labour, Maleficent's efforts to present herself as alluring may be read as an attempt to seduce her surroundings, thus constructing Maleficent as a destructive femme fatale, who exploits her femininity to get what she wants. In the Film Noir, the femme fatale's main tool to obtain her goals is her seductiveness: She deliberately performs an exaggerated image of femininity, thereby luring her victims into believing in her vulnerability as a woman; however, her seductiveness is only a deception to exploit others and to get what she wants. With this procedure, the femme fatale is the one who pulls the strings in society, thus challenging well-established norms of power (Grossman 4). Maleficent constitutes an example of such 'treacherous' femininity with her smooth voice and her enticing body language. However, in contrast to the other naïve and almost child-like female characters, Maleficent's seductiveness seems out of place, thus reminding the audience of the cunning

nature of the female villain (Bell, Haas & Sells 115). Director Jeff Labrecque corroborates this idea by explaining that Maleficent was intentionally drawn as both terrifying and captivating in order to emphasise her maliciousness (par. 1). While patriarchal society traditionally saw it as the heroine's moral quality to hide her sexuality and to wait patiently for her romantic happy ending (Radner 57), the evil woman shows her seductiveness on the surface, displaying it aggressively to her environment, both inside the text as well as the viewers (Brode 125). Consequently, Maleficent stands in contrast with Aurora's purity, which emphasises the princess's nobility and the witch's moral degeneration. Importantly, Maleficent is the only character in the film who exploits her hypersexual power to push her agenda (Rabison 202): The fairies as examples for mature female characters are merely shown as grandmotherly helpers with the primary goal to protect Aurora rather than the powerful magical creatures they truly are. Even the two middle-aged male characters, King Stephan and King Hubert, are represented as well-meaning but essentially impotent. Despite their sociopolitical rank, they are powerless against others, may that be Maleficent's evil forces or their own children's disobedience (Mollet *Cultural* 40). It is only Maleficent, who exploits her enticing charisma to obtain her goals. By linking this seductiveness to the destructive villain exclusively, the audience is reminded that expressive social authority is to be rejected, especially for women (Brode 125), thereby not only appealing to the social climate of 1950s America, in which female sexual empowerment was unimaginable (Brode 119), but also affirming the wholesome "Disney mystique" (Griffin 47) of chastity and innocence as key values in Disney culture.

A Vicious Temper

Maleficent's great powers are rooted in her wickedness: While the three fairies, Maleficent's polar opposites in the film, can only use their magic to bring joy, Maleficent is not limited in her actions, not even by the authority of the royal court, who seems to be equally helpless against her. Importantly, Maleficent savours her evil energy, for example when she ridicules Prince Philip while holding him captive in her dungeons, which is a particularly strong marker of her maliciousness (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Social* 1215). In her sarcastic remarks, it becomes obvious that she feels no empathy or remorse for her actions (Helmsing 66); instead, she relishes this part of her personality. This narrative of the powerful woman who exploits her strength to spread fear represents a critical motif in the portrayal of female Disney villains since it echoes social concerns of women leaving the domestic sphere (Mollet *Cultural* 38): With her tendency of self-aggrandizement and narcissism, Maleficent certainly reflects what society feared as the inevitable outcome of women's empowerment through increased career

opportunities, especially at the expense of men, who felt increasingly emasculated by women entering the workforce in the post-war era (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 1, Lindsey 149). This is particularly noticeable when she refers to herself as the "mistress of all evil" (*Sleeping Beauty* 51:18), thereby putting herself in a position of superiority. According to her self-confident claims, nobody has the potential to challenge her powers, not even the traditionally masculine domain of nobility.

Maleficent's self-aggrandisement of her magical potency is also reflected in her living space, the 'Forbidden Mountains', which is a castle on top of a mountain chain. Maleficent does not share her life with anyone except her raven and her goons. Similar to her own physical appearance, the castle's aesthetic is characterised by spiky shapes and dark colours. With the gargoyles and the rocks embellished with skulls, it constitutes a terrifying place, which represents a stark contrast to the magnificence of King Stefan's castle. In this way, the film juxtaposes the two castles and, by extension, Maleficent and King Stefan as leaders. The public sphere, exemplified by the royal court, is traditionally considered a space of reason, competence and, importantly, masculinity (Johnson 13, Young et al. 272). However, by establishing herself as a leader of her own with her castle, Maleficent illegitimately elevates herself to Stefan's level and appropriates the power of the court for herself. By acting as a usurper of male power, Maleficent once more counteracts traditional expectations of femininity, which require women to gladly accept a subordinate role to male authority (Cranny-Francis et al. 2). However, in contrast to the royal castle, the 'Forbidden Mountains' are represented as an old, destroyed place. Hence, the film symbolically implies that despite Maleficent's efforts, her castle constitutes only a poor imitation of a public, male space, similar to how she as a woman only ever represents a grotesque caricature of a true leader.

Interestingly, despite often being referred to as the mightiest character in the film, Maleficent is ultimately defeated by Prince Philip. During the final battle, the fairies gift him with an enchanted sword which, after their spell, magically stabs Maleficent. Although the fairies could have achieved the same outcome without Philip, who only acts as a carrier of the sword, the presence of a heroic man seems to be needed in order to re-establish the patriarchal order disturbed by Maleficent (Brydon 131). The objective of bringing the "sexual, manipulating woman" (i.e. the female villain) to fall in order to restore gender balance represents a vital motif in films of the 1940s and 1950s (Kaplan 2). Still, the underlying message of the need to remove the villain from the narrative in order to bring back order is that those who challenge social

structures will ultimately be punished, while those who conform to these regulations prevail (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 12).

Apart from her magical abilities, Maleficent also radiates power through her ambition and persistence: Even after sixteen years and several setbacks, she is determined to press her plan ahead and refuses to let go of her – as far as the audience knows – irrational anger. In fact, when she does not obtain her goals, she flies into rage easily and exhibits impulsive, even violent behaviour. Maleficent arguably "demonstrate[s] a definite sense of agency" (Davis *Girls* 109) in that she takes initiative and ensures the outcome she desires. This side of the character is particularly noticeable when she invites herself to the christening and when she captures Prince Philip to impede him breaking the curse. In an interesting line of argument, Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar and Streiff argue that Maleficent's anger for not being invited to the christening is not necessarily triggered by the fear of social exclusion as one might think considering that as a woman, Maleficent should be expected to long for community; in fact, her fury emerges from feelings of rejection from the male power of the royal court (5). Thus, while social exclusion is bearable for Maleficent, it is the segregation from the male sphere of agency and power which irritates her. Considering women's role at the time of film production, such an overwhelming wish for self-assertion and strong ambition does not conform with women's assigned responsibilities in the 1950s, which put women firmly within the domestic sphere (Davis *Girls* 116). In fact, this level of agency and determination was considered unusual for a woman in films, particularly in the light of the Federal Production Code, which disapproved of active female characters and demanded women to be represented in their role as the housekeeper and caregiver (Davis *Girls* 101). Interestingly, Maleficent's personality traits once more represent a transgression of established gender boundaries (Sharmin & Sattar 53): Qualities such as self-confidence, ambition and authority are not uniquely found in antagonists; instead, they typically represent masculine-coded virtues, which help the hero to defeat the wicked villain and to restore order (England et al. 566). By taking on these same characteristics, Maleficent undermines the heteronormative Disney standard, which requires women to be obedient and demure and only allows male characters to take on agentic traits (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 3). This strikes the audience as bizarre and therefore, emphasises her deviant nature as an antagonist.

Despite Maleficent's refusal of displaying 'proper' femininity and her inclination for masculine personality traits, it is a traditionally female-coded feature which initiates the central conflict in the film: her jealousy. The birth of the young princess irritates the witch so much that she curses

the baby to death. Maleficent even puts an end to the gifts presented to Aurora by the three fairies, thereby displaying superficiality, greed and selfishness, all of which were condemned fiercely in American society since the Wall Street crash and still resonated in the portrayal of villains in much later films (Mollet *American* 225). Interestingly, Mollet (*Cultural* 39) argues that the reason for Maleficent's jealousy is not necessarily the love Aurora is met with by her people as has been suggested by other scholars (e.g. Engelbrecht 29), but for her ability to rule the kingdom once she comes of age, thus once again pointing to Maleficent's hunger for political power rather than her wish for social belonging. Having argued that Maleficent as a female villain mainly displays masculine-coded traits, her jealousy of Aurora seems contradictory at first. However, the dynamic between her gender-transgressive personality traits and her overemphasised jealousy once more underlines the combination of masculine and feminine features embodied by the character. This aspect has two major implications for character construction: Firstly, it suggests that even though Maleficent occasionally transgresses gender boundaries with her actions, she cannot escape the feminine side of her personality. Although she desperately attempts to enter male spaces by taking on masculine-coded traits, she does not leave her femininity behind completely, thereby reflecting notions of biological essentialism, which was used to justify the 'natural' differences between the sexes (Davis *Girls* 116). Furthermore, another interpretative approach links Maleficent's jealousy with madness, which is central in the portrayal of evil women in Disney. Maleficent's jealousy is so strong that it shifts into obsessiveness, thereby implying that "[e]vil in Disney […] is a symptom of madness" and denigrating the expression of female anger (Davis *Girls* 109). Such a depiction is especially problematic since it not only vilifies mental illness, but it also implies that when women are offended, their motivations and concerns are typically an issue of overreaction and irrationality rather than justified exasperation as it would be assumed for male anger (Tyson *Critical* 85).

Unpleasant Company

Even though Aurora and Maleficent, both designed by Marc Davis, look similar with their tall and elegant appearance, their personalities differ like day and night. Such a juxtaposition between two women, who resemble one another physically but display contrasting characters, constituted a prominent film setting in early Hollywood cinema and served as a subtle strategy to teach audiences about the proper way of being a woman (Davis *Girls* 126): By rewarding favourable femininity in marriage and wealth, exemplified by the pure and obedient Aurora, while punishing the extravagant and strong-willed Maleficent, *Sleeping Beauty* puts the two

characters into comparison and emphasises the moral value of following the traditional path of femininity. At the same time, the film justifies Maleficent's ultimate demise by implying that due to her harsh, rapacious and gender-ideologically inappropriate behaviour, she is destined to fail in society (Bowman 81).

Seemingly without reason, Maleficent actively tries to interfere with Aurora's life on multiple occasions out of pure vengeance (Griffin 75). She bitterly resents the young princess and gives vent to her feelings of envy and acrimony to such an extent that she develops an obsessiveness to eliminate Aurora. Picking up on this character dynamic, Bowman argues that Maleficent's portrayal reflects Erich Neumann's concept of the *Terrible Mother* (90): According to this theory, the archetype of the *Great Mother*, a goddess figure from ancient mythology, embodies the life-bearing and altruistic nature of motherhood while her derogating opposite, the *Terrible Mother*, endangers the child's safety and deprives them from happiness and encouragement (Bowman 82). In the classical Disney film, the relationship between the child and the *Terrible Mother* is frequently represented with a unilateral rivalry between a jealous middle-aged woman and an oblivious, naïve teenage heroine as exemplified by Maleficent and Aurora[2] (Davis *Girls* 108): The witch poses an active threat to the princess's life and robs her from a joyful childhood in the traditional family unit. In the social climate of the 1950s, which promoted domesticity and nurturing motherhood as a woman's natural interests, Maleficent's destructive nature strikes the audience as an example for failed womanhood and the viewers struggle to feel sympathy for her (Basinger 432), which facilitates her construction as the villain. By furthermore drawing a binary contrast between Maleficent's cold-blooded violence against Aurora and the fairies as well-meaning caregivers, the film implicitly supports the prevalent "back-to-the-home ideology" (Lindsey 150) of the 1950s in that it reminds audiences of the feminine ideal of nurturing motherhood.

Still, Maleficent's destructive intentions go beyond that: As soon as she realises that her plan is to be thwarted, she immediately attempts to prevent Philip from saving the princess by abducting him, raising a wall of brambles around the castle, and even transforming herself into a dragon in their final battle. With these considerable efforts, she blocks the romantic union between the hero and the heroine and acts as an obstacle to heterosexual love, which represents

[2] Maleficent never interacts thoroughly with Aurora, thus technically not functioning as a mother figure. However, she constitutes an antithesis to the three good fairies, who, in contrast to Aurora's powerless biological parents, exemplify the nurturing qualities of the *Good Mother* by watching over her and protecting her from harm for years. Therefore, it can be argued that despite not being explicitly referred to as a (step-)mother in contrast to other *Terrible Mothers* in Disney, Maleficent's role has a similar function in the film (Bowman 89, Davis *Girls* 109).

a key characteristic of the Disney villain (McLeod 41). After Aurora's and Philip's encounter in the woods, they seem destined for one other and the audience eagerly awaits their reunion. However, Maleficent continuously disrupts the relationship, thereby not only depriving the hero and heroine from their happy ending but also frustrating the audience, who root for the young couple and who are familiar with the narrative pattern that the heterosexual union constitutes a core principle for closing the story (Griffin 4). When heterosexual romance is constructed as a force of transcendent power, which helps to solve all conflict in the Disney universe (Martin & Kazyak 327), the antagonist's effort to interfere with the protagonists' romantic union implies that they are not interested in such a happy ending for society. Only when Maleficent is finally eliminated, the relationship between Aurora and Philip is rendered possible, which emphasises the necessity of removing the villain in order to return to 'normality' (Elliot-Smith 10).

Even though *Sleeping Beauty* clearly focuses on Aurora's and Philip's love match, thereby appealing to the increasing wish for modernity emerging among younger generations at the brink of 1960s-America (Mollet *Cultural* 38), the film upholds traditional notions of heterosexual reproductivity as a signal for morality (Bell, Haas & Sells 119). Aurora is a symbol for new beginnings, which is a positive attribute in the optimistic world of Disney (Wilson 118): Her birth is celebrated in the whole kingdom, her name refers to the red light at dawn and even though it is not addressed explicitly in the film, she will probably have a family with Philip in the future (Bowman 87) as pointed out by King Hubert and King Stefan, who already toast to their grandchildren and plan a family home for the couple as "a place to raise their own brood" (*Sleeping Beauty* 41:18). Consequently, Aurora's intentions to marry and have children place her in line with conservative expectations towards femininity (Mollet *Cultural* 40). In contrast, Maleficent's portrayal as an old spinster without any chance for procreation highlights that she is neither successful nor interested in romantic relationships and, consequently, reproductivity (Bowman 89), which was rendered with suspicion and even rejection "in a society which fetishizes (sic!) production" (Doane 2). Furthermore, society heavily advocated the idea that for a woman to 'deserve' a husband, she had to accept her role as a woman in a patriarchal society (Tyson *Critical* 68). Taking this into account, Maleficent's open rejection of her feminine side and her subsequent lack of romance acts as a deterrent in a social climate, in which women increasingly wished to push the boundaries of acceptable femininity (Mollet *American* 23): With the villain opposing to romance so adamantly, it is emphasised that love represents the only moral path to (feminine) fulfilment (Basinger 432). Maleficent's aversion for romance is even more evident when she mocks Philip for believing in Disney's widely

propagated notions of 'happily ever after' and 'true love conquers all' while holding him captive in her dungeon. With these cultural messages being so prevalent in the Disney universe, they have slowly turned into universal beliefs shared by characters and audiences alike (Giroux 68). However, by rejecting these ideas, even ridiculing them, Maleficent distances herself from this ideology, thus separating herself from the Disney community and stressing her status as a social outsider (Mollet *Cultural* 40).

Even outside romantic relationships, Maleficent rejects communitarianism. As stated by Fauna, the witch is oblivious to kindness, love and communitarianism, all of which are traits traditionally coded as feminine (England et al. 567), which once more highlights Maleficent's rejection of her feminine side. With the exception of her raven Diablo, Maleficent operates on her own, which is a central parallel with the anti-hero in the Film Noir (Mollet *Cultural* 25). Even after her big triumph when Aurora pricks her finger, she does not join her servants in celebrating but only sits on the side. Speaking of the 'goons', the pig-like demons who function as her subjects, her relationship with these creatures is characterised exclusively by disrespect and feelings of superiority from Maleficent's side (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Maleficent with her servants (*Sleeping Beauty* 16:59).

For most of the film, Maleficent insults her servants as 'fools' or 'imbeciles' and even shows violent behaviour towards them, for example when she throws them down a staircase. This inability to show emotional warmth goes against Disney's dominant depiction of femininity (England et al. 567). Only when Maleficent is happy with their work, she refers to them as her 'pets', thereby not only emphasising their subordinate position to her but also illustrating that she is a disloyal leader, who only supports her subjects when they cooperate with her. This represents another contrast with the other female characters in the film, who form friendships with the animals in the woods and treat them as equals (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 3).

A True Beast

Maleficent is repeatedly described as an extremely powerful witch. This label is vital for the interpretation of her portrayal: Witches were traditionally feared for their involvement with demonic forces, which was said to be the source of their great magical potency (Shun-Hasiang Shih 51). Similarly, Maleficent prides herself upon her relations with the "forces of evil" (17:18), which portrays her as the epitome of maliciousness in a conservative Christian-American society (Bowman 91). On the other side, Maleficent's designation as a witch mitigates her powers: After all, a witch's power is not acquired naturally but obtained through an immoral arrangement with the devil, thus suggesting that if a woman possesses great capabilities, especially ones greater than men's, her power must have been gained illegitimately, while male power is hardly ever questioned (*Les Sorcières* 2:56).

Maleficent's depiction as a terrifying creature is underlined by the motif of dehumanisation. According to Longmore "[d]eformity of body symbolizes (sic!) deformity of soul" (133), thereby pointing to the intersection between physical aberrations and implied malevolence. Antagonists' non-human body features such as greenish skin have been interpreted as a signal for ill will across different texts (cf. Donnely for an analysis of the *Wizard of Oz*). Similarly, Maleficent's bodily features such as her Minotaurean horns, the yellow eyes and the claw-like fingernails make her appear as a mythical creature rather than a human being, hence emphasising Maleficent's deviation from the social standard of what a body should look like and implying that such excessive wickedness cannot be human at all (Brydon 134). Consequently, the animalistic elements of Maleficent's appearance do not only represent a justification for her exclusion from human society, but they also serve as a stigma for her malicious nature (Bown 27). Ultimately, Maleficent's dehumanisation culminates when she transforms into a dragon near the end of the film. The active effort to change her body reflects Maleficent's dynamic character and her determination to succeed, regardless of the cost (Davis *Girls* 107). Furthermore, Maleficent's animal-like physique, first only on a subtle level and then displayed openly with her transformation, are to evoke "primal fears and animal phobias" (Bell, Haas & Sells 116) in viewers and draw another parallel with the femme fatale, who is equally painted as a cunning predator, strategically ambushing her prey (i.e. patriarchal order), manipulating and ultimately, destroying it. Since animals cannot be understood in the same way as humans, the animalistic villain constitutes an even more imminent threat, thus emphasising the danger emerging from them (Bell, Haas & Sells 117).

4.3. Christening Scene

Aurora's christening begins with the three good fairies, who grant her one gift each: After Flora and Fauna present the princess with beauty and song, the youngest fairy, Merryweather, begins to express her wishes. However, she is interrupted by Maleficent's arrival. This short sequence already leaves no doubt to Maleficent's wickedness and destructive nature: The doors burst open, a strong wind picks up and a sound of thunder fills the throne room. Such weather conditions represent a stark contrast to the sunshine and happiness of the Hollywood musical at the beginning of the film (Mollet *American* 37). Furthermore, the harsh, uncontrollable weather foreshadows Maleficent's magical powers, which are equally unpredictable and grave as a natural disaster (Fera 41). The motif of weather is critical for the representation of gender dynamics in Disney media: Maleficent's command over storm and lightning imitates the imagery surrounding the Olympian king Zeus, possibly the most prominent illustration of masculinity (Dundes, Streiff & Streiff 3). In appropriating this role for herself, Maleficent already questions the patriarchal order of the royal court and subverts male power even before appearing in person.

Also the musical theme is transformed upon Maleficent's arrival, implying that after the well-wishers, an evil witch is to be expected now. Not only the volume changes considerably, thus pointing to Maleficent's megalomania and her conspicuous presence, but also the choice of instruments used in the musical themes implies a change in the gender dynamics: While the gifts of the fairies are accompanied by soft tunes characterised by violins and piccolo flutes, instruments commonly considered symbols of feminity, and overlain with a soft choir, Maleficent's arrival is accompanied by the play of larger instruments such as the tuba and the trombone, traditionally masculine-coded instruments (Hallam et al. 15). Furthermore, the cymbal with its loud, incisive tone is used to announce Maleficent's presence.

Eventually, Maleficent herself manifests from a flash of green light. The colour green is frequently interpreted ambivalently: While it refers to nature and health (e.g. green grass), other connotations for this colour include degeneration, corruption and even poison (Bellantoni 160). Additionally, green also acts as a representation of jealousy, which constitutes Maleficent's main motivation for coming to the christening (Mollet *American* 38)[3]. In addition to green,

[3] The colour green also functions as a signal for evilness in Disney, which is even more noticeable when considering its presence in connection with villains in general: In addition to Maleficent, numerous Disney antagonists are associated with a lime green colour scheme, such as the light in Scar's cave in *The Lion King* and Ursula's body colour when she fights King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* (Hundertmark 9).

Maleficent's colour scheme also prominently displays black and purple, which are not only visible on her cloak but also in the light conjured by her magic. Both colours are commonly interpreted as colours of mourning (Grzybowski & Kupidura-Majewski 400), hence potentially inappropriate to wear at a christening and foreshadowing Maleficent's malicious intentions for the young princess Aurora. Furthermore, in addition to being connected with royalty and wealth in many cases, the colour purple also symbolises sin and rebellion against an established system (Fera 44). Both of these interpretative approaches correspond with Maleficent's character: While she acts as a usurper of power by constructing herself as royalty with her purple cloak, she also questions the power of the established social order and attempts to overthrow it.

A conversation between Maleficent and the royal couple follows. She acts sarcastically surprised that, as declared by Merryweather, she was not "wanted" (*Sleeping Beauty* 8:04) at the princess' presentation, thereby indicating that Maleficent is fully aware of her exclusion from society. Yet, Merryweather's statement illustrates that not only Maleficent herself is not welcome at the christening, but also her values including jealousy and resentment have no place in the Disney fairy tale kingdom and, thus, in society (Mollet *Cultural* 37). The sequence of Maleficent conversing with the royal couple is also interesting with regard to cinematography. While her imminent arrival is displayed in a full-body shot, the camera immediately zooms into a medium shot. Starting from this moment, the previously fixed camera changes frequently between full-body shots and medium shots, mostly from the side and showing Maleficent in seeming conversation with the royal couple while the audience watches them as part of the crowd in the throne room. Only Maleficent is talking. She is not interested in true conversation, but as stated by animator Marc Davis himself, compels others to listen to her monologues (Sean Dudley 20:34), thereby again demonstrating how ruthlessly she exploits her power over others. At one point, the camera approaches her face until she is finally only shown in close-up, a prominent tool to depict the female villain, which is to show her grotesque beauty and to demonstrate the evil power she possesses. The close-up enables the villainess to address the audience directly, almost as if she extends her orders beyond the screen and casts her evil spell over the viewers, too (Bell, Haas & Sells 116). Furthermore, by dominating the screen with her presence, the evil woman exerts power over the spectator in that the viewers have no other option than to observe her mimics. Through the close-up, the female villain 'pulls' the audience into intimate closeness until they are forced to meet her female gaze. This power awards the female antagonist with a new sense of agency as opposed to women's more traditional role in film as an object of the male gaze (Doane 41-47).

The fact that the camera continuously approaches Maleficent's face with every shot also reveals the increasing threat she poses: While she comes to the christening, seemingly only to clarify a misunderstanding, the camera comes nearer the closer she becomes to uttering her curse as if she was a predator who slowly sneaks up on their prey. The only exception to this camera movement is another full body shot which places Maleficent in the centre of the screen (see figure 2). She opens her arms widely, thereby showcasing her full costume with her dramatic sleeves and increasing in size, which is commonly interpreted as a behavioural cue for agonistic demeanour and dominance in the animal kingdom (Drews 285), thus once more reflecting her animalistic side and her role as the predator.

Figure 2. Full-body shot of Maleficent in the throne room (*Sleeping Beauty* 8:46).

These climactic and expressive actions "enhance her power by allowing her to take up more space" (Wellman 6) on the screen and force others, both the characters within the film as well as the audience, to pay close attention to her. This is in line with general research about Disney villains, who tend to "move and speak with enormous style and panache" (Griffin 74), thus emphasising the overinflated nature of their performance. This moment is accompanied by a loud tune of the horn while Maleficent declares: "Listen well, all of you", even though everyone is already listening, which indicates her craving for admiration and her self-ascribed superiority. Her active efforts to gain attention contrast her from the Victorian feminine ideal, which was to draw male (i.e. the court's) attention to her without actively trying or without malicious intent (Davis *Girls* 122). Instead, Maleficent puts herself at the centre of attention, forcing male attention on her. In order to emphasise her verbal message, she stamps her magic rod, which some scholars have interpreted as a phallic symbol, hence serving as another tool to emulate male power (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streff 5). Interestingly, while her costume becomes

larger with this movement, the lines on her cloak still trace out a meagre body and long arms, thus hinting at the fact that her powers are not genuine. Furthermore, the lining of her costume is reminiscent of a bat, similar to the animals' long, thin fingers visible in their wings, which underlines her animalistic side. In fact, Animator Mark Davis confirmed that his intention was to draw Maleficent "like a giant vampire bat to create a feeling of menace" (Solomon 189 qtd. in Bell, Haas & Sells 117), which explicitly links the concepts of dehumanisation and the threat Maleficent poses at society.

The moment when Maleficent utters the curse also represents the moment when she is most dangerous, exemplified by another camera-zoom towards her body, which only shows her hand and her magic sphere. After scenes displaying demon-shaped magical lights, again coloured green, black and purple to indicate threat, and Aurora's grave to foreshadow Maleficent's plan, the curse-sequence ends with a close-up of her face: She no longer appears elegant or beautiful. This shot shows the grotesque, deranged face of a witch (figure 3).

Figure 3. Comparison between close-ups of Maleficent during the christening scene (*Sleeping Beauty*, 8:07 and 9:14)

In contrast to earlier scenes which depict her as a mature but elegant femme fatale, this shot foregrounds the negative effects of age on her appearance by disclosing the pouches under her eyes and the wrinkles around her mouth. Also her crooked nose is more prominent when she reveals her genuine maliciousness. This subtle change in her appearance once more underlines the close relationship between Maleficent's inner wickedness and undesirable, 'witch-like' physical appearance, which represented a belief advocated heavily during the 1950s (Davis *Girls* 177).

Eventually, the scene ends with Maleficent leaving the christening again. In contrast to earlier parts of the film, in which the power of the court is still intact since Maleficent has chosen not

to intervene yet, her curse overthrows the male order and chaos commences. The volume increases and the weather becomes harsh again. In line with this reduction of orderliness at the court, Maleficent is increasingly portrayed as an inhuman, supernatural being: First and foremost, this idea is transported by King Stefan's explicit order to "[s]eize that creature", thereby indicating that Maleficent's actions make her so evil that she is not even considered human anymore. Additionally, Maleficent's dehumanisation also becomes manifest when she leaves the scene assuming the form of a reptile in a green flame while the soldiers have to watch her inactively (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 5).

Another important motif in this sequence is Maleficent's laughter. While Disney heroes and heroines generally use laughter to show positive emotions in prosocial contexts, evil laughter mainly occurs when the villain takes pleasure in the chaos caused by them (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Social* 1219), hence marking their laughter as an unambiguous marker for the "guilty intentionality" of their wicked actions (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Structure* 72). Therefore, Maleficent's laughter after cursing the young princess serves as evidence for her evilness: Her plan has been realised and her hysterical laughter signals to the audience that even though she is fully aware of her actions' consequences, she feels no remorse. In addition to purpose, also the form of Maleficent's laughter is critical: According to research by Wood, Martin and Niedenthal, acoustic factors of laughter such as volume, intensity and pitch exert influence on how a person is perceived with sex acting as a critical moderator for listeners' judgements (14). According to their results, Maleficent's soft, high-pitched laughter at the beginning of the scene would be evaluated as an acceptable form for feminine-coded laugher, which is often expected to be more restrained and quieter (12). On the other side, loud, deep laughter such as Maleficent's conspicuous cackle after uttering her curse may be interpreted as a sign of dominance and perceived superiority, inappropriate for a woman's laughter (14). These judgements are emphasised by the display of Maleficent's teeth, which constitutes a common threatening gesture among animals (Drews 286). These empirical results appear even more significant when interpreted in a sociocultural context: Provided that 1950s-women were required not to draw unwanted attention to them (Davis *Girls* 116), Maleficent's striking laughter contrasts her from the soft and restrained femininity displayed by the 'good' characters in the film. Finally, it is not only the acoustic quality of her laughter but also its 'target' which reveals her wickedness: Maleficent's laugh is directed both at the royal couple, who is powerless against her curse, as well as the soldiers, who try to seize her unsuccessfully. Both royalty and militia are traditionally considered symbols of masculinity (Johnson 13), thus

indicating that Maleficent's laugh is directed at the masculine presence in the scene. This echoes society's imminent fear that the authority posed by a powerful woman leads to the demise of masculinity (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 4). It is not only the curse that makes Maleficent fearsome, but also the way in which she ridicules traditional masculinity, who is incapable of acting against her malicious power.

4.4. The Mistress of Patriarchy

Analogous to other Disney villains, Maleficent's portrayal is characterised by her deviance from Disney's moral and cultural standard (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 1). While the 'good' characters exemplified by Aurora, Philip and the fairies largely comply with the sociocultural values cherished in the Disney community, thus prompting audiences to develop a bond and potentially even identifying with them on a personal level, Maleficent is constructed as the wicked, inferior aberration from Disney's stringent moral and social standard. She exemplifies a monstruous, unscrupulous Other, which does not belong into the joyful and optimistic world of the Disney fairy tale and only triggers chaos (Davis *Girls* 22). While the viewers form a hegemonic 'we' with the protagonists and their helpers, consequently rooting for their triumph and happiness, Maleficent and her stooges represent the morally deficient out-group, hence reminding the audience of the values Disney does not approve of (Mandracchia 23). Therefore, it is imperative to note that Maleficent's portrayal as the antagonist is not necessarily rooted in an isolated aspect of her performance, not even in her wicked plans to kill Aurora. Instead, what makes her portrayal as the villain so successful is her depiction as the Other in different areas: Her character performance generally deviates from the social norms cherished the Disney community, thus alienating the audience and constructing her as different, potentially even dangerous (Wood 79).

As illustrated repeatedly in this analysis, Maleficent's Otherness is, among other factors, indicated by her refusal to comply with dominant notions of Western, conservative gender ideology. Her portrayal clearly contradicts prevalent ideas about the gendered body and women's responsibilities in society, thus detaching the character from what the audience believes to be appropriate, which, in turn, makes viewers question her morality as a whole (Gross & Woods 5, Zillman 53). While 'good' femininity in *Sleeping Beauty*, exemplified by the princess Aurora and the three fairies, clearly aligns with traditionally female-coded qualities such as physical beauty, nurturing behaviour and obedience (England et al. 566), Maleficent subverts gender ideology on two levels.

Firstly, she lacks decisive features, which would emphasise her femininity. With this rejection of traditional femininity, Maleficent's portrayal as the villain aligns with long-standing beliefs about a woman's status in patriarchal society, which traditionally vilified those who refused to adhere to these social standards (*Les Sorcières* 5:00). However, in addition to neglecting her female side, Maleficent possesses a range of male-coded traits; in fact, she seems to idolise masculinity to such an extent that she continuously emulates male power. Even though the audience is reminded consistently that Maleficent's imitation of masculinity is not comparable with the naturally superior abilities of a man, she seems to 'deserve' punishment, not only for her malicious actions towards Aurora, but also for her violation of normative femininity and her "pseudo-masculine" performance (Patterson & Spencer 76). Hence, this analysis supports the findings of earlier work on the portrayal of Disney villains, which demonstrated that female antagonists' portrayals are shaped by a transgression of normative gender boundaries in that they foreground traditionally masculine-coded traits in female villains (Putnam 158, Sharmin & Sattar 55).

Nevertheless, especially recent Disney films increasingly include female characters who do not necessarily match the hyper-femininity and innocent naiveté of the early princesses. Despite displaying a more androgynous gender performance, they are still beloved among viewers. For example, Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) is equipped with strong magical powers and disapproves of fast-paced romantic relationships, yet still constitutes a Disney fan-favourite (Hine, Ivanovic & England 6). Therefore, despite gender regulations being more rigid in the late 1950s than they are today, it would be inconclusive to attribute Maleficent's status as the villain to her gender-transgressive performance exclusively. What is crucial for Maleficent's portrayal as the villain is that she adopts this androgynous performance in order to challenge patriarchal regulations and eventually even attempts to overrule male power. She actively refuses her ascribed role as an obedient and passive woman (Engelbrecht 22) and claims traditionally masculine-coded privileges for herself instead (e.g. political power as a leader), thereby trying to assert her spot in the public domain with might and main: After not being invited to the royal court, she constructs her own 'kingdom' in the Forbidden Mountains with the goons as her subjects. By cursing Aurora, she even puts herself above the power of the royal court in that she tries to punish King Stephan for excluding her from the feast, which represents an unimaginable effrontery considering that she should serve as a submissive subject in the patriarchal fairy tale society. With these actions, Maleficent claims traditionally male rights as hers, thus threatening the hegemonic power of masculinity and challenging established patterns of social power. This

has implications both within the narrative in that the other characters see the need to stop her wicked plans, but also extends beyond the film on a symbolic layer: Considering the ideological climate of the 1950s, which required women to return to the home and accept their responsibilities in the domestic sphere (Mollet *Cultural* 42), Maleficent's portrayal mirrors the feared scenario that when society 'allows' women to trespass traditional gender norms, they will become more and more power-hungry and ultimately try to overthrow traditional social regulations of patriarchal power altogether. This concern of powerful women taking what once 'rightfully' belonged exclusively to men and, in turn, men losing these rights, especially in a professional context, was highly prevalent after women had stepped into the public sphere during World War II (Lindsey 149) and certainly resonates in Maleficent's performance as a ruthless witch, who rejects her traditional responsibilities as a woman and, instead, strives after recognition in the male domain. As a result, villainous femininity is represented not so much as a simple transgression of gender-normative boundaries, but rather emerges from a field of tension between the refusal of feminine fulfilment and the desire to hold a position of power which one is not granted (Mollet *Cultural* 40). Disney's equation of Maleficent's longing for power with her wickedness suggests an implicit reasoning for the maintenance of traditional gender roles: In order to reach one's happy ending, it seems beneficial not to break out from one's ascribed role in the patriarchal hierarchy (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 1).

In addition to the transgression of femininity, this analysis identified various aspects where Maleficent takes on a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine features, thus constructing the character as what Butler calls an "incoherent gendered being" (23). Therefore, in contrast to other scholars who interpret Disney villains as carriers of stereotypes relating to homosexuality or transgenderism (e.g. Griffin 146, Putnam 147), this analysis found that Maleficent's gender role portrayal cannot be read exclusively through binary categories, thereby corroborating McLeod's interpretation of antagonists as symbols of queerness (McLeod 27). In her appearance, personality and performance, Maleficent displays a combination between traditionally masculine- and female-coded attributes. Consequently, she does not only transgress normative gender boundaries, hence embodying the 'wrong' gender for her sex, but her performance cannot be assigned unambiguously to either masculinity *or* femininity. Maleficent refuses to assimilate to a binary understanding of gender expression altogether, thereby violating the most underlying principle of heteronormativity (Bell 15) and breaking with Disney's "heterosexual paradigm" (Griffin 5): In contrast to the clearly gendered individuals in the film, best exemplified by Aurora and Philip, who eventually enter a

heterosexual relationship, Maleficent does not conform unambiguously with *neither* masculine *nor* feminine gender expression, which subtly codes her as queer and Others her as deviant from the heteronormative standard (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 2). Nevertheless, only queer-coded gender expression alone does not necessarily vilify a character yet, even in the Disney universe. In fact, McLeod identified another character type, the 'quelper' (i.e. queer helper[4]), who is clearly permitted a space in the Disney universe and frequently even turns out to be a fan favourite (198). Similarly, Brode notes that allusions to homosexuality are used strategically by Disney in order to make characters more lovable (233). However, what differentiates queer antagonism from these 'good' characters is that the villain refuses to remain in the supporting role granted to them (McLeod 198). Instead, they strive after overthrowing heterosexual dominance, e.g. by trying to enter positions of power or by disturbing heterosexual love (Helmsing 68). The LGBTQ+ community was traditionally represented as forsaken characters, who were to remain in the shadows of society, feel deep shame for their sexual 'deviance' and eventually end up sad, lonely or even dead in order to receive redemption (*Celluloid* 58:25). However, Maleficent refuses to join the ranks of these condemned characters: Instead of accepting a life in the dark, which a heteronormative society would grant her as a queer individual, she demands to be part of society, as exemplified by her uninvited entrance to the christening, and even gain further power despite her status as a social outsider (Helmsing 68). Such a vilification of queer gender expression in the open reflects fears of queerness ousting heteronormativity from its dominant status: If society concedes that individuals leave the beaten track of heteronormativity and binary gender expression, 'Pandora's box' may be opened and evil chaos could spill out, inevitably corrupting society (Russo 4). Crucially, Disney's supporting characters (including the 'quelper') normally serve as facilitators to the formation of heterosexual relationships and the maintenance of patriarchal society, thereby subordinating themselves to heteronormativity (McLeod 190). In contrast, Maleficent constitutes a threat to heterosexual society: In addition to her own non-reproductivity, she interferes with the heterosexual love between the protagonists, not because of jealousy of the relationship but because of her sheer abomination for heterosexual happiness (Griffin 75). Because of her, the romantic union between Aurora and Philip is at peril and eventually even delayed. This dynamic of the queer villain disrupting heterosexuality on purpose and out of mere grudge for the protagonists' happiness mirrors prevalent fears of

[4] Examples for this character type include the same-sex couple Timon and Pumbaa (*The Lion King* 1994), who raise the lion cub Simba, or the snowman Olaf (*Frozen*, 2013), whose mannerisms are reminiscent of the sissy.

queerness similarly disturbing the future of a heteronormative society (Edelmann 4). Therefore, even though Maleficent's portrayal may not be as expressively queer-coded as that of the male, more sissy-esque antagonists in the Disney universe such as Jafar (*Aladdin* 1992) and Governor John Ratcliffe (*Pocahontas* 1995), her mere existence as a symbol of queerness still poses imminent threat to the heteronormative fairy tale society.

Maleficent's Otherness continuously serves as a justification to exclude her from the hegemonic group of the royal court and its allies such as the fairies. In addition to not being invited to the christening in the first place, seemingly without any reason, it is communicated clearly to Maleficent that she is not wanted at this joyous occasion and that she does not belong to the happy Disney community. Some scholars have even read this motif as an allegory of the queer (and, by extension, Othered) viewer, who represents an outsider of the heterosexual, 'royal' public and the only role they can inhibit is that of the upsetting intruder (Helmsing 68). Ultimately, Maleficent's Othering from hegemonic gender ideology culminates when she is Othered from society as a whole and pushed into the role of a monstrous animal (Adkins 10), most famously when she transforms into a dragon in the end of the film. These cases of dehumanisation indicate that since she does not adhere to traditional norms of gender role portrayal, "the only role left [for] her is that of a monster" (Tyson *Critical* 85). This reading of Maleficent as a queer-coded antagonist, isolated from community due to her maliciousness, mirrors the traditional view of queerness as something inherently wicked, legitimately excluded from society (Dyer *Culture* 2).

Maleficent's subversion of gender ideology on two levels, as a woman refuting her female side and as a queer individual not abiding to the gender binary, illustrates the intersection between misogyny and queerphobia at which we "find particularly powerful messages regarding the goodness of order, obedience, and normalcy versus the evilness of chaos, transgression, and deviance" (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 90): In a social dynamic where femininity and queerness are not clearly subordinate to straight masculinity and challenge its marginalised status, hegemonic dominance no longer goes unquestioned. Essentially, this is the threat posed by a character such as Maleficent: In principle, Disney graciously allows gender-transgressive, queer characters such as the 'quelper' to exist, particularly as long as they comply with their allocated position at the margin of society, cater to comedic relief and otherwise acknowledge their status of social inferiority (e.g. by subordinating themselves to the protagonists' happiness). Instead, what marks Maleficent as the villain is that she wants to liberate herself from this marginalisation, be visible in society and gain a position of privilege, even at the risk

of overruling the dominant group (i.e. royalty, which symbolises heteronormative society), thereby illustrating how gender ideology functions in a larger discourse of power (Thompson 2). Only through the restoration of patriarchal norms, interpreted as the happy ending, the original social order is reinforced as the desirable state, thus perpetuating male dominance over women and heteronormativity over queerness (Griffin 50). With depictions of female villains as ruthless trespassers of gender boundaries and social norms, exemplified by Maleficent, it is implied that when a marginalised individual strives for power, potentially even resulting in them subverting masculine heterosexual dominance, evil forces must be at play; after all, Maleficent's portrayal indicates that an individual who is willing to transgress boundaries of gender so callously also does not recoil from disregarding other regulations of social life, too (Russo 4).

5 Maleficent as the Misjudged Fairy Godmother (*Maleficent*, 2014)

"I realised there was an enormous challenge of how to make someone who could be that cruel and that evil into someone that we could care about", Linda Woolverton, writer of *Sleeping Beauty's* prequel *Maleficent* (2014), explains when asked about her motivation to work on the film (Movie Youtube 1:30). Certainly, a notorious villain such as Maleficent does not automatically turn into the heroic protagonist of the story only because the audience is able to understand her motifs. Instead, a range of modifications had to be made in the narrative and in character construction so that viewers were able to relate to the character more closely and accept her as the protagonist. The aim of the following section is to identify these changes and to link them to Maleficent's portrayal regarding femininity and (non-)binary gender expression.

Maleficent (2014) claims to present the true story of the animated classic, proposing that the plot of *Sleeping Beauty* only constitutes a legend told to discredit Maleficent. In the remake, the young Maleficent spends her childhood as a mighty fairy in the moors, a magic forest close to a powerful kingdom. One day, she meets the peasant boy Stefan and they fall in love. Over time, however, they drift apart and their relationship comes to a stop. They no longer see each other until one day, Stefan drugs Maleficent, cuts off her wings and presents them to the king in order to be named his successor. Disappointed by Stefan's betrayal, Maleficent transforms the moors into a dark kingdom and retreats to a ruined castle. Subsequently, the storyline largely follows the animated film with one crucial exception being that Maleficent builds a close relationship with Aurora, yet without informing her about the curse. On her 16th birthday, Aurora learns the truth about her identity: Profoundly upset, she enters her father's castle where, despite Maleficent's efforts to save her, she pricks her finger. In order to revoke the curse, the pixies encourage the reluctant prince Philip to kiss Aurora, yet his attempt fails. Eventually, Maleficent apologises to Aurora and kisses her on the forehead, which turns out to break the curse. When Maleficent and Aurora leave, Stefan and his guards strike. As her defence, Maleficent transforms her raven Diaval into a dragon while Aurora sets out to find Maleficent's caged wings. After the fight ends in Stefan's death, Maleficent is reunited with her wings and returns the moors to their former glory together with Aurora.

5.1. Contextualisation of Production

The production and release of *Maleficent* was characterised by a field of tension between progress and re-emerging conservatism. Leading up to the #MeToo-movement, which gained

momentum in 2017, the application of technology to pass on feminist messages represented a critical characteristic of fourth-wave feminism, which "allow[ed] women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online" (Cochrane n.p.). Digital activism rose in popularity and feminist-inspired hashtags started trending as early as 2013 with notable examples including #EverydaySexism and #RapeCultureIsWhen, thereby raising awareness for the hardships faced by marginalised groups in society and providing a safe space for victims of sexism and sexual violence to share their experiences (Gadzekpo & Smith 263). This dynamic was accompanied by an image makeover of the feminist movement itself: While postfeminist ideas had presented feminism as outdated and superfluous at the beginning of the millennium, the late 2000s and beginning 2010s experienced a climate in which the idea of calling oneself a feminist was not only acceptable but even stylish and attractive (Gill 618). Also Disney picked up on this progressive impetus by increasingly depicting a modernised version of femininity with their third wave of Disney princesses starting with *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009 (Hine, Ivanovic & England 6). Despite scholars criticising that this rise in the popularity of feminism mainly resulted in only half-hearted objection to structural sexism and promoted feminism as a stylish feature in one's social media profile rather than a political movement (Gill 613), it is nevertheless notable that this most recent wave of feminism also led to a more thorough comprehension of complex social issues such as awareness for sexual violence, objection to rigid gender norms and a better understanding for an intersectional approach to discrimination (Pinedo 139). In line with this emerging feminist zeitgeist, Disney's remake *Maleficent* (2014) is frequently praised as a reflection of female empowerment during this critical time (Schwabe 149).

In addition to the considerable advances of fourth-wave feminism, however, America was also faced with a gradual reinstalment of conservatism and the growing wish for a return to traditional American values during the time when *Maleficent* was produced and released. Many people believed that the rise of new liberalism under Barack Obama's presidency had changed what once constituted America and "shattered the American Dream" (Mollet *Cultural* 135). Fittingly, it was not surprising that only two years later, Donald Trump's election campaign with the slogan "Make America Great Again" resonated with so many Americans; after all, it promised a return to earlier, better times before the country lost its former glory in the rapid changes of the 20th century (Churchwell 11). Especially the 1950s represented the epitome of nostalgic fascination for many Americans. Following World War II, the United States profited from a considerable economic recovery and after the hardships of the Great Depression and

war, people were finally able to enjoy a more financially stable life (Bettis et al. 225). Many Americans still longingly looked back on this golden time in history when life was allegedly simpler and social norms, one of them being the binary understanding of gender with clearly assigned responsibilities for men and women, were supposedly unambiguous (Mollet *Cultural* 147). According to Kimmel, many people felt that society's understanding of masculinity had changed significantly and that its boundaries with femininity were blurred, especially due to the large number of women trying to prove themselves in formerly exclusively masculine domains (42). Interestingly, the feminist movement was blamed for these social changes and scrutinised for trying to enforce rights for women while men lost more and more of their former privileges (Mollet *Cultural* 136). This development led to considerable irritation at progressive femininity as well as feminism and ultimately resulted in the wish to reinstall the 'old America', including a return to its traditional distribution of gender roles (Kimmel 42).

The duality between progress and conservatism in American society present at this time is reflected in Disney's plethora of live-action remakes since the early 2010s. *Maleficent* was one of the first in a series of Disney productions, which retell the company's most successful classics, including *Cinderella* (2015), *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Cruella* (2021). It is striking that Disney has relied on these live-action remakes so heavily in the last decade, especially given that their recent original productions such as *Moana* (2016) and *Encanto* (2021) have been praised for their progressive character portrayals, both among viewers and film critics (Coyne et al. *Power* 2427, Hine et al. 4), while older films have been judged repeatedly for their problematic representations of marginalised groups (Petter n.p.). Still, there are two reasons why it is still profitable for Disney to return to their classics on a regular basis: On the one hand, live-action remakes enable corporations such as Disney to adapt their traditional, potentially outdated stories to a more contemporary audience, thereby presenting them as new, modernised versions of older tales. These remakes pose an opportunity for Disney to purge their reputation from the stigma of simplistic, partly problematic portrayals in earlier films and to improve their films with regard to complexity and critical social engagement (Brugé and Llompart 108, Mollet *Cultural* 138). Especially with *Sleeping Beauty*, the writers may have seen urgency to radically transform Disney's traditional text due to the considerable level of feminist backlash the film has received since the late noughties, stating that it depicts a passive heroine, who is only awakened through a non-consensual kiss by a prince she met once before (Petter n.p.). With *Maleficent*, Disney had the opportunity to improve these problematic aspects of the story while simultaneously being able to revise the text for a more mature

audience, who looks for nuanced characters and a complex storyline. According to Brugé and Llompart, the growing trend to rehabilitate former villains such as Maleficent and Cruella DeVil in live-action remakes is a direct outcome of these demands by older viewers: Showing traditionally evil characters in a positive light blurs the lines between the protagonist and the antagonist, which complicates the plot and allows for a more complex experience for mature audiences (112).

On the other hand, Disney's reboots of original productions let audiences revisit stories from their childhood, hence appealing to the viewers' love for sentimentality. Despite remakes offering "progression and realism" (Mollet *Cultural* 139) through cutting-edge technology, more intricate storylines and complex characters, these films also heavily revoke viewers' fond memories of the original texts and offer an intertextual journey to the past (Hundertmark 8). Many entertainment corporations have recognised the profitable side of nostalgia long before *Maleficent*. However, Disney's "reboot culture" (Mollet *Cultural* 139) is particularly rich, including live-action remakes, sequels and prequels, anniversary editions as well as their most recent coup with the streaming platform Disney Plus, which provides viewers with all of Disney's original content. The intertextual references to its older narratives let viewers revisit characters almost like old friends and the audience experiences pleasant memories of their childhood (Mollet *Cultural* 138). This argumentation is echoed by Verevis, who adds to the discussion that remakes furthermore offer the opportunity "to duplicate past successes and minimise risk by emphasising the familiar" (4), thus stressing the economic profit offered by reboots through nostalgia: If a film was popular with an audience once, a remake offers almost guaranteed financial success.

5.2. Character Analysis

In contrast to the animated film, which begins on the day of Aurora's christening, the audience is introduced to Maleficent as a young, confident fairy in the live-action remake. It is emphasised that she enjoys life in the moors, even assuming the role of 'protector of the moors' as soon as she comes of age. The audience learns about her childhood and adolescence, thus experiencing Maleficent at a stage of her life which is traditionally reserved to the classic Disney princesses, all of whom are shown as adolescent girls at the peak of blooming femininity (Bell, Haas & Sells 109). This early insight into Maleficent's early life makes her more approachable than the animated character, who we only become acquainted with at Aurora's christening, and furthermore places her in line with a range of beloved Disney heroines, whose

narratives also start in their childhood such as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Rapunzel* (2010). Other parallels between Maleficent and the Disney princesses include her love for nature and her affinity for the animal creatures of the moors as well as her first romantic experiences at the brink of adulthood with her first kiss on her sixteenth birthday. These subtle resemblances introduced right at the beginning of the film blur the lines between the binary categories of good and evil, thereby foreshadowing Maleficent's more complex character development. As a result, her modern portrayal "revises and rewrites female antagonism in the classic fairy tale" (Brugé & Llompart 108) and challenges her construction as the villain.

Fairy – but make it feminist

When designing Maleficent's appearance, the artists on the set of *Maleficent* had to keep a careful balance between the character's signature physical features and the changes necessary to turn Maleficent into a Disney heroine. Prosthetics specialist Arjen Tuiten, who was part of Angelina Jolie's styling crew on *Maleficent*, explained that considerable effort went into the design process of the character's appearance: "She's basically a fantasy creature, but it still had to be very beautiful, you know?" (Wischhover n.p.). These deliberations between Maleficent as an attractive woman and a mystical creature are also reflected in the character's final filmic physical appearance. Firstly, Maleficent's "beautiful" (Wischhover n.p.) side manifests in her predominant alignment with Western contemporary standards of feminine attractiveness. The character's physical appearance exhibits numerous features which, in contrast to the animated Maleficent, emphasise her femininity rather than hide it, hence once more suggesting that a character is perceived as more lovable when they abide to gendered expectations of beauty (Herbozo et al. 30). First and foremost, Maleficent's hair plays an important role for her appearance again: Both at the beginning and at the end of the film, she does not wear her hooded headpiece, but her long, flowing hair is visible. As discussed in the previous chapter of this analysis, hair serves as an effective subconscious cue for gender identity and attractiveness in Western societies (Brebner, Martin & Macrae 1110, Pergament 46) with long hair in women being shown to carry especially positive connotations such as health, youthfulness and delicacy (Manning 47). Consequently, Maleficent's hairstyle not only enhances her femininity, but it also ascribes supplementary features to her portrayal, which go beyond her look and add to the character's positive image. On the other side, Maleficent's hair is covered strategically at specific stages of the film: During her adolescence and leading up to Stephan's betrayal, she is shown with open hair, thereby alluding to her juvenile naiveté as well as her developing femininity as a young woman (Weitz 278). Subsequently, however, her formerly cheerful and

amicable nature changes. She turns into a bitter character, abandoning her altruistic endeavours and rejecting her caregiving responsibilities for the moor creatures, both of which are commonly read as feminine-coded qualities (Tyson *Using* 140). Her decision to cover her hair parallels this change in her gender expression, hence serving as an outward symbol of her inner transformation and the dissociation from her femininity. Eventually, Maleficent's long, flowing hairstyle reappears in the final scene of the film when she crowns Aurora as queen of the moors and the human kingdom. This return to her earlier, distinctly feminine physical appearance suggests that by solving the social conflict of the film and reconciling with Aurora, Maleficent can also make peace with herself and restore her femininity. With Maleficent's hairstyle mirroring her character arc so closely, it can be argued that the visibility of her long hair not only serves as a stereotypical marker to enhance Maleficent's femininity (Brebner, Martin & Macrae 1110), but that it also represents an indicator for her moral and personal journey over the film. It is only in moments when the audience sees her hair that she is truly happy and carefree. With this imagery, the film aligns with Disney's traditional argumentation that a woman who displays her femininity on the outside is at peace with herself while negative feelings must be at play with a lack of feminine fulfilment (*Les Sorcières* 5:00).

A similar transformation over the course of the film can be observed regarding Maleficent's clothing. In parallel to her hairstyle, she changes her maiden dresses with floral adornments, which underline her feminine side, into her characteristic black robe from the animated film for Aurora's christening. Interestingly, however, the cloak no longer fully covers her body, but exposes part of Maleficent's chest with its V-neck, thus alluding to her subliminal femininity, which still shines through her portrayal. Generally, Maleficent's attire is characterised by a contrast between rough features (e.g. coarse fabrics) and subtle allusions to her femininity such as low necklines, tight shapes and floral embroidery. With this disparity, Maleficent's wardrobe adds a new layer of meaning to her performance in the film: Her clothes are no longer impractical and bulky, but they allow for motion and activity. While the animated Maleficent mainly displays a limited range of movement with her long cloak, the live-action remake paints her as a dynamic, empowered woman, who is eager for agency and whose clothes are adapted to this lifestyle. This spin on the character's attire mirrors society's growing demand to deconstruct traditional gender stereotypes in fashion and emphasises the non-traditional nature of Maleficent's character (Akdemir 261). For example, when she sets out to save Aurora, she changes into tight leather trousers, which allow for riding her horse more comfortably and safely in contrast to the long, flowy dress she wears before that. Simultaneously, however,

Maleficent's feminine side still clearly shines through her progressive portrayal, which may be read as an attempt to soften the film's feminist undertone. Despite the film's progressive stance on femininity and Maleficent occasionally flaunting gender regulations, the viewers are reassured continuously that she still follows basic gender norms such as valuing good looks and stylishness in her clothing (Stover 5). For example, returning to Maleficent's leather trousers, the tight catsuit clearly accentuates the character's body shape, thereby also catering towards sexual attractiveness rather than mere practicality for horse-riding. As a result, Maleficent's physical portrayal appeals to both, the progressive as well as the conservative attitudes existing in the early 2010s. Especially the practice of 'sugar-coating' feminist notions with more traditional messages about gender and foregrounding feminism as an element of style rather than a political movement were highly prevalent at this time, often serving as a strategy to make feminism more palatable for mainstream audiences (Gill 613).

Figure 4. Top-down shot of Maleficent displaying the character's most prominent facial features (*Maleficent* 13:56).

In addition to Maleficent's beautiful side, however, the creators also intended to stay true to the animated character's signature features from the original Disney tale. Tuiten explains that there was considerable debate between Disney and the creative design team regarding the extent and prominence of Maleficent's supernatural facial details (Wischhover n.p., figure 4). The character exhibits only a selected range of features which alienate her appearance, among them her brightly coloured eyes and her accentuated cheekbones. In addition to some of Maleficent's characteristic features from the animated film, the live-action remake also reveals her pointy ears. This ear shape is usually found in depictions of fantastic creatures (Mikl 35) and underlines the character's change from a witch into a fairy, which will be explored in more detail later. First and foremost, these elements of facial modification underline Maleficent's otherworldly

nature, thus painting her as the supernatural creature the audience expects to see. On the other side, however, Disney apparently did not intend to go too far with regard to Maleficent's dehumanisation. For example, the company rejected the idea of chin implants for the character (Kornhaber n.p.), but approved of Maleficent's defined cheekbones, which are commonly perceived as a beauty ideal for women (Marshall 96). As a result, one may argue that Maleficent's supernatural appearance arguably only goes as far as to retain Western standards of feminine beauty. Rather than presenting her as the mythical creature from the animated film, features of dehumanisation are employed strategically in order to enhance Maleficent's beauty rather than emphasising her Otherness.

Since the release of *Maleficent*, the character's appearance has been linked inextricably to the appearance of the American actress Angelina Jolie. Her casting not only serves as a strategy to make the film more interesting for adult audiences, who are familiar with her from various Hollywood blockbusters, but also adds to character perception: As stated by Schlögl and Zagalo, Jolie's "image is usually associated with powerful, fearless and seductive females" (165), a role which she already embodied many of her earlier films such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2000) and *Salt* (2010). Additionally, Jolie is well-known as an advocate for women's rights outside her cinematic roles as well as for her engagement with the organisation UNICEF, hence combining feminine attractiveness with feminist empowerment and social engagement (Herbst 37, Mollet *Cultural* 141), which made for a popular combination in the post-postfeminist social climate of the early 2010s (Gill 316). Considering that Disney is eager to foster a similarly progressive perspective on topics such as gender equality with their recent films (Coyne et al. *Power* 2426), the company's image campaign certainly profited from Angelina Jolie as the figurehead of *Maleficent*. Jolie's casting can be read as an attempt to convey her glamorous celebrity image as a beautiful yet empowered, modern woman on Maleficent as a character: As soon as the viewers observe Maleficent, they inevitably also watch Angelina Jolie with all the positive attributes she is well-known for, which subconsciously prompts the audience to transfer many of the qualities of Jolie's reputation on the fictional character, too (Schlögl & Zagalo 165).

Naughty but nice

At the beginning of the film, it is immediately established that Maleficent constitutes "the strongest of the fairies" (*Maleficent* 8:22) in the realm. Especially when the moors are attacked by the king's troupes and Maleficent widely competes against the soldiers on her own, the

audience can grasp the extent of her magical abilities. Maleficent's great capacities reflect prominent attitudes towards femininity in the early 2010s. At a time when women increasingly set out to pursue similar career and life goals as men (Bettis et al. 225), such a powerful character functions as an optimistic assurance to viewers that gender equality has been achieved. In fact, by repeatedly referring to Maleficent's great capacities, it almost seems as if Disney wanted to convince their audience that, *of course*, they know that women can be as competent as men. Still, even though Maleficent is so strong that she could potentially do harm to others, she actively restricts her capabilities for the welfare of the moor society. This softening of Maleficent's powers reflects more conservative views on feminine power, where women are expected to hold back their abilities as to avoid offending others, especially men (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 5). Instead, Maleficent exclusively employs her powers in her role as a caregiver at the beginning of the film, thus implying that women's primary 'power' is to tend to others and their needs rather than displaying her strength publicly (Tyson *Using* 140). Maleficent *could* potentially outperform everyone in the whole kingdom because she possesses the same (if not more powerful) abilities as the male characters, but what makes her great power palatable is that she accepts her position in society and that she actively chooses to use her strength within this accepted framework. True chaos only unravels when Maleficent unleashes her full magical powers and uses them for revenge on Stefan. In parallel, she abandons her altruistic efforts for the moors and prioritises her own needs, hence casting her feminine-coded responsibilities aside (Rand et al. 393) with immediate consequences: She is isolated and feared by the other creatures in the moors, hence emphasising the common notion that a woman who deploys her powers without limits and for her own good is to be suspected and feared (Tyson *Using* 140).

In general, the live-action film presents a more multi-faceted image of Maleficent's personality. While she appears as a rigid persona in the animated film, almost fossilised in her facial expressions, the live-action Maleficent shows a broad range of emotions, which is perceived as a traditionally feminine quality in contrast to the masculine-coded reservedness of her animated counterpart (Sharmin & Sattar 55). In many instances, Maleficent's underlying sense of morality is foregrounded: She is attentive towards the moor-creatures' needs and mindful of her natural surroundings, for example when she mends a branch. In fact, it is established explicitly that "she had never understood the greed and envy of men" (*Maleficent* 9:20), thereby clearly separating her from the jealous and rapacious nature of the animated character. Interestingly, Maleficent also displays a strong belief in the good of humankind when she

forgives Stefan after he steals from the moors, which is reminiscent of the trustful and almost naïve nature of the Disney princesses (Coyne et al. *Pretty* 1910, England et al. 567). Finally, the viewers learn that she even enjoys harmless mischief, particularly towards the fairies or the creatures of the moor, and appreciates humour when it is directed at her, for instance when a moor troll throws a ball of mud at her face. While promoting the film, Jolie herself explained that portraying Maleficent's "sense of wicked fun" was an important objective for her in order to present a more refined image of the character (Movie Youtube 3:26). These positive features of Maleficent's personality paint her as a more amicable character, who can be accepted as a Disney heroine and who viewers are more willing to identify with. She no longer functions as the unapproachable, distanced witch living in a cold castle, but she displays a complex personality as a real human being.

Figure 5. Maleficent wailing after waking up without her wings (*Maleficent* 18:34).

The connection built up with the audience at the beginning of the film comes into play when Maleficent wakes up after being drugged by Stefan and realises that her wings have been taken from her. In contrast to the animated character, who remains reserved and secluded even in moments of great emotion, Maleficent now displays her pain and her disappointment on the outside, thus prompting the audience to feel sympathy for her (see figure 5). Instead of intrinsic evilness, the audience learns about Maleficent's painful backstory and her anger triggered through Stefan's betrayal, revealing the events that led to her becoming so vengeful. This certainly should not mitigate the severity of her evil actions against Aurora but it gives the audience an explanation for her behaviour and shifts the conception of evilness from the person Maleficent to the pain she experienced as the reason for her maliciousness (Aranjuez 14 qtd. in Brugué & Llompart 112). Therefore, while the animated character's exasperation seems disproportionate for the viewers, they can comprehend her anger in the live-action remake and

perhaps even empathise with her (Brugué & Llompart 113). This idea is in line with a range of more modern depictions of the witch archetype, which present the evil woman as a product of society's failure to treat her kindly rather than a genuinely wicked individual, thereby justifying her actions as a mere reaction to social rejection (*Les Sorcières* 50:55). This change in the narrative is crucial for character construction since the audience can understand Maleficent even after she reveals her evil side. The knowledge that her maliciousness is not entirely unmotivated but triggered by resentment towards Stefan, her former lover, represents a plausible reason for the audience to root for her, even at a point in the plot when Maleficent clearly functions as the villain already. While the loss of her wings, which represent an essential part of her identity, is certainly the primary reason for Maleficent's pain, also the disappointment in Stefan is presented as a trigger for her anger. This is particularly interesting because it constitutes an 'acceptable' reason for a woman to be angry: because of love. In contrast to the animated film, in which Maleficent's exasperation is triggered by her isolation from political power (Dundes, Streiff Buitelaar & Streiff 5), she is now primarily declared as a rejected lover, who looks for personal revenge.

Trauma Solved Through Motherly Love

In the live-action reboot, Maleficent acts as an active member of the moor community. She is deeply involved with the other creatures' wellbeing and even takes on maternal responsibilities such as settling disputes. Still, her relationship with the other individuals in her community is characterised by fairness and tolerance, underlined by the narrator proposing that "they needed neither king nor queen but trusted in one another" (*Maleficent* 1:14). Especially her connection with Diaval, the raven, is explored in more detail in the live-action remake, emphasising the equal nature of their relationship rather than presenting Maleficent as his ruthless mistress. Diaval stands by her even at her lowest point, thereby showing that she is never fully isolated from community and serving as an identification figure for the audience, who is equally supposed to advocate for Maleficent. This aspect suggests that Maleficent is not the cold-hearted creature she was made to be in the animated film, but her friendships with the moor creatures and Diaval suggest otherwise. Instead of constructing herself as superior, she seems to value the equality and the amicability in the moor community. Maleficent's appreciation for true friendship and companionship corresponds with the portrayal of earlier Disney protagonists, most famously the Disney princesses (Wasko 128) and reflects traits from the domain of community such as warmth and supportiveness, which women are often expected to cherish (Carter 251). Rather than exclusively following her own aspirations, the well-being of

society is presented as her primary goal, which ties in with conservative ideals of the woman as a devoted caregiver (Tyson *Using* 140).

In contrast to *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent's relationship with Stefan, the later king, is granted close attention in the live-action remake. *Maleficent* reveals the characters' shared history as an amorous couple. Her portrayal as a lover gives the character a new dimension and serves to make Maleficent more approachable for the audience: While the animated witch is presented as a heartless woman uninterested in heterosexual love (Stover 4), Jolie's Maleficent arguably displays romantic ambitions and successfully enters a relationship, thereby assuring the audience that idea that love plays an essential part in Maleficent's life, even if she acts widely autonomously (Basinger 431). This portrayal mirrors prevalent tendencies of the late 2000s and early 2010s, in which concerns about women's advancing ambitions and their potential impact on family life were prevalent, frequently reflected in the motif of the progressive careerwoman who is 'tamed' through romance (England et al. 563, Stover 5). *Maleficent* makes use of this common trope, albeit in a slightly different way: Instead of showing heterosexual love as a part of Maleficent's redemption arc, the mere ability to love is used as an underlying justification for her morality.

However, Maleficent's romantic happiness is only short-lived. In an endeavour to become the successor to the throne, Stefan drugs her, presents her wings to the king as evidence that he killed Maleficent. Scholars and film critics have read this sequence as "a metaphor for rape and sexual abuse", emphasising that even though sexual assault is not depicted explicitly, the scene still shows "physical mutilation and 'castration' of the female body by male force" (Schwabe 150). This interpretative approach was ultimately even confirmed by Angelina Jolie herself, who corroborated that the reference to rape was intentional:

> *"The question was asked: 'What could make a woman become so dark and lose all sense of her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness?' Something would have to be so violent and aggressive and so of course for us, we were very conscious, the writer [Linda Woolverton] and I, that it was a metaphor for rape."* (Woman's Hour 9:09).

The motif of sexual abuse becomes even more explicit when the audience experiences Maleficent's reaction after waking up and finding out that her wings have disappeared: Her performance communicates such immediate agony and pain that the audience is naturally compelled to feel sympathy for Maleficent as a crime victim and to empathise with her hatred for Stefan (Cappiccie & Wyatt 84). Importantly, by violently removing her wings, Stefan not

only physically mutilates Maleficent, but she also loses her confidence as well as her faith in the good of humanity (*Les Sorcières* 49:58). Thus, rather than ravelling in irrational anger, it is only as a response to this trauma that Maleficent transforms the moors into a dark kingdom, appoints herself as the leader and emulates the violence she has experienced, truly embracing her evil side (Schwabe 149).

Even though *Maleficent* addresses the topic of sexual violence against women, thereby acknowledging "how rape culture has become such a part of [women's lives] to have even invaded a children's movie in our popular culture" (Cappicci & Wyatt 84), the core topic of the film, according to Jolie, is "how the abused then have a choice of abusing others or overcoming and remaining loving, open people" (Woman's Hour 9:39), thus shifting the film's perspective from scrutinising offenders of sexual assault to how victims (should) recover from trauma. Despite the extreme violence committed to her, Maleficent does not lose her strength entirely and even emerges from her trauma more powerfully (Heaton n.p.). On the one hand, this indicates that women possess great strength in coping with violence, which some read as an empowering message towards victims of sexual assault (Krischer n.p.). On the other hand, however, Pidduck emphasises that while it can certainly be beneficial to discuss the empowering message of women emerging stronger out of situations of violence, it is essential not to let this discourse overshadow society's responsibility to protect women from sexual abuse in the first place (151). Nevertheless, *Maleficent* does not address this issue: Although the film does not fall short of criticising Stefan's actions on an individual level, the possibility of sexual violence is still presented as an integral part of women's lives and "the movie fails to provide examples of factors that might help to lessen aggressive outcomes" (Cappiccie & Wyatt 86). Instead, the film mainly focuses on Maleficent's struggle as a coping victim, thereby normalising the idea that no matter which gruesome actions are inflicted upon women, they will and should recover from their trauma gracefully.

Maleficent's immediate coping mechanism is revenge (Cappiccie & Wyatt 85): She appears at the christening of the infant Aurora and seeks vengeance against Stefan by cursing his first-born to a death-like sleep. Against everyone's expectations, however, Maleficent develops a close, affectionate relationship with the little princess over the course of the film, first only watching her from the distance but later also interacting directly with the girl, for example tucking her in at night (Schwabe 151). While the fairies turn out to be ineffective and neglecting mother figures, more occupied with bickering than watching over the child, it is Maleficent who supervises and even saves Aurora at times, for instance when the young princess is at risk

from falling off a cliff. When she finally shows herself to the adolescent Aurora, the princess names Maleficent her fairy godmother, thus awarding her with a highly prestigious label with a long-standing Disney history: Fairy godmothers, who are naturally "soft-hearted, generous, affectionate, and kind" characters (Bell, Haas & Sells 118), function as the heroine's ever-present protection and appear magically at her rescue if needed. Not intending to clarify the misunderstanding, Maleficent embraces this status even more literally. After the death of Aurora's biological mother, it is Maleficent who steps into this role, which leads to a new, integral component of Maleficent's character: motherhood. Even though the two characters do not share a connection by blood, Maleficent protects Aurora continuously and even puts herself in danger when rushing to the castle to save her, which makes her "sacrifices […] deemed even purer in their selflessness [since] [s]acrifice and nurturing, lifted from the realm of necessity, become a matter of choice" (Bell, Haas & Sells 119). This depiction of Maleficent as the caregiver for Aurora puts her in a long line of childless female characters, who provide nurturing and sacrificing care for other parents' children (Engelbrecht 22). Despite being unmarried and acting widely autonomously, thus contradicting prevalent ideals of femininity and motherhood, these characters constitute an "ideal example of sacrificial motherhood" (Basinger 431) because they suggest that a woman's life is still destined for motherhood even if she lives without a man and strives for independence. In a similar way, Maleficent takes on maternal responsibilities for Aurora and acts as a surrogate mother despite knowing that ultimately, she will have to bid farewell to the princess, may that be because of her future life at court in the human realm or because of Aurora's death through the curse. Furthermore, Maleficent's portrayal can still be approved of because she upholds the patriarchal system, not only by caring for the princess but also by supporting the love between Aurora and Philip, no longer disrupting their relationship but even acting as an advocate of heterosexual love (Basinger 433). Even after having given up on the concept of true love and not entering a relationship herself, she helps others to achieve heteronormative happiness, thus subordinating herself to the concept of heteronormativity indirectly (Engelbrecht 29). Hence, even though the initial plotlines in the two films are similar, Maleficent's change from the *Terrible Mother* into the self-sacrificing, nurturing *Good Mother* is essential for character construction and her potential for atonement (Bowman 90): Instead of foregrounding the original romantic plot between Aurora and Philip, the film was continuously promoted as "a love story between a mother and a daughter" (Movie Youtube 7:18), thereby implying that a mother's love widely exceeds romantic feelings between lovers. Maternity rather than heterosexual love seems to be the path to reconciliation between the two realms and, importantly, Maleficent's redemption

(Engelbrecht 30). Schwabe considers this modification to the original story a progressive development, stating that it constitutes a "feminist twist" in which "the producers of *Maleficent* play with the expectations of those viewers who anticipate the princess will be saved by a man" (151). This is in line with many of Disney's more recent films, which no longer limit saving actions to male characters (Coyne et al. *Power* 2415), thereby indicating a gradual shift towards a more flexible portrayal of gender in Disney.

On the other side, however, Maleficent's representation in the role of the mother also bears potential for problematic interpretations in that it normalises the myth of women's natural inclination for motherhood. Despite her otherwise independent nature and the initial indifference she feels for Aurora, it seems that Maleficent is biologically inclined to serve as a mother. Crucially, it is only after she embraces her motherly feelings for the princess that she can find peace again, thereby suggesting that serious trauma, as inflicted upon Maleficent, can be healed through the nurturing relationship between a mother and a child and alluding to the 'true' nature of a woman as an altruistic caregiver, who finds personal fulfilment by ensuring the wellbeing of others (Dundes, Streiff & Streiff-Buitelaar 3). Eventually, it is even Maleficent who saves Aurora from the curse through the platonic love between mother and child, thereby proving her true love for the princess and, by extension, making motherhood a core component of her redemption arc (Brugué & Llompart 112). Her relationship with Aurora makes her feel remorse, which is visible when she tries to reverse the curse. These attempts of repentance contrast the character from her animated predecessor and signal to the audience that Maleficent has changed profoundly. However, Schwabe notes critically that Maleficent's depiction also corroborates the motif of maternal potential as a requirement for redemption, which has dominated Hollywood's recent fairy tale adaptations. The idea that in order to rehabilitate themselves, female villains first have to comply with traditional standards of femininity, most clearly exemplified through the role of motherhood, domesticates these active and autonomous characters and perpetuates the traditional ideal that in order to be accepted as good, a woman first has to prove that she can adhere to patriarchal norms (152).

The Protector of the Moors

In contrast to the animated film, the live-action remake shares with older versions of the fairy tale that the evil actions are triggered by a fairy, not a witch. Even though this difference might seem marginal at first, the label of the fairy has a range of ramifications for character perception. Firstly, Maleficent's depiction as a fairy underlines the fundamental moral changes in made in

the live-action remake's character: Especially early literature traditionally juxtaposed the fairy and the witch with the former mainly functioning as a helper for humans while the witch's harmful magic was feared (*Les Sorcières* 11:55). Consequently, while her portrayal as a witch in the animated film foregrounds Maleficent's destructive nature, her status as a fairy highlights her prosocial side and her willingness to help the other creatures in the moor community (Wilby 297). In addition, the label of the fairy puts Maleficent in line with the group of the 'three good fairies', thereby indicating that despite her supernaturalism, Maleficent is not entirely a malicious exceptional phenomenon. In *Sleeping Beauty*, she appears as a lone warrior, isolated and essentially Othered from the hegemonic fairy tale society; however, by making Maleficent a fairy, she suddenly becomes part of a group and shares commonalities with other characters[5], which underlines her social embeddedness. Furthermore, traditional representations of the fairy highlight these creatures' innate magical abilities (Briggs 98). Rather than acquiring their strength through immoral arrangements as the witch, the fairy's powers are genuine and pure, which corresponds directly with Disney's understanding of 'good' magic (Wasko 142). Although Maleficent's magic is certainly strong, she does not seem to possess the same universal powers as in the animated film or chooses not to employ them. For example, it is Diaval who transforms into the dragon at the end of the film and not Maleficent herself. Therefore, while Maleficent's dehumanisation represents a crucial element of her character in *Sleeping Beauty*, the remake highlights Maleficent's position as an integral part of her community.

Christian mythology understands the fairy as a disgraced angel, who revolts against their society's norms and is consequently punished for their behaviour, thus taking on an ambivalent role between virtue and evil (Briggs 319), which scholars have found to be an interesting basis for the interpretation of Maleficent's character (*Les Sorcières* 50:28), who is equally referred to as "both hero and villain" (*Maleficent* 1:28:07). Although Disney's animated films are not necessarily well-known for religious symbolism (after all, this might lead to an exclusion of potential viewers), the company makes use of common tropes from various faiths (mainly Christianity in a conservative Christian-American society) and integrates them into their films without explicit reference to religion (Holdier 113). In the beginning, Maleficent's portrayal is

[5] This idea is explored even further in the sequel *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), in which the audience learns that Maleficent belongs to a hidden 'subspecies' of fairies, the *Dark Fey*. The members of this population cherish qualities such as tolerance and closeness with nature, which align with the Disney community's value system. By showing Maleficent as part of a group which shares a belief system similar to the audience's, she is perceived as part of a hegemonic 'we' (both within the film as well as extending to the viewers) rather than a devious variation from the social norm.

reminiscent of traditional angelic imagery, not only exemplified by her kind actions but especially her physical appearance, most prominently her large wings and the flowing dress. This symbolism of Maleficent as an angel is particularly evident in a frame at the beginning of the film, in which she soars to the sky after a wild flight through the moors and ends up above the clouds, looking solemnly into the sun (see figure 6).

Figure 6. Angel-symbolism in *Maleficent* (9:00).

After being robbed of her wings, however, Maleficent is banned from the heavenly realm, both literally because she no longer has physical access to the sky, but also figuratively since she embraces her malicious side. Crucially, while Maleficent functions as an example of the 'fallen angel' in her transformation into evil, her redemption arc can equally be read as an allegory to the Christian concept of repentance. She represents a sinner, who makes atonement and is forgiven by (divine) mercy: Only after Maleficent discards her dark side and saves Aurora, she is rewarded with her wings again, thereby being able to enter heaven once more. With this optimistic outlook on redemption through atonement, the film promotes the romanticised notion that every evil action can be compensated as long as the individual is willing to change and do penance adequately (Brugué and Llompart 112).

Finally, fairies were traditionally considered nature spirits with close ties to the natural environment (Briggs 42). Therefore, a crucial implication of Maleficent's status as a fairy is her close connection with nature since her powers are rooted in her natural environment. Young and Kidd explain that "[h]istorically, Western androcentric cultural constructions of women associate them with nature through the processes of gestation and childbirth" (272), which indicates an important link between Maleficent and her femininity. Especially the Disney heroines tend to be portrayed as allies of nature, most famously embodied by the princesses who, despite their royal status, spend a considerable amount of time in the woods and seem to form amicable relations with animals almost automatically (Wills 122). Brode explains that this

motif underlies a specific character arc, based on the connection between a woman's sexuality and nature: While the heroine lives close to nature as a young girl and explores it eagerly, often with her first kiss taking place in nature, increasing age and sexual maturity transform the girl into an experienced woman, usually the villain, who masters nature, usually exemplified by her ruling over the natural space and its inhabitants (210). This imagery can also be found in *Maleficent*: After growing up peacefully in accordance with nature, Maleficent is violently robbed of her youthful naiveté and matures quickly. She transforms the moors into her personal kingdom, ruling it with an iron fist and controlling its inhabitants. This shift from Maleficent's close relationship with her environment to her domination of nature constitutes another outward reflection of her inner transformation: While her earlier self was reminiscent of a classic Disney heroine and showed the stereotypically female affiliation for nature (Wills 122), her character shift towards her evil side is also manifest in how she distances herself from the realm of nature and, by extension, her femininity. However, as soon as Maleficent starts to make atonement, also her connection with the moor creatures seems to heal again in parallel with returning to her more feminine self.

Even though Maleficent serves as the protector of the moors, thus inhabiting a high rank within the moor community, she hardly ever shows any interest in extending her power beyond the natural realm. Even when she hears about the king's plans to attack the moors, she does not interfere with male power, but she only defends the moors in times of need. Also her visit to Aurora's christening does not seem motivated by political exclusion but more out of personal revenge on Stefan. Instead, Maleficent seems content within the natural realm and in her role as the protector of the moors. Historically, masculinity was located in the public sphere with connotations such as reason and culture, which the film displays in the form of the human kingdom, whose patriarchal norms prescribe that only a man can serve as the ruler. At the same time, the secluded, mystical realm of the moors represents the private sphere, which was traditionally reserved for femininity and connected with emotion and domesticity (Young & Kidd 272). Thus, Maleficent's inclination for the moors can be read as an active choice for the feminine-coded private domain. Even though the boundaries between the public and the private sphere have blurred in past decades (Kimmel 42), women are still underrepresented in a professional context, particularly in leadership positions (Cimirotić et al. 167), and spend disproportionally more time doing care work than men (Ferrant et al. 2). However, rather than scrutinising these injustices on a structural level, the early 2010s were shaped by postfeminism and the idea that despite gender equality having been achieved (McRobbie 255), these

discrepancies could be explained by women naturally leaning towards the private sphere and simply preferring not to enter male-dominated fields because they are happy with the status-quo anyway (Bulbeck 234). This essentially perpetuates and legitimises much older ideas of the separation of the sexes and distinct areas of responsibility for men and women (Davis *Girls* 116), albeit with the additional myth that women are no longer oppressed thanks to female empowerment but predominantly choose the private sphere because of personal preference. Maleficent's powerful position within nature combined with her disinterest to enter the male sphere reinforces this idea: Even though she is granted authority within the moors, Maleficent does not see the necessity to extend her authority beyond that, especially not the masculine-coded court. She is not intentionally kept from the public sphere, nor does she lack the capability to access it; instead, her limitation to the moors is simply based on her personal wishes and decisions. With this social discourse, the film reinforces the traditional myth that a woman's place is still firmly rooted within the private sphere (Mollet *Cultural* 38, Young & Kidd 272); however, no longer because she is actively restricted to it, but because of her 'natural' inclination to uphold the separation of the sexes.

5.3. Christening Scene

The christening scene represents the first intersection between the plotlines of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent* and resembles the execution of the original film closely. Similar to the animated classic, Maleficent's advent interrupts the youngest fairy's good wishes for the infant Aurora. Her arrival is foreshadowed by the hue changing from yellow to grey and the wind picking up, resulting in candles going out and chandeliers swinging violently. Therefore, Maleficent's arrival is equally accompanied by harsh weather conditions as her animated counterpart's; strikingly, however, thunder and lightning, the Zeus-like markers of masculine power (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 3), are absent from this version, indicating that although Maleficent certainly brings about utter chaos, she refrains from employing the energy-rich indicators of true masculinity in this sequence.

Eventually, Maleficent appears; first, only her shadow silhouette is visible next to a stone relief with several men, which appears as if the statues were bowing to her, thus foreshadowing the great power she is going to exert in this scene. In contrast to the animated film, however, she arrives on foot, which contrasts her from the other fairies, who use their wings to navigate the throne room. Firstly, this prompts the audience to remember the violence inflicted upon Maleficent, hence serving as a reminder that her motivations are not unjustified (Hundertmark

7). In addition, her arrival without magic (in contrast to her animated predecessor, who can simply appear out of thin air) emphasises Maleficent's non-magical, almost 'human' side, through which the audience is to identify with her.

For the first time in the film, Maleficent's horns are no longer covered by her hair. Instead, they protrude from her hooded headpiece, thereby drawing attention to the character's signature physical feature; in fact, the other fairies already recognise Maleficent from afar because of this attribute. Since the horns possess powerful recognition value for the original character, it is not by coincidence that such emphasis is placed on them in this scene: Firstly, they serve as visual support for the viewers to follow Maleficent's inner journey to her evil side. The clear emphasis on the horns suggests to the viewers that the formerly altered, 'good' character has now assimilated into the notoriously evil Maleficent. Furthermore, the visibility of Maleficent's iconic horns can be read as an attempt to appeal to the audience's transtextual knowledge from the original film. This sequence does not merely display the entrance of a malicious ill-wisher; for the audience, it also represents the return of a well-known Disney character from their childhood. Thus, the viewers' potential aversion for Maleficent's transformation and her following evil actions during the christening can be overshadowed by feelings of nostalgia for a familiar character, who reminds them of their childhood (Mollet *Cultural* 143).

Maleficent's imminent arrival is finally introduced by a slightly angled top-down shot in which the camera zooms in on Stefan. It appears as if the audience experienced the scene through Maleficent's eyes while she approaches the throne, which is also referred to as a point-of-view shot. This tool allows viewers to participate more actively in the plot and to establish a closer connection with the character whose glance they follow, which is Maleficent in this scene (Branigan 103-104). In the form of a retrospective point-of-view shot, the next frame briefly shows a full-body shot of Maleficent emerging from the crowd, thus breaking the suspense, and finally revealing the identity of the mysterious visitor (Branigan 111). During Maleficent's conversation with the royal couple, the camera movement once more returns to frequent transitions alternating between portrait-shots of Maleficent from an external position and prospective point-of-view shots from her perspective showing Stefan and the queen as the objects of her glance, thus endorsing that it is Maleficent who holds the power in this scene. Strikingly, selected shots from Maleficent's perspective now also occur in the form of a reverse angle filmed over her shoulder, thereby positioning the audience directly behind her, both literally as well as figuratively as her moral support (Branigan 110). This is particularly striking during one close-up shot in which the protagonist turns her head around, and speaks seemingly

directly to the camera, which creates a special moment of intimacy between her and the viewers (see figure 7).

Figure 7. Reverse angle shot from Maleficent's point of view. Maleficent is talking almost directly to the audience (*Maleficent* 30:11).

This cinematographic pattern represents a stark contrast to the animated film, in which the audience exclusively observes Maleficent from a vis-á-vis perspective, thus not allowing for identification with the character but in fact, emphasising the opposition between the antagonist and the spectators. In *Maleficent*, however, the use of the point-of-view shot in different variations gives the scene a more dynamic character and reinforces the intimate connection between the protagonist and the audience thus far in the film.

After the conversation with Stefan and the queen, which is an almost verbatim rendition of the animated film and once more lets the audience relive their transtextual memories of *Sleeping Beauty* (Hundertmark 8), Maleficent announces that she will also endow Aurora with a gift and approaches the cradle, which is a stark deviation from the animated original. She opposes Stefan's orders to stay away from the child and shoots the revolting fairies into a caste effortlessly, thereby showing early in the film that Maleficent has genuine interest in Aurora while others fail to protect the child (Schwabe 151). Eventually, she bows over the cradle and inspects the infant carefully, which is once more reflected in a point-of-view shot from Maleficent's perspective. Interestingly, the princess does not appear to be afraid of Maleficent in contrast to the other characters in the scene, who react to the character's arrival with cries and fearful facial expressions. Firstly, this silent exchange in connection with Aurora's positive reaction to Maleficent predicts the close connection between the two characters. In addition, the sequence represents the first allusion to Maleficent's maternal qualities: While Aurora's biological mother remains on her throne and distances herself spatially from her child, the classical image of the mother bowing over the baby's cradle is occupied by Maleficent, indicating that Maleficent will, in fact, serve a more important maternal role in Aurora's life.

In contrast to *Sleeping Beauty*, in which Maleficent simply curses an anonymous baby, Maleficent's interaction with Aurora tones down the character's evilness and demonstrates that despite her considerable transformation, Maleficent internally remains her soft, feminine self (Schwabe 150).

Still, even the interaction with the baby cannot refute Maleficent's anger and she begins to utter her curse. The cinematography changes once more, now pointing to Maleficent's power on various layers: She takes on the same wide-spread position as in the animated movie, however with the change that she is now shown in a medium bottom-up shot, which underlines her overwhelming dominance to the other characters. The colour lime green is prominent again, which is a contrast to Maleficent's warm, gold magic earlier in the film (figure 8). This change not only represents a transtextual allusion to the animated character in *Sleeping Beauty*, but it also enhances Maleficent's status as the villain at this stage of the film (Hundertmark 8).

Figure 8. Bottom-up shot of Maleficent uttering her curse (*Maleficent* 31:41)

In a short break, during which Stefan asks her not to "do this" (*Maleficent* 31:16), she slowly turns to him. Once again, this frame is shot in a reverse angle with the audience seemingly positioned right behind her in order to uphold the connection with the viewers at this critical moment during which Maleficent turns into the villain of the film (Branigan 110). Importantly, this sequence also initiates another point-of-view shot in which Maleficent catches sight of a spinning wheel standing in the throne room, underlined by a prominent musical cue to build apprehension. With this cinematographic setup, the film suggests that Maleficent did not come to the christening with a cold-blooded plan ahead of the feast, but that her evil actions constitute an impulsive reaction to how she is treated by the other characters (*Les Sorcières* 50:55). It appears that only Stefan's continuous refusal to acknowledge his treason against Maleficent and the following sight of the spinning wheel spark her idea for the curse. Therefore, even though this might seem marginal at first, it is crucial for character construction that Maleficent

does not follow a callous plan as in the animated film, but that the curse constitutes a spontaneous overreaction to her anger, which is generally considered more relatable and judged less harshly by viewers (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Structure* 72). Furthermore, this change aligns Maleficent with numerous Disney heroines, who equally often make rash, sometimes unreasonable decisions out of heightened sensitivity and emotion, which are qualities commonly associated with femininity (England et al. 559).

Primarily, however, Maleficent's motivation to come to the christening is to humiliate Stefan in front of his royal household and his subjects. This is particularly striking when he asks her to take back the curse: Rather than following his wish, she spitefully replies: "I like you begging" (*Maleficent* 31:59), hence emphasising her moral superiority, which is endorsed cinematographically with a bottom-up shot of Maleficent. Still, she cannot be persuaded; instead, Maleficent takes Stefan's humiliation to the extreme when she orders him to kneel in front of her, which causes considerable consternation among Stefan's royal counsellors, a group of old white men. According to Mollet, this sequence represents "a dark twist on the dangers of ambition" (*Cultural* 146): Although Stefan functions as the underdog initially, which would have put him in an ideal position to succeed in the Disney universe, his tendency for corruption and his callous strategies to gain power indicate that he does not deserve social recognition, much less a happy ending. Hence, the audience can still justifiably support Maleficent, even though she curses the child and embarrasses Stefan. Additionally, Maleficent's degradation is exclusively directed at Stefan, not masculinity at the royal court in general, which may make her performance more acceptable for viewers. The viewers observe her in her private vendetta against Stefan, clearly being able to side with Maleficent as the rejected lover. Even her eventual concession is a way to remind Stefan of his wrongdoings: After uttering the curse in a transtextual verbatim rendition, Maleficent declares that her spell can only be broken through true love's kiss. While it was originally Merryweather who weakened the curse in order to protect Aurora from death, it is now Maleficent who uses this ironic addendum to mock Stefan since both of them are convinced through their shared past that true love's kiss does not exist (Hundertmark 8).

Finally, Maleficent leaves the scene again. She turns around and opens her arms in a V-position with the green flames still burning around her, which constitutes a reference to the shape that the animated Maleficent takes on when she leaves the scene. On the left side, Aurora's cradle illuminated in green is visible. Diaval is sitting on top of the veil, thereby showing Maleficent's influence over the infant and foreshadowing their close relationship once more. On the other

side of the throne room, the spinning wheel is left completely in the dark, symbolising death and mourning. This opposition with Maleficent in the middle between light and dark once more alludes to her combined status as both the hero and the villain at this critical moment.

5.4. Wicked Witch Turned to Feminine Fairy

One might not have thought it possible that a character such as Maleficent could ever be accepted let alone celebrated by audiences. However, *Maleficent* aimed at this goal: In contrast to the animated classic *Sleeping Beauty*, the film complicates the notion of good and evil and blurs the line between the traditional fairy tale archetypes of the heroine and the villain in order to present Maleficent as a lovable protagonist. Directed at a more mature audience, *Maleficent* obscures Disney's clear-cut binary of good and bad (Hastings 83), thus allowing for a more complex reading of Maleficent's sense of morality. With that, *Maleficent* clearly challenges earlier depictions of the character as the antagonist: Although her curse remains a key element of the plot, Maleficent's actions are otherwise altruistic and she even reconnects with her integrity in the end (Donnely n.p.). Due to this complex character dynamic, the audience is faced with the question whether one malicious action automatically marks somebody as evil, thereby showing how much viewers' individual biases influence judgements of 'good' and 'evil' (Forbes 13). Still, a key question posed in this analysis is which modifications were made to the character's portrayal of gender so that viewers can forgive her for her errors and value her for her qualities, even though the film's main plotline is identical with the animated movie.

Essentially, Maleficent's cinematic redemption is enabled through her representation as a flawed but lovable character, who is appreciated by her community as well as the audience, rather than a social outcast. While the analysis in the previous chapter of this MEd thesis identified Othering as a key strategy in Maleficent's portrayal as the villain, the live-action remake follows the opposite direction: To ensure that Maleficent emerges as the heroine of the film, she is consistently constructed as part of a hegemonic 'we' with the viewers: Firstly, the surprising revelations about Maleficent's earlier life and the abuse she experienced presents viewers with a relatable explanation for her actions. Rather than painting her as the callous antagonist, the audience witnesses Maleficent's painful past, thus providing a justification for her evil image and prompting spectators to empathise with the character on a personal level (Schwabe 147). Even though Maleficent's temporary cruelty remains central for the narrative, viewers can comprehend why she acts this way, which creates a bond between the character and the audience (Brugué & Llompart 113). Secondly, the analysis of the christening scene

revealed that the film's cinematographic construction similarly aims at redirecting the spectators' identification process from seeing Maleficent as an opponent to connecting with her personally. Through the strategic use of the point-of-view shot and the reverse angle, the audience experiences the sequence in close proximity with Maleficent, sometimes even through her eyes, thus also constructing an alliance with the protagonist on a cinematographic level (Branigan 110).

Finally, perhaps the most powerful strategy to make Maleficent's portrayal more relatable to the viewers is by aligning her belief system with the values cherished by mainstream audiences of the early 2010s, with gender ideology being central to this goal (Davis *Girls* 16). Rather than committing multiple violations of gender norms as in the animated film, Maleficent's portrayal in the live-action remake idealises her as an empowered yet classical woman of the 21st century, thereby reflecting the juxtaposition between feminist progress and the wish for a return to traditional womanhood in America at the time of production (Mollet *Cultural* 141). In an interview, Angelina Jolie herself confirmed that this was her intention behind her performance: She wanted to show Maleficent as a combination of both "a warrior but also soft and female and deeply feeling [with] all the complexities that women have" (Movie Youtube 3:56). Thus, while the earlier depiction of Maleficent actively refutes her femininity and emulates masculinity instead, the modern character actively embraces her feminine side: She is emotional, sensitive and serves as a devoted caregiver for others, all of which represent essential qualities conforming with the gender ideological discourse of proper femininity in Western society (Giroux 99). Simultaneously, Maleficent's portrayal is defined by glamorous notions of feminism and even embellished with flattering catchphrases such as being "the strongest" creature in the moors (*Maleficent* 8:22), thus nodding to the 2010s' feminist zeitgeist when it became stylish to strive after female empowerment (Gadzekpo & Smith 263).

Hence, it can be argued that Maleficent's redemption is closely linked to, potentially even dependent on, her conformity to traditionally heteronormative gender ideology. Even though she temporarily displays the same level of evilness as the animated character, the fact that she generally adheres to the ideological 'rules' of patriarchy seems sufficient to grant her a happy ending. In contrast to the animated character, whose goal it is to subvert male power, Maleficent never acts as a threat to the dominance of masculine heterosexuality; instead, her anger is directed at Stefan on an individual level, for which the audience does not judge her as harshly because love and romantic rejection are viewed as adequate reasons to long for revenge (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Structure* 72). Beyond that, Maleficent appears content with her place

in the secluded moors and does not challenge the social order of the patriarchal fairy tale society, which clearly disconnects her from her evil predecessor, who greedily strives after social power and elevates herself as a political leader (Dundes, Streiff-Buitelaar & Streiff 10). Instead, the film implies that Maleficent finds empowerment in traditionally feminine-coded duties such as her maternal responsibilities for Aurora and the moor creatures, which reflects a conservative feminine ideal (Bettis et al. 225). Finally, Maleficent follows the heteronormative path of a Disney heroine by pursuing a relationship with Stefan. Even after she renounces romance for herself, she is convinced of the power of heterosexual love as expected in a heteronormative society (Tyson *Critical* 110). This redirection of Maleficent's ambition and her subordination to heteronormativity remove the character's queer-coded features from the animated film until Maleficent no longer aligns with the traditional depiction of villainy as Other at all. Rather than granting a marginalised, queer character a happy ending, the film paints its protagonist as a heteronormatively attractive woman, far away from the earlier "incoherent gendered being" represented by the animated character (Butler 23). Hence, adherence to gender ideology still seems to be a key indicator for a character's morality and their popularity among mainstream audiences despite Disney's more inclusive undertone recently; otherwise, why would the writers of *Maleficent* have seen the need to make such significant modifications to the character's portrayal of gender?

Based on these deliberations, one may argue that *Maleficent* represents an indication of a changing, potentially more progressive attitude in Disney regarding the depiction of villainy (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 12) while simultaneously repeating Disney's limited rhetoric of gender, albeit in a new face (Golden & Jacoby 305). Certainly, including elements of feminist empowerment, for example foregrounding a mother-daughter-relationship as opposed to a heroine's romantic trajectory, reflects women's increasing authority and opportunities outside marriage in contemporary society (Hine, Ivanovic & England 12). Instead of presenting straightforward archetypes of good and evil and instantly condemning her as the villain, the film concedes that Maleficent has been treated unfair in the original narrative and gives her the chance to explain herself, thus endorsing that society should listen to women and their lived experience. In this way, *Maleficent* reinvents the archetype of the witch and glamourises her as a "strong female character" (Gardner n.p.). This modern character trope emerged out of the femme fatale villain and despite still sharing many of her characteristics such as single-mindedness and an inclination for violence, the "strong female character" (Gardener n.p.) increasingly allows fictional women to show authority and agency without

immediate scrutiny from viewers. Mandracchia praises this development of rehabilitating former villains and liberating them from their portrayal as deviant, emphasising that "the idea that behaviors (sic!) or individuals that are considered 'bad' can be normalized (sic!) or celebrated as good implies an inverted social script that rejects dominant cultural constructions of Otherness" (230). These innovative messages seem to have brought about salutary effects: Brugé and Llompart describe a growing tendency, both among mainstream audiences but especially the LGBTQ+ community, to identify with this new image of the villain, even celebrating them as figures of empowerment and viewing their Otherness as an asset rather than a shortcoming (108). Finally, representations of flawed but lovable female characters such as Maleficent constitute an optimistic indication of a trend in cinema and television: Women are no longer put on a pedestal as the angel of the household, naturally inclined to do good, but they are allowed to make mistakes and eventually redeem themselves (Pinedo 2).

Yet, despite the film's potential for modern female representation, scholars question Disney's marketing of *Maleficent* as a radical reading of the animated original, even labelling it as a "(faux) feminist re-vision" (Greenhill 357) and criticising that the film still presents conservative views of femininity, only sugar-coated with messages of female empowerment (Heaton n.p.). This was corroborated in this analysis: Even though Maleficent certainly acts as a capable protagonist, her portrayal ultimately backdrops into a stereotypical display of feminine power (e.g. her strong inclination for motherhood), thus indicating that gender-normative performance still serves as a strategy to construct a progressive character as more lovable and acceptable for audiences (Sells 81). Maleficent's modern portrayal strategically eradicates her Otherness, most visible in her portrayal of gender, thus exemplifying a prevalent gender-bias in the construction of contemporary Disney characters. This suggests that despite Disney's efforts for more gender-inclusive representation, the company's conservative views on gender ideology are still not entirely irrelevant for the construction of their characters. After Maleficent partly assimilates to the animated character, she faithfully returns to traditional values of femininity, thereby endorsing the myth that despite the "strong female character" certainly being a prestigious role, true happiness is only found by embracing classical femininity (Gardener n.p). Rather than finding herself in the changed social circumstances of a more modern and enlightened society, it is Maleficent who has to adapt to conform to gender norms and to be accepted in a society defined by patriarchal regulations. Under the pretence of giving a marginalised character a voice, the film presents the same hegemonic female character type as worthy of being visible and surviving for her happily-ever-after (Brugué and Llompart

112). Consequently, *Maleficent* is not as radical in its representation of femininity as initially declared by Disney. By suggesting that queerness must be defeated while we can forgive the same character with a female-coded behaviour profile, the film corroborates rather than refutes traditional gender ideology (Patterson & Spencer 74). Although *Maleficent* reflects Disney's efforts to showcase modernised narratives and to present innovative character arcs, it also illustrates how "screenwriters and filmmakers still seem to be struggling to create new powerful female characters" (Brugé & Llompart 114) without falling back into traditional stereotypes in order to avoid commercial backlash (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *Difficult* n.p.).

6 Conclusion

"So, you see, the story is not quite as you were told." (Maleficent, 2014)

With this closing statement, *Maleficent* acknowledges one of the basic foundations in cultural studies: Allegedly taken-for-granted 'truths' of life are not universal, but they emerge out of cultural negotiation and the way we are 'told' through hegemonic ideological discourse. One of these key 'truths' in the Disney fairy tale, namely that 'good' will prevail while 'evil' must be punished for its violation of social norms, formed the starting point of this MEd thesis. The aim of this analysis was to identify what constitutes Disney's notion of 'evil' and to what extent a character's portrayal of gender serves as an indicator for morality. In a contrastive analysis of two famous feature films, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Maleficent* (2014), it was examined how the character *Maleficent*, who functions as the villain in the animated film and steps into the role of the protagonist in the live-action remake, can be read against heteronormatively gendered expectations and how her gendered portrayal regulates her function in the narrative.

The analysis of *Sleeping Beauty* supports the extensive body of earlier research on gender in Disney, which emphasised that Disney's notion of evilness is mainly rooted in the villain's deviance from social norms with Western conservative gender ideology representing a particularly strong framework for the evaluation of what is seen as 'normal' or 'appropriate'. The film depicts a female villain, who continuously refuses the role of traditionally intelligible femininity and instead strives after male privileges such as political power, thus echoing society's concerns of women leaving the private domain for opportunities outside marriage. Maleficent's mere existence as a queer-coded individual threatens the success of heteronormativity in the film to such an extent that the only way to reach a happy ending is to destroy her. Consequently, this analysis found that Maleficent's tendency for gender transgression as well as her refusal to conform with a traditional binary understanding of gender represent crucial underlying factors for her portrayal as the antagonist.

On the other side, the live-action remake made it its aim to reshape Maleficent's story and to offer the audience a different perspective from the dominant discourse about the character as the evil antagonist. Advertised as a progressive reading of the 'story' audiences had been 'told' for years, Disney seemingly acknowledged the problematic aspects of their previous representation of the female characters in *Sleeping Beauty* and promised a more complex portrayal with their remake. *Maleficent* certainly foregrounds the presence of female characters and shows them as dynamic and powerful individuals, while the male characters are limited to

supporting figures. Especially the protagonist Maleficent, who was formerly depicted as emotionally cold and scrutinised for her jealousy, is allowed to redeem herself. However, what sets out as a beneficial endeavour from a feminist perspective to present an initially marginalised character in a positive light and to shift the film's focus on an active heroine, Maleficent's revision as the protagonist is mainly rendered possible through the regulation of her gendered performance. In contrast to the animated character, Angelina Jolie's Maleficent is defined significantly by her conformity to conventional beauty standards, a communitarian personality and, importantly, her potential as a mother figure for Aurora, all of which were only added in the live-action remake in which she functions as the protagonist. The prevailing myths conveyed by the film continue to mirror society's values and attitudes towards the question what is considered morally appropriate behaviour for a woman and, in turn, where we find the borders to unacceptable gendered performance. Thus, even though Maleficent technically no longer functions as the antagonist, the audience learns an important lesson about (un)acceptable behaviour through her performance and through the changes made to her character: Happily ever after, let alone repentance and forgiveness by the audience, only seems possible for those who subject themselves to the patriarchal regulations of Disney's "happy heterosexism" (Putnam 147). In the live-action remake, Maleficent widely engages in the same evil actions as her animated twin, yet her conformity to gender norms and the ensuing implication that she shares a belief system with the audience appears sufficient to make her a heroine. As a result, this MEd thesis found that despite Disney's acclaimed efforts to present messages of diversity, biased expectations regarding gender still seem to be imperative for the construction of female Disney characters. Even though antagonists are no longer as prominently represented as a queer Other (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt 12), adherence to gender ideology still functions as a critical indicator for a character's construction as good or evil.

Certainly, Disney's more recent output has shown heightened awareness for social inequality and diversity, which has been welcomed by audiences and reverberates in the unprecedented success of originals such as *Encanto* (2021) and *Turning Red* (2022), which advocate for social inclusion and focus on issues formerly unknown in Disney. Notably, live-action productions aimed at adolescent audiences such as *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (2020) also address queerness and mental health explicitly, both of which were located firmly in the discourse about antagonists for a long time. This implies that while *Maleficent* may have been only a starting point and does not yet reflect a fully changed attitude, Disney seems to aspire after more inclusive representation of their characters, which is certainly beneficial considering

that that positive visibility of marginalised groups and sexual diversity on the screen contributes significantly to a more tolerant attitude among audiences and helps to challenge traditional gender roles (Zerebecki et al. 11). However, it must be noted that as of yet, social diversity in Disney is mainly found among supporting characters (e.g. the 'quelper'), who are allowed to exist but must ultimately make space for the heteronormative hero and heroine. Notably, the company's upcoming projects show similar endeavours for more inclusivity in Disney's protagonists with regard to race (e.g. the casting of a Black actress for Ariel in the remake of *The Little Mermaid*, 2023) and body shape (e.g. the representation of a plus-size ballerina in the upcoming *Life in Motion*, 2023). Nevertheless, we still have to see similar developments for a more complex portrayal of gender in Disney protagonists, which, as found in this analysis, widely remains within a traditional understanding. Providing viewers with positive queer identification figures may be a crucial first step into normalising the idea that queerness is not an exclusion criterion from a happy ending or society altogether (Munro 182).

The present analysis could only take into account one Disney classic and its remake, which is why the findings of this MEd thesis might not be generalisable over the whole Disney film canon. Future research investigating the gendered representation of other redeemed Disney villains (e.g. *Cruella DeVil* from *101 Dalmations* and the live-action remake *Cruella*) will be needed in order to confirm these results. Furthermore, due to the scope of this MEd thesis, this analysis did not touch upon Maleficent's sequel *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), in which Maleficent's maternal role is explored even further as she has to cope with the hardships of Aurora becoming more independent and eventually starting a life of her own with the prince. Certainly, this aspect of the film provides a range of interesting points for an analysis from a feminist perspective. Finally, this MEd thesis focused on the role of gender-transgressive antagonism, showing that among other factors, adherence to gender ideology can change character perception to such an extent that a former villain can suddenly be accepted as the heroine. While queer-coding has been known to be central for the construction of antagonistic characters for a long time, one may ask whether notions of gender transgression and queerness are reserved exclusively for the 'bad' guys. As briefly touched upon in this MEd thesis, research has indeed identified a Disneyfied version of 'good' gender transgression, which is referred to as the 'quelper'. Even though an exploration of this archetype was not the primary goal of this MEd thesis, the analyses of the two texts pose further questions regarding this character, their difference from the antagonist and, importantly, what constitutes the notion of 'acceptable' queerness in the Disney universe, which will need to be addressed in future research.

In conclusion, the messages of Disney's feature films are certainly not as innocent nor as trivial as research believed for a long time. Despite the company's reputation as a producer of cute cartoons and pure entertainment, Disney's output also follows a specific ideology, which certainly has significant impact on their young audience. The films teach viewers how to achieve happiness and what roles are provided for them in society. Especially the archetype of the villain functions as an imperative teaching tool in that this character shows what behaviour society cannot accept and what the consequences for socially 'inappropriate' performance are. Importantly, however, the villain's performance not only entails their evil actions, but it also communicates messages about appearance, demeanour and, as found in this MEd thesis, gendered performance. Thus, these films not only offer entertainment, but they also communicate pedagogical messages. As a future educator, it is imperative to take note of these directives, not only in order to raise pupils' awareness in the form of reflection about the representation of characters in texts (e.g. class readers), but also for text selection in general: If children and adolescents are surrounded by a biased ideal of heteronormative gender portrayal from powerful corporations such as Disney, teachers might intentionally choose texts for the ESL classroom, which present a more varied outlook on gender and also depict non-gender normative characters as acceptable and, importantly, happy protagonists.

Disney films represent a cultural force in the Western world and it would be illusionary to suggest that the company's ideals can be blocked from young audiences completely. In fact, some messages presented by Disney such as the importance of friendship and the benefits of helping others certainly constitute crucial basics of communal life and represent valuable 'lessons' for viewers, while simultaneously communicating clearly that destructive behaviour is not accepted in society. Yet, if messages of gender transgression are consistently equated with villainy while repentance is only possible through adherence to gender ideology, a problematic bias in the representation of marginalised characters remains. More diverse and complex representation of gender is needed so that the potential that Disney's texts doubtlessly have can be used for positive identification processes and that these formerly Othered characters are shown in a similarly positive light, equally worthy of their happily-ever-after.

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8 Abstract

With their beloved films, Disney not only provides nostalgic and escapist entertainment, but the company's output also promotes powerful social messages, one of the most pervasive being that 'good' will inevitably triumph while 'evil' must be punished for its wrongdoings. Due to the company's wide availability and popularity, these sociocultural meanings extend beyond their films and significantly influence society's conceptualisation of how the world functions and how to achieve happiness. Especially Disney's earlier films define a character's morality and their consequent chances at happily-ever-after through specific cues with adherence to conservative gender ideology being a key indicator for decency and virtue. Conversely, a rejection of a traditional, binary portrayal of gender is frequently used as a sign for villainy in Disney, even though these characters are hardly ever explicitly referred to as queer and only hint at a transgression of gender norms through subtle, queer-coded features. With this portrayal of gender, the antagonist's performance implies an equation between evilness and queerness. Since the villain contradicts the social norms the audience is familiar with, thus prompting viewers to dissociate from the character, Othering them as an outcast to society and evoking negative feelings of antipathy and even fear.

This MEd thesis investigates the gender-bias in the construction of one of the most notorious female Disney antagonists: *Maleficent*. In a contrastive analysis of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Maleficent* (2014), it is examined to what extent the character's role as the protagonist in the remake can be attributed to modifications made to her performance of gender.

The analysis of the animated film *Sleeping Beauty* echoes previous research in that Maleficent's evilness is rooted in her subversion of traditional gender ideology and her tendency to challenge patriarchal norms as well as heteronormative standards. She rejects her femininity and instead, strives after authority and power. On the other side, her modern portrayal in the live-action remake presents Maleficent in a more positive light, which mainly derives from changes made to the plotline, but also from the character's performance of gender, especially her appearance, her role as a caregiver in community and her potential as a mother figure. Therefore, it can be argued that despite Disney's acclaimed endeavours for inclusivity and diversity in recent productions, conservative notions of gender ideology are still reflected in the construction of their female characters' morality.

9 Zusammenfassung

Mit seinen liebgewordenen Filmen bietet Disney nicht nur nostalgische und eskapistische Unterhaltung, sondern vermittelt auch soziale Botschaften. Eine der verbreitetsten davon lautet, dass das ‚Gute' unweigerlich triumphiert, während das ‚Böse' für seine Vergehen bestraft werden muss. Aufgrund der breiten Verfügbarkeit und Popularität des Unternehmens gehen diese soziokulturellen Bedeutungen über die Filme hinaus und beeinflussen in erheblichem Maße die Vorstellungen der Gesellschaft darüber, wie die Welt funktioniert und wie Glück erreicht werden kann. Vor allem die früheren Werke Disneys kennzeichnen den moralischen Wert einer Figur und die damit verbundenen Chancen auf ein glückliches Leben durch spezifische Hinweise, wobei die Einhaltung einer konservativen Geschlechterideologie häufig als Schlüsselindikator für Anstand und Tugend dient. Umgekehrt wird die Ablehnung einer traditionellen, binären Geschlechterdarstellung von Disney häufig als Zeichen für Antagonismus eingesetzt, wobei diese Charaktere kaum explizit als queer bezeichnet werden und eine Überschreitung von Geschlechternormen eher durch subtile, queer-codierte Merkmale angedeutet wird. Mit dieser Darstellung von Gender impliziert das Auftreten des/der Antagonist*in eine Gleichsetzung zwischen Bösartigkeit und Queerness. Indem der/die Bösewicht*in den sozialen Normen, mit denen das Publikum vertraut ist, widerspricht, werden Zuschauer*innen häufig dazu veranlasst, sich von der Figur zu distanzieren, sie als Ausgestoßene der Gesellschaft zu betrachten und ihr negative Gefühle wie Antipathie und sogar Angst entgegenzubringen.

Diese MEd-Arbeit untersucht die geschlechtsspezifischen Vorurteile in der Konstruktion einer der berüchtigtsten weiblichen Disney-Antagonistinnen: Malefiz. In einer vergleichenden Analyse von *Dornröschen* (1959) und *Maleficent* (2014) wird untersucht, inwiefern die Rolle der Figur als Protagonistin in der Neuverfilmung möglichen Änderungen ihrer Darstellung von Gender zugeschrieben werden kann.

Die Analyse des Zeichentrickfilms *Dornröschen* bestätigt frühere Forschungen, indem sie aufzeigt, dass Malefiz' Bösartigkeit maßgeblich in ihrer Subversion traditioneller Geschlechterideologie und ihrer Tendenz, patriarchale Normen sowie heteronormative Standards in Frage zu stellen, begründet ist. Die Figur lehnt ihre Weiblichkeit ab und strebt stattdessen nach Autorität und Macht. Auf der anderen Seite zeigt ihre moderne Darstellung in der Realverfilmung Malefiz in einem positiveren Licht, was vor allem auf Änderungen in der Handlung zurückzuführen ist, aber auch auf ihre Darstellung von Gender, insbesondere ihr

Aussehen, ihre Rolle als Bezugsperson in der Gemeinschaft und ihr Potenzial als Mutterfigur. Daher kann argumentiert werden, dass sich trotz Disneys vielbejubelter Bemühungen um Inklusivität und Vielfalt in den jüngsten Produktionen dennoch konservative Vorstellungen von Geschlechterideologie in ihren weiblichen Figuren und deren Moralkodex widerspiegeln.