



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Queer Sea Witch: Blurring the Boundaries Between Feminine
and Masculine in Different Anglophone On-Screen Adaptations
of “The Little Mermaid”

verfasst von | submitted by
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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Assoz. Prof. Mag. Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak M.A.

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1. Introduction

“Don’t underestimate the importance of body language!” says the sea witch, introducing the concept of gender performativity in a children’s animated film (*The Little Mermaid* (1989) 43:17-22). This thesis investigates the portrayal of the sea witch in seven anglophone on-screen adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” It examines how the characters’ markedly queer representations challenge conventional gender boundaries through their expressions of femininity and masculinity. The sea witch’s character has been read as a queer character, as well as the little mermaid’s narrative, which is longing for another world. In the theoretical section, I will discuss concepts of adaptation, dance, gender studies, queer theory and drag, all of which are interconnected in the analysed adaptation. Following this, I will chronologically analyse the physical attributes and behavioural traits of the sea witches, such as gestures and movements, across these seven adaptations. Fairy tale retellings and adaptations reflect the changing ideologies of their culture, according to Nicky Didicher (49). These particular versions of “The Little Mermaid” include a classical ballet sequence within a live-action film, a stop-motion animation within a live-action film, computer-animated films and a live-action film. In the end, I will explore the changing representation of the sea witches in relation to gender norms. This introduction will start with the exploration of the archetypal witch in Western society and the closely related figure of femme fatale. Finally, it will analyse the sea witch in Andersen’s original fairy tale. This introduction provides an overview of how witches have been portrayed in popular culture, particularly in Andersen’s original fairy tale, which sets the stage for a deeper examination of the analysis.

The contemporary image of the witch in Western society has its roots in the Great Witch-Hunt of the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and the New World. Before this period, the witch was often viewed positively. However, during this period, women who avoided maternity, beggars, prostitutes or those who expressed their sexuality beyond the confines of marriage and procreation were regarded as witches, as Silvia Federici notes (202, 213). These women were typically depicted as old and ugly. Women who rebelled against social norms, challenged male authority or opposed the Church were seen as aggressive, lusty and proud (Federici 202-3). Hence, they possessed attributes that were traditionally associated with masculinity. Their punishments reveal a misogyny that matched no other tortures (Federici 204). For example, one form of punishment involved completely shaving their heads, as it was believed that the devil hid in their hair (Federici 204). This bald portrayal of witches is reflected

in several anglophone on-screen adaptations of “The Little Mermaid.” Ultimately, there is a relation between the degraded image of women and “the image of femininity constructed by the contemporary debates on the ‘nature of the sexes,’” which oversimplified women as weak and prone to evil (Federici 205). This view justified male control and reinforced the patriarchal order.

According to tales of the period, witches were able to castrate men or render them impotent, which instigated men to fear women (Federici 207). Some stories even depicted witches stealing male sexual organs and hiding them until they were forced to return them (Federici 207). This imagery parallels Disney’s sea witch, who seizes the sea king’s trident, both symbols representing the power of men over women. Beyond making men impotent, witches were also accused of being dangerous and demonic, with their sexuality turned into an object of fear (Federici 210). This perception aligns with how the term “queer” insinuated someone’s sexual deviance in the 19th century. Any sexual activities that were deemed as “non-productive,” like homosexuality, nudity and dances were banned (Federici 217). Subsequently, witches were associated with dancing, a theme in all adaptations. In conclusion, all types of minorities were linked to witchcraft and the Devil based on factors such as gender, sexuality, race, class and age.

There was a persistent identification between female sexuality and bestiality during this period, meaning that witches were associated with a variety of animals that were believed to assist them in their crimes and with which they maintained intimate relationships (Federici 215). This connection is evident in several of the analysed adaptations, where witches are accompanied by creatures like eels and sharks. The association with animals was especially important in the 16th and 17th centuries when animals were devaluated to the ultimate “Other” (Federici 215). As a result, witches and essentially all women. Hence, female sexuality and femininity were linked to the “Other.” Additionally, witches were accused of shape-shifting and morphing into animals (Federici 215), a concept represented in all but the most recent adaptation. These adaptations feature witches with fish heads, snake hair, octopus bodies, eel tails, and stingray bodies. In the 17th century, especially during the Age of Reason, men were depicted as rational beings, while women and the body were marked as the “Other,” weak, irrational and wild, the opposite of reason (Federici 166-7). “Especially blamed was the female tongue, seen as an instrument of insubordination” (Federici 115). This view perfectly aligns with the original “The Little Mermaid,” where the mermaid’s tongue is cut out so she can pursue marriage. All in all, the phenomenon of witch-hunts contributed to a misogyny that

continues to characterise female-male relations, especially in the depiction of the witch as the “Other” and as a queer figure.

In Western popular culture, witches have consistently been queer-coded. “Queer coding” refers to attributing stereotypically queer traits to characters without explicitly stating their gender and sexual identity, as explained by Francesco Piluso (131). Witches are portrayed with non-conforming gender and sexuality, which challenge traditional gender norms and mark them as morally deviant (Piluso 131). “Often female and frequently queer, witches (and those accused of witchcraft) are relegated to the margins of heteronormative patriarchal monotheistic culture,” notes Jane Barnette (2). Typically, the character of the witch plays a villainous, antagonistic role. She is the opposite of the protagonist, especially as the protagonist embodies positive values and conforms to social norms, such as being in love and seeking marriage, while the witch represents non-normative characteristics, such as being unmarried and childless. According to Alba Morollón Díaz-Faes, the witch is portrayed as “the outsider who must be eradicated, and the queer” (22). This good/bad and heterosexual/queer dichotomy frequently assigns queer characters the role of obstructing the protagonists’ success (Piluso 135). Therefore, the protagonist needs to fight and defeat the witch. This notion aligns with the *femme fatale* archetype.

The *femme fatale* archetype, representing dangerous femininity, has been present in various narratives from Greek mythologies and Biblical tales on- and off-screen, preserving core features, yet with variations that constantly change through time and space, states Tuğçe Özdiñç (175). The term “*femme fatale*” literally means lethal woman (Özdiñç 185). Witches and sirens are among the earliest and most prominent figures of the *femme fatale*, feared and controlled due to their supernatural powers, as David Leeming and Jake Page mention (88-9). This connection between witches and sirens is especially important in the context of Andersen’s sea witch, which embodies elements of both. She is named a witch and takes away the voice of the little mermaid, a trait closely associated with sirens. The voices of sirens have long been linked to enchantment and seduction, as Robert E. Bell notes (400). Therefore, the mermaid is a symbol of evil, according to David Farnell and Rute Noiva, who cruelly tempt men to their destruction (9). The main attributes of the *femme fatale* are fierceness, power and manipulative wit, which are presumed monstrous and dangerous, linking the *femme fatale* to the concept of evil and disruption of patriarchy (Özdiñç 175-7). This evil nature might also be represented through shapeshifting, especially into animals, as indicated by Ayman Hassan Elhallaq (88).

Another key feature of the *femme fatale* is her overt, often predatory sexuality, which threatens the power of men, as Stevie Simkin notes (5). She is fully aware of her body and uses

it to achieve her goals, free from the constraints of social norms (Özdinç 179). Moreover, to obtain what she desires, she can mask her true identity, intentions and feelings, as a master of manipulation, facilitated by her wit and intelligence (Simkin 29). According to Julie Grossman, other attributes include the ability to role-play, perform and exude physical self-confidence with a striking appearance (1). The femme fatale tries to escape objectification and rigid, socially sanctioned positions that oppress her (Grossman 4). However, when she assumes or “performs” unconventional or unprescribed roles, her ambition to find fulfilment outside social conventions challenges the status quo (Grossman 4). In conclusion, she uses all her attributes to disrupt patriarchy and take the power of men (Özdinç 180). They cause ambiguity in this process (Özdinç 180). The femme fatale is an emblem of otherness, note Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe (4). Therefore, the femme fatale is neither subject nor object, but abject, which is threatening and abominable, according to Julia Kristeva (48). From the perspective of both men and women, she is the “Other,” always an outcast in society (Özdinç 183). Subsequently, this figure meets a fatal end in narratives, as she must be eliminated, notes Naomi Segal (102). The femme fatale essentially challenges social norms by subverting gender boundaries. For example, older women, like the sea witches are either “backgrounded as loving (preferably deceased) mothers or, if powerful and independent, vilified as evil femme fatales or ugly hags,” as maintained by Karen E. Wohlwend (59).

“The mermaid herself is a rather queer figure, since she transgresses many, supposedly impenetrable borders and subverts binary orders,” as Efrat Tseëlon states (1019). In the original fairy tale, the little mermaid notes that her sisters are distracted, allowing her the opportunity to visit the sea witch. She describes the witch as someone “of whom [she has] always been very much afraid [of]” (Andersen 32). This suggests that the sea witch is a well-known figure among merpeople, especially for her fearsomeness. As someone who lives outside the sea kingdom and beyond social norms, the witch is marked as the “Other,” echoing the historical and cultural witch figure that was mentioned above. The little mermaid believes the witch is able to “advise and help” her (Andersen 32), which highlights the witch’s knowledge and power.

The sea witch’s “realm is one of decay, death, and destruction,” notes Maria Tatar (318). She lives in a grotesque “house built of the bones of the wrecked” (Andersen 33). The surrounding area is dangerous and characterised by roaring whirlpools and polyps, creatures that are half animal and half plant (Andersen 32). These polyps are so menacing that they seize anything in their grasp, never letting go, whether it be the skeletons of animals or mermaids (Andersen 33). The little mermaid is so terrified by this scene that her heart beats fast with

terror, and she almost turns back. As she approaches the sea witch's house, she encounters huge, fat water snakes, which the witch affectionately calls her "little chickens" and allows "to crawl about on her unsightly bosom" (Andersen 33). Additionally, she has a toad feeding from her mouth. This imagery aligns with the archetypal witch figure, who is close to nature and animals, particularly toads, which are commonly associated with witches.

One of the sea witch's core attributes is her omniscient nature and power, exemplified by her immediate understanding of why the little mermaid has come to her (Andersen 34). However, her abilities are not without limitations, such as the constraint of time (the little mermaid must act before sunrise) and the unnecessary suffering the little mermaid must endure, including the pain with every step she takes. The sea witch judges the little mermaid, calling her foolish for her decision (Andersen 34). She also demands the little mermaid's voice in exchange since she envies her voice, which is the most beautiful of the sea (Andersen 35). When the little mermaid asks what she will have left without her voice, the sea witch replies that she will preserve her "beautiful form ... [her] gliding gait, and [her] speaking eyes, with these [she] ought surely to be able to bewitch a human heart" (Andersen 35). Ultimately, the little mermaid agrees to the bargain, and the sea witch cuts off her tongue. This helping aspect of the witch, which is not nurturing in the traditional sense, reflects the idea of subverted maternal roles, a trope used in fairy tales. She offers wisdom about life and death to the little mermaid but in a cruel way. This subverted maternal role ties her to traditional femininity but subverts it through her cruel and unconventional methods. Thus, witches are wicked replacements of maternal figures, transgressive and excessive in their gender representations (Piluso 136).

In conclusion, the contemporary image of the witch in Western society is rooted in the misogynistic biases of the Great Witch-Hunt of the 16th and 17th centuries. The witch is a fearsome and demonic figure linked to non-normative sexuality and femininity. She embodies the concept of the "Other." This portrayal has influenced how witches are represented as queer-coded villains in various adaptations. The femme fatale archetype aligns with this depiction since witches and femme fatales are portrayed as outcasts who must be eliminated by the end of the narrative. The original sea witch exemplifies a queer and subversive figure. She also reflects a subverted version of maternal roles, ultimately echoing these archetypal, gender-transgressive traits that were outlined above. All in all, these findings set the stage for a deeper examination of the analysis, as the characteristics of the witch, the femme fatale and the original sea witch have influenced subsequent portrayals of the sea witches in the adaptation. Therefore,

these attributes are not unique to any adaptation but are integral to the archetypal witch's character.

2. Theorising Queer Performances On-Screen

2.1 From Page to Screen: Theories of Narrative Adaptation

Adaptation is a complex process of transformation and re-creation, both in the contexts of biological, such as genetic adaptation, when something is made to fit a given environment, and cultural, such as narrative adaptation, when a story is mutated and adjusted to fit a particular cultural environment (Hutcheon 31). Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, along with other scholarly works discussed in this chapter, provides an encompassing framework for understanding how stories, like Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" change and evolve when they are transferred from one medium to another, like adapting a narrative story to film. This chapter will explore the theory of narrative adaptation in relation to the specific case of anglophone on-screen adaptations of "The Little Mermaid," which will be further explored in the analysis chapter. It is particularly interesting to examine versions of this fairy tale through the lens of adaptation, as a film uses images and relatively few words to convey its message (Hutcheon 1). This perfectly aligns with "The Little Mermaid," especially as the protagonist's voice is taken by the sea witch, requiring her to use body language and "speaking eyes" to communicate (Andersen 35). Hence, both transcends language visually. By examining the adaptation process, this chapter will explain why the original story of "The Little Mermaid" has changed over time.

An adaptation involves the extensive and announced transposition of a particular work from one medium to another. As Hutcheon notes, telling a narrative in written words is not the equivalent of presenting it visually and aurally, as each form has its specificity and distinctiveness (7, 23-24). The transposition allows the core elements of the narrative, such as characters, plots and themes to be transferred into another form, as these elements can be separated from form, according to Kamilla Elliott (133). This implies that the essence of the sea witch can be preserved in various forms of adaptation, such as ballet, stop-motion animation, computer animation and live action. This preservation is supported by Christian Metz's observation that literature and cinema are capable of conveying any messages (39). However, Hutcheon argues that each adaptation approaches the story through different modes of engagement, like narrating, performing, or interacting, which result in variations in characters, their motivations and points of view, consequences, themes and symbols (10). Therefore, adaptation involves not only retelling a narrative but also reinterpreting and reimagining it to meet the demands of a new medium, commonly referred to as "appropriation and salvaging" (Hutcheon 8). For example, in the original "The Little Mermaid," the sea

witch's features are briefly described, and only her conversation with the protagonist and the potion-making are depicted. In contrast, all anglophone on-screen adaptations place emphasis on the sea witches' movements, which shows how different mediums can focus on distinct aspects.

The transposition of a narrative from one medium to another necessitates significant modifications (Hutcheon 16). This transposition causes inevitable losses and gains, as Robert Stam acknowledges (*Beyond Fidelity* 62). André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion further explain that each medium combines and multiplies tools of expression, such as rhythm, movement, gesture, music, speech, image and writing (65). This is apparent in the different adaptations of "The Little Mermaid," where each version capitalises on the strengths of their respective medium. For example, the ballet adaptation in *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952) uses the expressive potential of dance to portray the powerful figures of the sea witches. Dance has its composite conventions and rules that all operate to structure meaning (Hutcheon 35). Ralph Stephenson and Jean R. Debrix add that some messages are better conveyed without words, as they can disturb the image, which further justifies the analysis of movement (199). In stop-motion animation, traditional animation and computer animation, the emphasis is placed on the sea witches' looks and gestures. In these cases, non-verbal elements are equally important as verbal elements. This is particularly true for animation, as it is created frame by frame, implying that each movement on the screen has its intended purpose, like a carefully crafted choreography. In contrast, the live-action *The Little Mermaid* (2023) introduces a more realistic visual aesthetic with Ursula's sinister appearance. All these film adaptations create visual and aural correlatives for interior events, as a film has many techniques that verbal texts do not have, such as lighting, setting, clothing and editing pace (Hutcheon 58). Camera angles and setups establish power dynamics among the characters, and music enhances the audience's connection to the characters (Stam, *Introduction* 39; Hutcheon 41). This is exemplified in the Walt Disney Studio's adaptations, where the iconic song, "Poor Unfortunate Souls" plays a significant role in establishing Ursula's character. The analysed adaptations show how each medium uses its strength to reinterpret the narrative and offer a distinct portrayal of the sea witch's character. Hence, the analysis chapter of the thesis will examine non-verbal and verbal elements of the sea witches in their respective adaptations, as well as camera angles, lighting, setting, costumes, editing, and music.

Adaptations inevitably undergo modifications due to individual adapters, audiences, and the contexts of reception and creation, in other words, an adaptation "does not exist in a vacuum" (Hutcheon 142). Hutcheon explains that adaptations "communicate narrative

meaning to someone in some context, and they are created by someone with that intent” (26). First, this adapting process involves numerous artists and creative decisions, making it a collaborative art form. Hutcheon raises the question, “who of the many artists involved should be called the actual adapter(s)?” (81). In the context of the Walt Disney Company’s adaptations, the sea witch was inspired by a drag queen Divine. This demonstrates the diverse artistic influences that shape the final product. Second, all adaptations modify and revise their material to communicate messages to their intended audience. Hence, works from different times attempt to change their source material to cater to their current audience’s social norms and expectations. The significance of cultural, social, and historical contexts in shaping the meaning of these works is highlighted by the fact that audiences are active contributors, bringing their expectations and demands when experiencing adaptations, Hutcheon further elucidates (122, 134, 139). Ultimately, adaptation is a process through which stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and places (Hutcheon 176, 179). This explains why stories like “The Little Mermaid” undergo changes in different adaptations to reflect current cultural and social values. Additionally, Leo Braudy describes remakes as “unfinished cultural business[es]” (331). This idea suggests a conversation between the analysed adaptations, where each is aware of previous works and deliberately modifies the original material, creating mutations. This concept of mutation is particularly evident in how adaptations handle characters. Murray Smith argues that “character structures are perhaps the major way by which narrative texts solicit our assent for particular values, practices, and ideologies” (4). In “The Little Mermaid,” the sea witch’s character has been reinterpreted to reflect traditional femininity and masculinity, aligning the figure with contemporary gender expectations.

For audiences, the pleasure of adaptation stems from repetition with variation, allowing studios to stay within a safe zone while reaping economic benefits (Hutcheon 4). As Hutcheon points out, “it is not simply a matter of risk-avoidance; there is money to be made,” and the “monetary appeal cannot be ignored,” as adaptations are “safe bets with a ready audience” (5, 86, 87). This idea resonates with John Ellis’ statement that Hollywood is only interested in the tried and tested (3). Hollywood, as part of the culture industry, is driven by profit, which often results in media that are more mass-produced than nuanced, featuring the same tropes to minimise risk, as described by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (32, 35). For instance, the Walt Disney Company’s perceived corporate attitude of achieving as much profit as possible, even if it is against the company’s previous image, reflects this approach, adds Sean Griffin (106). Disney uses the same tropes in films that portray princesses, such as dead parent(s), magical elements, a love story, with a kiss at the very end, a “wish song” like “Part

of Your World,” which are all about wanting to find happiness elsewhere and a happy ending (Griffin 150). Like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), *The Little Mermaid* continues the formula of princess and prince versus the evil old woman who is a witch and/or stepmother. To maximise profit, Disney has produced numerous adaptations of Andersen’s fairy tale, such as an animated film, sequels, prequels, theme park rides and a live-action remake. This economic motivation drives studios to continually revisit and reinterpret classic stories like “The Little Mermaid,” guaranteeing their relevance and profitability in a competitive market.

To summarise, Linda Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation provides an encompassing framework for understanding the transformation of narratives across different mediums, individual adapters, audiences, and the contexts of time and places. This chapter outlined how the sea witches of “The Little Mermaid’s” anglophone on-screen adaptations can preserve the essence of the original character while reinterpreting them according to the demands of each medium. Hence, each adaptation uses the strengths of its form, especially non-verbal elements, such as appearance, body language and gestures. Adaptations also change due to the influence of artistic contexts and the audiences’ demand to align with current social norms, like gender expectations. Additionally, Hollywood, as a part of the culture industry, relies on the same tested tropes to guarantee financial stability and profit-making, which is why studios like Disney repeatedly revisit and reinterpret classic stories. Ultimately, the responsive nature of narrative adaptations ensures that classic tales such as “The Little Mermaid” continue to resonate with contemporary audiences.

2.2 Gender in Dance Theory

Dance, as much as adaptation, does not exist in a vacuum since it is part of the arts, culture, society and history, according to Gayle Kassing (4). This chapter examines dance theories and provides a framework for analysing the movements and gestures of the sea witches in the seven anglophone on-screen adaptations of “The Little Mermaid” within the context of contemporary Western culture. Dance’s various meanings and nuances can be observed, investigated and theorised in all its variety, as Maruša Pušnik notes. However, this exploration will only focus on the connection between dance and gender, particularly within the Western theatrical tradition where the adaptations were produced. The chapter will also survey examples from the 1990s, when three adaptations were released and two subsequent adaptations closely related to them. Therefore, I will draw on critical works about ballet and Western competition

dances, like contemporary from the 1990s onwards, to discuss the relationship between dance and culturally conditioned gender norms.

Karen Schupp proposed that dance culture and movement serve as a channel for expressing and reinforcing specific ideas about the social construction of gender and traditional norms of femininity and masculinity (79). For example, romantic ballet provided an escape from the rise of industrialism in the 19th century, or American modern dance responded to the 1930s social and economic state. Hence, movement systems can be visual manifestations of social relations, which helps to understand cultural values. Specifically, there is a nuanced interplay between dance and gender because, according to Marília Del Ponte de Assis et al., dance communicates and expresses complexities, mirroring and maintaining ideological beliefs about the body and gender (452; Kassing 5). Dance is an essential area where gendered identities become manifested since dance uses the body as its primary means of expression, and gender identities and social norms are expressed by bodies. Luce Irigaray suggests that body language is marked by sexual differences, which means that gender is always a product of cultural structures (189-90). Therefore, the body is a site of cultural frameworks that define gender (Butler, *Gender* 45). This connection presents a lens through which to view the movements of the sea witches in adaptations of “The Little Mermaid.” This chapter will examine how dance can conform to and challenge traditional gender norms, which offers a framework for the analysis of the sea witches’ on-screen portrayals. It will also introduce how dance can serve as a vehicle for more fluid and subversive manifestations of gender identity, such as queerness and drag, which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

The study of the connection between dance and gender emerged from feminist theory and gender studies during the 1980s. Ted Polhemus proposes that at the most fundamental level of analysis, “dance, gender and culture are one and the same thing” (3). Thus, these three concepts form an inseparable bond, irrespective of contextual variations (Polhemus 3). Culture, when viewed through an anthropological lens, encompasses everything that members of a social group share (Polhemus 3). Subsequently, it is essential to emphasise the importance of non-verbal communicative systems, commonly referred to as physical culture, as they influence physical development and behaviour (Polhemus 4). Polhemus emphasises that bodies and their movements are mediated through social norms rather than intrinsically natural (Polhemus 4). Cynthia J. Novack and Éva Székely concur that choreographies convey messages regarding movement, behaviour and society (37; 219). This cultural shaping influences how individuals use their bodies, such as standing, walking and holding a posture, which varies across societies and eras (Polhemus 4). Nonetheless, there is a correlation between

the social body and the physical body, as physical behaviour exhibits cultural variation and is a pivotal component of the human expressive and communicative system that transcends linguistic barriers (Polhemus 4, 6). Dance can be viewed as “a schema, an abstraction or stylising of physical culture” (Polhemus 7). In other words, dance embodies the metaphysics of culture, as movements represent an individual’s distinctive way of life and “the complexities of the socio-cultural system” (Polhemus 8-9). Therefore, moving a body in a manner that is contrary to one’s cultural norms amounts to breaking the rules (Polhemus 4).

The structure of choreography is influenced by ideologies about the body and gender (Novack 34). Since gender, a social characteristic in dance studies affects individuals’ perception and comprehension of culture, culture becomes less of a singular, unisex phenomenon (Polhemus 10). Dance practices have the potential to reinforce the social construction of gendered bodies since dance can provoke and influence spectators’ attitudes and opinions (Schupp 78; Assis et al. 450). As stated by Elizabeth Parry, dance has often served as a means of expressing gender binaries through the Western classic, binary lens. For instance, in Helen Thomas’s study conducted in the 1990s in London, participants, when viewing dances from the Western theatrical tradition, would link the dancer’s grace to femininity and their strength to masculinity (*An-Other Voice* 70). This study illustrates how dance influences spectators’ attitudes towards these attributes. This study also demonstrates that in that specific context that aligns with the adaptations, there were expectations of how gendered bodies moved. According to Wendy Oliver and Doug Risner, these variances in movement stem from inherent differences in body structure (2). Nevertheless, due to its link to self-expression, dance has the potential to transcend biological body constructions (Oliver and Risner 2). This characteristic of dance plays a significant role in the process of “social construction and transmission of gender knowledge,” according to Judith Lynne Hanna (75). Hence, movement can question social norms and expectations. This will be demonstrated in the analysis section.

Gender representation in dance is influenced by codes and conventions that create meanings that support or challenge normative ideas about gender, such as femininity, masculinity and other aspects of identity, notes Ramsay Burt (29). Regardless of whether dance reinforces or dissents from normative values, there is always a relationship between dance and gender. To understand these codes and conventions, it is essential to be able to read dance, movement and choreography. Susan Leigh Foster argues that understanding dance begins with perceiving how the body moves: seeing, hearing, and feeling its motions, in other words, visual, aural and kinaesthetic impressions (*Reading* 58). One must learn to see and feel the rhythm in movement and comprehend the three-dimensionality of the body, or specifically two-

dimensionality in the animated adaptations of “The Little Mermaid” (Foster, *Reading* 58). One must also understand its anatomical capabilities in relation to gravity, and identify the gestures and shapes it forms (Foster, *Reading* 58). The notion of gravity is especially intriguing in “The Little Mermaid,” as the sea witch lives underwater in all adaptation that changes the relation to gravity. Animation is also able to overcome anatomical capabilities, as there are no limitations in drawing in this regard. Such skills of “reading” dance enable the recognition and reinterpretation of these elements, even when they are performed by different dancers or through diverse types of media (Foster, *Reading* 58). It allows for the comparison of movements, facilitating the recognition of similarities, variations, and contrasts (Foster, *Reading* 58). Through the process of reading dance, one can comprehend larger patterns, phrases of movement, sections of the dance, and ultimately, the dance as a whole (Foster, *Reading* 58).

The alignment of gender to the body, despite being commonly perceived as innate, is a learned outcome of cultural construction, according to Joyce Sherlock, which echoes Judith Butler’s work on gender (526). As mentioned above, dance and gender can represent ideologies (Sherlock 525-6). Choreographies can link gender stereotypes with images of power, manipulation and control. In Western contexts, such as ballet and contemporary dance in the 1990s and today in the United States, these art forms often perpetuate masculine and feminine stereotypes through specific ways of looking, behaving and moving (Novack 46; Schupp 78). Historically, dance, in the Western theatrical tradition, mirrors male dominance and female submission, particularly in ballet, where the ballerina is sustained, carried, and manipulated by the male dancer (Assis et al. 450). Typically, the female is the object of desire and adoration, with the male dancer orchestrating, meaning the female’s choreography is initiated and controlled by the male and serves as an assistant in the background to allow the female to shine (Assis et al. 450). This power dynamic reinforces and encourages traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity, with bodies and movements constructed to tell stories, reveal problems, raise discussions, and reflect cultural values and prejudices (Assis et al. 451-2). Culturally gendered norms of body behaviour restrict how one dances. However, these norms vary across cultures and over time, thus dance negotiates social and cultural discourses, reflecting ideas about gendered bodies that evolve and change (Burt 15-6). The question remains, as Johanna Boyce et al. ask, “conventionally, how do we associate certain things with feminine and masculine?” (85).

As can be observed, a substantial amount of dance scholarship on gender originates from a simplistic and dichotomous idea of gender, such as masculinity and femininity, when

theorising the body's relationship to social norms in dance. To a certain extent, this reflects the cultural work of traditional Western forms, such as classical ballet. Nonetheless, these concepts will provide a useful framework for analysing the adaptations from 1952 to the present, as queer representations in dance stem from these problematic embodiments, which ultimately lead to blurring the boundaries between traditional gender attributes. In classical ballet, jazz, tap and contemporary dance, traditional masculinity is exemplified through powerful movements that emphasise strength and dominance, reinforcing the binary gender norms prevalent in Western theatrical tradition.

Male dancers typically exhibit physicalities that are perceived as solid and athletic, with movements that emphasise lower body strength, like leaps and jumps, which require physical energy and large amounts of space (Oliver and Risner 2, 7-8; Schupp 79, 83, 85, 86; Assis et al. 456). They also exhibit effortless upper body strength through push-ups and floor work, which are choreographies executed on the floor or at a low spatial level (Schupp 86; Assis et al. 456). Masculine movements can also feature elevated positions with a confident gaze, which present self-assurance, according to Allison Yamanashi Leib and Robert C. Bulman (606-7). Choreographies often include quick, strong and hard-hitting movements involving physical risks and a display of confidence, authoritativeness and control (Oliver and Risner 2, 7-8; Schupp 79, 85). Tricks, challenging movements that look almost impossible for the audience, are associated with masculinity, as Gillian T. Ebersole suggests, through tough and emotionless execution (1). The powerful movements of male dancers exemplify dominance and aggression (Leib and Bulman 608). As a result, female dancers are controlled by men (Novack 38). Male dancing bodies promise action (Burt 13; Sherlock 528). Therefore, male dancers are expected to be physically strong and look strong in their dance movements (Thomas, *Dancing* 508). Vulnerability would challenge dominant ideas about masculinity, adds Beatrice Allegranti (27). Masculine-coded movements also instil the audience's respect and admiration (Assis et al. 456). Such energetic and vibrant movements are performed by men, reinforcing attributes of traditional masculinity that are encouraged by social norms (Assis et al. 456).

In the same context, and in opposition to masculinity, femininity is expressed through graceful and fluid movements, which reinforce traditional gender stereotypes through the physical appearance and performance of female dancers. Female dance movements are characterised by grace, beauty, and emotional expressiveness, as well as flexibility and fluidity (Oliver and Risner 2, 7-8; Schupp 79). Female dancers are typically restricted to limited space and perform at a slow to moderate tempo, which can include moments of stillness and hesitancy (Oliver and Risner 2, 7-8; Schupp 79). These choreographies frequently feature turns,

pirouettes and difficult balances, as well as flexible movements, such as battements, kicks, développés and extensions (Schupp 86). Feminine movements are characterised by elegant postures, graceful passivity, petite movements and softened facial expressions (Leib and Bulman 606; Thomas, *Dancing* 508). In terms of the female dancer's appearance and body, they are associated with being tall and slim, displaying more bare skin (Schupp 83). They also feature elaborate hairstyles, heavy makeup, fake eyelashes and large earrings (Schupp 83). Talent in female dancers is typically judged by the combination of body shape and technical expertise, contributing to a form of graceful physical capital, despite feminist interventions (Sherlock 528). Women's fragile movements exemplify vulnerability and frailty, reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes (Leib and Bulman 608; Novack 38).

However, dance can also challenge and contradict culturally mandated versions of masculinity and femininity by neutralising the choreography or transforming and deconstructing gender roles through role reversal or "regendering" (Oliver and Risner 2-3). Thus, the works of queer dance choreographers often shed light on the limitations of conventional gender tropes (Oliver and Risner 11). This notion is evident in the Walt Disney Company's *The Little Mermaid*, where Ursula's character was inspired by a drag queen. For example, dance can blur conventional gender differences by combining sensitivity with strength and dynamism (Assis et al. 458). There is no inherent masculinity or femininity expressed through gender-appropriate behaviour (Burt 39). Instead, these social constructs are re-enacted through dance (Burt 39). The performers of dance do not express an inner truth of masculinity or femininity through choreographed movements but rather re-enact socially established signs and conventions. These signs are displayed on the surface of the body and can be executed by any body, irrespective of gender (Burt 41). Drag, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, reveals the imitative structure of gender and its contingency, suggesting that masculinity is constantly in the process of becoming, as it is continually redefined to maintain dominance among changing social circumstances (Butler, *Gender* 137, Burt 11). This undermines the idea of normative masculinity as being unmarked (Burt 42). Also, women can perform moves conventionally associated with masculinity, challenging and denaturalising assumptions about femininity in dance (Burt 125). For instance, in contact dances, women are able to display strength and energy to perform lifts. Similarly, two men can project softness, non-competitiveness, responsiveness and caring in their choreography (Burt 130). Correspondingly, in the on-screen adaptations of "The Little Mermaid," the sea witches' dance movements conform to and subvert gender norms.

In conclusion, as an expressive and communicative form, dance is intertwined with cultural and gender norms. Due to this connection, dance can reflect and challenge social values. It is imperative to consider dance as a non-verbal code to comprehend the messages conveyed to the audience through movement, along with costumes, objects, scenery and lighting (Assis et al. 452). This chapter outlined how femininity and masculinity can be expressed through movement in Western popular culture. I will analyse the sea witches using these gendered tropes in order to reflect on how the antagonists of the adaptations challenge and confront these traditional binary norms. The analysed performances are evidently queer-coded. Therefore, the subsequent chapters will examine gender studies, queer theory and drag more closely.

2.3 Challenging Gender Norms: Performative Ambiguity

Gender corresponds to the social constructs that dictate how men and women should behave, what roles they should fulfil, and the appropriate attributes they should possess, as Manizheh Alami explains (247). This chapter will explore the key themes in gender studies, with a particular focus on the concept of performativity, which examines how individuals represent and express their identities. Performativity, as Judith Butler adds, refers to the notion that gender is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing series of acts, gestures and movements, in other words, images that individuals project and that societies interpret (*Gender* xv, 189; *Bodies* xxi). This theoretical approach will assist in analysing the adaptations of “The Little Mermaid,” as films themselves are images in motion. In these adaptations, the performativity of various sea witches challenges the assumptions of normative femininity and masculinity, which blurs the boundaries between these social norms. As a result, the sea witches become symbols of performative ambiguity, which aligns with the archetypal witch that possesses attributes associated with traditional masculinity and femininity, ultimately linked to the “Other.” First, the chapter will consider the distinction between gender and sex and examine the concept of performativity, the fluid and changing qualities of gender identity. Then, it will discuss how gender is historically and culturally constructed and how it varies accordingly, reinforcing the binary system, social norms and power dynamics. Lastly, it will investigate how gender ambiguity facilitates resistance and diverse expressions of identity.

Gender is distinct from biological sex, as “gender is the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture” (Butler, *Bodies* xiv). This distinction, introduced to challenge the deterministic idea of “biology-is-destiny,” reveals that gender is not the result of sex but is culturally constructed (Butler, *Gender* 9). Even the concept of sex, often considered a

biological fact, is shaped by and interpreted through cultural meanings, suggesting that what we perceive as sex is a manifestation, absorption and displacement of gender (Butler, *Gender* 4, 11). Some parts of sex are constructed, and some parts are not. Therefore, as Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna add, the traditional two-sex system is also a product of cultural norms and not a biological inevitability (vii). Thus, the stable identity that gender is presumed to provide is deeply intertwined with and dependent upon various understandings of sex, according to Maite Escudero-Alías (19). This perspective establishes the primacy of gender as a cultural category over sex, as Thomas Laqueur also emphasises (8). Moreover, Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead note that different cultures conceptualise gender and sex in diverse ways, which shows that a binary view of gender and sex is not universal (*Preface* ix). These insights highlight that gender and sex are fluid and culturally constructed across different societies. This concept is reflected in all the analysed adaptations of “The Little Mermaid,” where the gender and sex of the various sea witches are ambiguous. For example, in the ballet adaptation of *Hans Christian Andersen*, the costumes intentionally conceal the gender identity of the dancers, by hiding anatomical differences, so it is impossible to determine their sexes.

The performativity of gender does not mean a stable identity or a singular act but rather a compulsory repetition and a ritual that is able to challenge and destabilise the naturalised categories of identity and desire (Butler, *Gender* xv, 189; *Bodies* xxi). Gender is a fluid, constantly changing construct, in other words, a process of becoming, as it is a “complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time” (Butler, *Gender* 152, 22). The becoming characteristic of gender aligns with Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born woman, but rather becomes one” (301). However, before cultural forces transform individuals into gendered beings, all children possess the potential to express a full range of sexual and gender possibilities, according to Gayle S. Rubin (51). Subsequently, the categories of man and woman are not naturally given but are politically constructed identities that can be transcended or redefined (Wittig, *One* 248). Additionally, gender is not a noun or a set of free-floating attributes, as it is constantly influenced by “the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, *Gender* 34). A gendered self, or as Robert J. Stoller refers to it, core gender identity, is produced by regulations of attributes (11). The conformity to gender norms is tied to the binary conceptualisation of gender, which distinguishes masculine and feminine roles and is reinforced by compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, *Gender* 31). In fact, even heterosexuality is a constantly repeated effort, which imitates its idealisation (Butler, *Bodies* 85). Butler argues that “no one is born with a gender — gender is always acquired,” stressing that gender is not an inherent attribute but one that is

performatively produced (Butler, *Gender* 151). Hence, there is no gender identity behind performativity (Butler, *Gender* 34). This perspective echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that "there is no being behind doing, effecting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything" (45).

In the meantime, the performativity of gender can reject and challenge those regulations and norms because there is the possibility that "man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, *Gender* 9). When femininity and masculinity are analysed in later chapters, it is not an argument for using identity categories as universal. However, this distinction will help to assess binary gender norms present in Western popular culture at the time of the adaptations and to realise queer-coded patterns where these binaries blur. This act of challenging conventions can open the door to possibilities for more diverse expressions of identity, which is explored through the portrayal of the sea witches in all adaptations. The character of the sea witch exemplifies how performativity can disrupt and question rigid gender binaries by offering an ambiguous performance.

Gender, as mentioned above, is a historically and culturally constructed concept that relates to various social and political processes, as Salvatore Cucchiari argues (31). In other words, gender is "a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (Butler, *Gender* 10; Strathern 171; Shore 194). This comprehension emphasises that gender roles are not static but inconsistent across different historical and cultural contexts and intersect with various identities, including race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and region (Butler, *Gender* 4-5). Subsequently, gender cannot be separated from the political and cultural context within which it is produced and maintained. The social construction of gender is evident in how most societies use anatomical sexual differences at birth to assign social roles, creating a gender dichotomy, as Harriet Whitehead claims (83). For instance, in the two adaptations of the Walt Disney Company, there is a particular distinction between the two sea witches, which reflects changing times. In the first animated film, Ursula says, "it's she who holds her tongue who gets a man," which aligns with the norms of its time (*The Little Mermaid* 43:44-6). In contrast, the revised live-action film dropped this part of the song "Poor Unfortunate Souls," which underscores the changing social norms and ideas of femininity.

Power relations can construct binary gender categories, which means male dominance and female subordination, which reflect social structures (Butler, *Bodies* ix; Ortner and Whitehead, *Preface* ix). Despite this general pattern in Western cultures, gender roles and power dynamics vary across cultures (Ortner and Whitehead, *Introduction* 1; Collier and

Rosaldo 275). A consistent theme in many cultures is the opposition of nature and culture, mirroring the female/male divide, with men dominating the public sphere and women confined to the domestic domain (Ortner and Whitehead, *Introduction* 6-7; Collier and Rosaldo 275). Butler argues that performativity operates as a modality of power and that sexuality is constructed within the terms of power, shaped by heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions (*Bodies* 139; *Gender* 41). In all the adaptations of “The Little Mermaid,” the various sea witches dominate the little mermaids. These power dynamics are shown through camera angles and positioning in frames, which will be further discussed in the analysis. According to these portrayals, the sea witches assume a masculine position in their relationship with the little mermaids. The sea witches’ powerful and domineering personalities contrast with the subordinated roles traditionally assigned to female characters, thus providing a critical perspective on how power is gendered and shaped by heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions.

The boundaries between masculine and feminine traits are ambiguous and subject to continuous reinterpretation. In various historical and cultural contexts, including Fitz John Porter Poole’s essay on the Bimin-Kuskusmin in Papua New Guinea, there is the concept of the “ambiguous gender” (117). In Poole’s context, females can practice male and female rituals and be perceived as both (117). This ambiguity aligns with the notion that becoming a woman is not dictated by biology (Butler, *Gender* 11, 45). “Becoming,” in other words, performativity, reflects the fluidity of gender as a social construct. However, in Western society, Monique Wittig adds, there is no gender but the feminine, “for the masculine is not the masculine, but the general,” rendering femininity into an “Other” dominated by the universal (*The Point* 64). This concept reinforces the notion that femininity is constantly positioned in contrast to masculinity, a site of its absence (Butler, *Gender* 52). Hence, as the traits of masculinity evolve over time and across cultures, femininity shifts accordingly (Butler, *Gender* 52). This evolvment is evident through an example that connects three adaptations of “The Little Mermaid.” In the Walt Disney Company’s versions and latest adaptation, the sea witches are destroyed. In the 1989 adaptation, she is killed by Prince Eric. On the contrary, in the 2023 versions, the witch is destroyed either by Ariel, the little mermaid or her grandmother. These modifications reflect the changing perspective about feminine power and its role within gender dynamics in Western popular culture.

In conclusion, the performativity of gender enables its fluidity. It is also constantly changed by the social norms of different times and cultures. Whether masculine or feminine, these characteristics are not inherent to one’s sex, allowing for the possibility of individuals

embodying traits typically associated with the opposite gender and still maintaining their own gender identity (Butler, *Gender* 33). This subversion is particularly evident in the Walt Disney Company's portrayals of villains from the Evil Queen to King Candy, which will be discussed in later chapters. Nevertheless, the sea witch's ambiguity and reinterpretation of masculine and feminine traits underscore these performative aspects of gender. This leads to more diverse and complex expressions of identity. Gender portrayals on-screen should question these binary norms so that audiences can transcend the rigid binaries of the past and embrace the full spectrum of human experience.

2.4 Queer Approaches: Unconventional Gender Identities

Gender is an act that is "open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of the natural," as a subsequence of its performativity (Butler, *Gender* 200). Thus, performing gender can challenge conventional boundaries and expose the constructed, performed and fundamentally phantasmatic status of gender. In close connection with gender studies, it is imperative to examine the concepts of queer theory, as they hold a crucial role in the analysis part of the thesis. This chapter will delve into queer theory to furnish a framework for analysing the unconventional gender roles of the sea witches in the anglophone on-screen adaptations of "The Little Mermaid." It is fundamental to establish a conceptual context for queer theory, as it provides a frame for discussing non-normative gender representation, particularly the drag queen phenomenon, which is closely related to two of these adaptations. Additionally, five of the adaptations are animated films, a medium that has historically been a source of queer representation. Since characters and their movements are not defined and restricted by real-world physics, such as gravitation or physiques, they can move in unconventional and unnatural ways. This chapter will begin with an introduction to queer theory and its origins. It will then examine its relationship to performativity and its critique of normativity. Lastly, it will centre on the representation of queer bodies.

Queer theory emerged as a theoretically oriented intervention in the late 1980s and early 1990s following the radical gay rights movement sparked by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, as Siobhan B. Somerville notes (2). During this period, the term "queer" was often used as a homophobic slur against gender non-normative minorities (Somerville 3). This use was heightened by the fear surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which claimed tens of thousands of lives in the United States alone (Somerville 3). However, activists and scholars later reclaimed this pejorative term. Gloria Anzaldúa and Teresa De Lauretis brought the "queer" into academic discourse with the aim of reducing its stigmatising connotations. Marginalised

groups, like drag queens, have already been embracing this approach. As a result, “queer” evolved into a term that signalled a political stance of solidarity and defiance, challenging polite discourse and rejecting the shame imposed by society (Somerville 3). This reclamation process paralleled the popularisation of “coming out,” as Sean Griffin argues (94-5). Ultimately, the term “queer” has been normalised and now signals unity and resistance.

There are two ways to use the term “queer” in queer theory. First, a unifying umbrella term that can encompass any non-normative sexual and gender identity (Somerville 2). This use reflects “the ability, the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch this way and that way” (Anzaldúa 174). Kadi Amin further explains that “queer” refers to anything that subverts, resists, or creates alternative forms of normativity (21). This interpretation is particularly relevant to the sea witch characters in the adaptations since they perform femininity and masculinity, which demonstrates gender ambiguity. Therefore, the sea witches constitute queer characters. This characteristic is consistent with the archetypal witches associated with queerness and otherness. Nevertheless, these outsider identity markers undergo alterations with time in social structures through performativity (Perea 38). The second use of the word “queer” is as a verb applied to critique and question existing identity categories and gender norms. This approach challenges heteronormativity and aims to redraw boundaries beyond the conventional binary system of the sexes and genders (Somerville 2). Therefore, the analysis section will examine how the queer portrayals of the sea witches blur traditional gender roles. By employing queer methodologies, the analysis reveals how these portrayals challenge and reshape what is considered normal.

The binary perception of gender and sex establishes superiority and hegemony, which renders queer identities inferior, according to Richard Dyer (3). Moreover, the occurrence of queer behaviour has been linked to “moral weakness, mental sickness or personal inadequacy” (Dyer 2). This hierarchy and negative perception elicit responses such as pity, cure, tolerance, resignation and defiance (Dyer 3). These responses to queerness have been around since the late Middle Ages and are “still with us, maybe even more hegemonically, today,” notes Dyer in the 2000s (3). It can be contended that their presence persists to this day. These perspectives align with the portrayal of the sea witches as queer-coded villains, which villainise their conduct. I will further explore this concept in subsequent chapters. Despite this, there is the possibility to dissent from the superiority of heteronormativity. Public acts of queerness, like sex, dressing up and protest, have the power to affect social change, according to Nadia Ellis (158). At its core, queering gender is essential for constructing non-normative identities,

challenging norms and fostering a broader understanding of gender, notes Maite Escudero-Alías (187).

Queer theory, in particular, is a site of struggle and contestation, articulating non-normative identities that critique and disrupt binary oppositions and heteronormativity (Escudero-Alías 12). It also questions categories such as gender, sex, sexuality, race and class (Escudero-Alías 12). The depiction of differences, including racial and sexual differences, has consistently been exposed through stereotypes (Escudero-Alías 43). This phenomenon is particularly relevant to drag performances, which typically exploit stereotypes of femininity and masculinity (Escudero-Alías 43). The representation of femininity and masculinity as cultural dimensions that influence social attitudes and behaviour necessitates treating these concepts as performances that repeat and reinforce cultural codes. Redefining the traditional parameters of gender identity requires considering the socio-cultural context in which these performances occur (Escudero-Alías 59-60). In this context, the audience can engage in meaning negotiation and cultural recognition, contesting hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity (Escudero-Alías 59-60). Femininity and masculinity are cultural constructs that are fluid and unstable (Escudero-Alías 72). For example, masculinity in Western culture is often associated with white, heterosexual, middle-class men who possess power and wealth, characterised by traits such as reason, sexuality, control, aggressiveness, domination, fearlessness, autonomy, strength and a persistent cultural association with violence (Escudero-Alías 72, 73-9). Queer conceptualisations of gender identity reveal that these masculinities do not imitate any original gender but instead redefine and deconstruct the idea of “real” male masculinity and expose its artificiality (Escudero-Alías 80, 86). For instance, the sea witches’ expressions of femininity and masculinity are positioned within the aesthetic of camp, which is characterised by exaggerated, playful and ironic expressions. Camp, an aesthetic style closely related to drag, attempts to destabilise these binary terms by encompassing all non-normative identities excluded from traditional normative identity politics (Escudero-Alías 3). In the subsequent chapter, I will elaborate on this concept in detail.

Queer bodies and dancing are described by José Esteban Muñoz as rejecting normative trajectories (109). Therefore, observing a queer performance can reveal moments when boundaries seem to dissolve, which illustrates how queer performers challenge “sturdy assumptions” (Ellis 157-8). Queer performers who embody femininity and masculinity incorporate the disjunction between their anatomies and identities into their acts, embracing all genders (Escudero-Alías 86, 139). A single ecstatic moment in their performance can encapsulate an entire political world, questioning binary gender norms (Ellis 157-8). By

questioning essentialist identity politics, these performances reveal the performative nature of gender and sex, demonstrating masculinity and femininity as flexible signifiers that are distinct from biological sex. For example, in the first adaptation, the sea witches' costumes deliberately conceal the gender identity of the dancers by hiding anatomical differences. It is impossible to determine their biological sex only by their performance. Furthermore, as claimed by Richard Schechner, performance is a "twice-behaved behavior" that can be repeated and rehearsed (Schechner, *Between* 36; Schechner, *Performance* 324). According to this statement, the analysed performances are significant, as they carry specially crafted meanings, not only due to their repetitiveness but also due to their construction within the cameras' lenses. While some performances may merely replicate gender norms, the gestures and movements of the sea witches in the adaptations suggest a more theatrical or playful construction of femininity and masculinity in accordance with queer representation.

The performer's body vividly transitions from one form to another, appearing present and then abruptly disappearing, which indicates a transition from one state to another (Ellis 160-1). This concept is particularly relevant to Ursula's character in the Walt Disney Company's *The Little Mermaid*, who shapeshifts into a beautiful young girl named Vanessa during several scenes. Queer bodies function as a deconstructive tool, questioning the foundations of existing aesthetic norms and values while expanding their possibilities, states Lynda Nead (62). Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson emphasise that the presence of a body that is gendered and sexed "allows one to perceive, interpret and document the performative event," thus creating meaning through the performative body (2). Jonathan Katz further contends that queering a body is "to refuse boundaries and borders and delimited knowledges" (161). The body holds significance as the site where meaning and representations of diverse subjects are drawn upon and contested (Escudero-Alías 59). The traditional concepts of the body as a fixed and universal meaning-making entity are interrogated, making way for the notion of the performative body as an open-ended process of interpretation (Escudero-Alías 59). Certain gender stereotypes in Western culture reflect and produce the body (Escudero-Alías 59). Stereotyping not only dominates but also normalises cultural images (Escudero-Alías 59). Representation plays a principal role in creating and sustaining cultural ideas about femininity and masculinity, which are essential for comprehending meanings (Escudero-Alías 59). However, cultural texts are not always interpreted uniformly, since interpretation is an ongoing process of adopting or rejecting a set of meanings (Escudero-Alías 59). Therefore, the representation of certain bodies becomes meaningful only through interaction between the reader/spectator and the cultural context (Escudero-Alías 59).

In conclusion, queer theory provides a framework for analysing performances that do not conform to the binary gender system. Queer performances and bodies are crucial for challenging norms and promoting a broader understanding of gender. The analysis of queer performances, such as those of the sea witches in the adaptations of “The Little Mermaid,” illustrates the concept of gender as a performative and constantly changing construct, which makes endless variations of movements possible. The role of the performer’s body demonstrates how gendered and sexed bodies function as sites of meaning-making and possibly resisting rigid social norms. Ultimately, these theories enable the analysis of queering sea witches who blur the distinction between feminine and masculine. These performances open up the possibility of ambiguity, which aligns with the archetypal witch’s portrayal in Western culture.

2.5 The Evolution of Drag and Its Impact

Drag performances can offer insights into how one performs their gender, as well as the possibilities of gender nonconformity. Drag performers’ primary objective is to “express all kinds of gender expressions,” as Brian Schaefer notes. This chapter will discuss the topic of drag queens and drag kings and their performances, which will help to analyse the adaptations. The Walt Disney Company’s adaptations explicitly based their sea witch on the drag queen Divine. This influence was reflected in subsequent adaptations after 1989. According to Simon Doonan, there has been a growing popularity of drag since the 1990s as a result of changing norms around heteronormativity and gender fluidity (7-10). This change has been reflected in the increasing use of diverse gender pronouns and identities, indicating a positive cultural shift towards inclusivity (Doonan 7-10). However, Laurence Senelick asserts that due to the mainstream status of drag, these performances have lost some of their subversive characteristics that critique heteronormative gender norms (492). Senelick even labels it “Disneyfied,” since it has become normalised and well-known among broader audiences (492). Despite this, drag continues to challenge the essentialist identities that society imposes, shock and engage audiences.

When drag first emerged, the performances confronted and satirised binary gender norms, misogyny and castration anxieties, as Simon Doonan states (16). By the 1950s, there had been a shift in norms, and drag subsequently evolved in accordance with them, as it has consistently reflected those changes (Doonan 23, 42). It has become increasingly provocative (Doonan 23). During the 1970s, drag became an integral component of alternative cinema, resulting in a more family-friendly approach that still challenged and blurred traditional gender

roles (Doonan 192). The key figure of this era was Divine, who was an underground movie drag queen. Divine was a “tubby chap” from Baltimore named Harris Glenn Milstead (Doonan 193). In her roles, she portrayed women without any acknowledgement of being a man (Doonan 192-4). These portrayals ultimately questioned what it meant to be a woman with their exaggerated, mocking and parodying qualities. This aligns with other drag queens, such as those from “pre-Disney 42nd Street,” who aimed to portray themselves not solely as women, but as exaggerated and ultra-glamorous superwomen, which contribute to the fluidity of gender (Senelick 11-12). Throughout its history, movie drag has been characterised by extremes, either eliciting shrieks of laughter or screams of terror (Doonan 187). Movie drag has been shocking audiences and making them question contemporary social norms. This evolution reflects the broader cultural understanding that gender is a representation, according to Teresa de Lauretis (3), a role assumed and constructed similar to a stage character by an actor (Senelick 4). Since the 1980s, the Wigstock generation has played a pivotal role in bringing drag out of the gay ghetto and into mainstream acceptance (Doonan 33-5). Before this period, drag violated the law (Doonan 42-3). Nonetheless, in light of the heightened tolerance and acceptance, drag has been faced with the task of finding new ways to engage audiences in a discourse regarding gender identity (Doonan 42-3).

Drag is a performative art form that challenges and deconstructs heteronormativity by highlighting the performative nature of gender (Schaefer). Drag is, in essence, performativity itself. Its performers are known as drag queens and drag kings. For example, drag queens, who usually are male, portray femininity through various elements of gender performativity, like clothing, make-up and movements. These elements of femininity are markedly exaggerated. Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier note that drag has long been associated with “parodying, performing, creating, deconstructing, and affirming” gender, even before queer theory gained prominence during the late 1980s and early 1990s (9). As a result, drag can reinforce and radically challenge existing gender norms (Edward and Farrier 13). It positions itself as rebellious by reflecting on the imitative structure through which binary gender is produced, which disputes heterosexuality’s claim to naturalness and originality (Butler, *Bodies* 125). Laurie A. Greene argues that the power of drag lies in its public performance, wherein the audience is aware of the contradiction between the performer’s anatomy and their gender presentation and behaviour (42). This awareness, which is distinct from cross-dressing or the gendered presentation of transgender individuals, enhances drag’s impact. For example, the explicit depiction of drag in the Walt Disney Company’s adaptations helps to notice patterns of

movement, like the exaggeration of femininity when the sea witch wiggles her breasts towards the centre of the frame.

Drag highlights the divergence between anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance, revealing how gender is a constructed, stylised and repetitive performance that can reinforce and challenge the binary classification of gender (Butler, *Gender* 187, 191). Drag performances illuminate how sex and gender can be distinct from one another. These performances demonstrate the constructed nature of gender, challenging the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence that falsely naturalises gendered experience as a unified whole (Butler, *Gender* 187). The effect of gender is thus produced through the stylisation of the body, wherein everyday gestures, movements and styles create an illusion of a stable, abiding gendered self, despite its inherent fluidity and performative nature (Butler, *Gender* 191). Drag performances of gender aim to mirror an idealised gender, sexuality, class and race privilege, promising an escape from systemic issues such as sexism, homophobia, poverty and racism (Butler, *Bodies* 89). However, this ideal remains an unattainable morphological standard (Butler, *Bodies* 89). In contemporary times, drag remains a compelling form of satire. Actors like Melissa McCarthy on *Saturday Night Live* used drag to critique political figures during the Trump presidency, such as Sean Spicer (Doonan 161). McCarthy's drag performances are particularly important in the context of the Walt Disney Studio's live-action *The Little Mermaid*, which will be further discussed in its respective chapter.

The act of aligning with social norms fails to completely define an individual, which leads to constant negotiation between self and social expectations (*Bodies* 86). This perspective leads to interpreting practices, like drag. Drag ultimately mocks the expressive model of gender, challenging the idea of a true gender identity (Butler, *Gender* 186). By parodying notions of an original or primary gender identity, practices like drag reveal the constructed and fluid nature of gender (Butler, *Gender* 187). This parodying critiques the idea that gender identity is a fixed and authentic essence (Butler, *Gender* 187). These practices aim to normalise queer behaviour through the lens of failed heterosexuality (Butler, *Bodies* 87). Nevertheless, heteronormative norms consistently exert an influence on the definition of "being a man" or "being a woman" (Butler, *Bodies* 86). As a result, there is always the cost of loss and the forced approximation to norms that one does not fully choose, but is compelled to inhabit and reinterpret (Butler, *Bodies* 86). Realness in gender performance is achieved through the embodiment and repetition of these norms, resulting in an effect of naturalness that is never entirely attainable but strives to approximate an idealised standard (Butler, *Bodies* 88). This coincides with the portrayals of the sea witches as villains in the adaptations. As queer

characters, they are demonised, while the opposite, the protagonists who represent heteronormative femininity, are idealised.

Gender is defined through the constant application of norms that reinforce and challenge the very standards that define it. These norms are criticised and transformed by drawing on more dominant ones. The subject of gender is created by the repeated performance of identifications, which validate and undermine the norms that shape it (*Bodies* 90). Instead of replacing prevailing norms, this repetitive process reinforces them, making them more painfully obvious because they are performed and desired by the individuals they are subject to (Butler, *Bodies* 91). *Paris is Burning*, a 1990 American documentary film about drag performers, exemplifies this as it “attests to the painful pleasures of eroticizing and miming the very norms that wield their power by foreclosing the very reverse-occupations that the children nevertheless perform” (Butler, *Bodies* 95). This strategy seeks to actively engage in redefining the terms of domination rather than passively appropriating dominant culture to maintain subordination (Butler, *Bodies* 95). This act of appropriation entails a type of agency that functions through speech and performance to reproduce and reconstruct norms and occasionally succeeds in challenging and changing them in the process (Butler, *Bodies* 95).

Drag performances not only mock femininity and masculinity but also exaggerate and parody traditional gender norms, ultimately exposing the absurdity of social conventions (Senelick 409). Drag amplifies these gender expressions to critique the limitations imposed on bodies and their representation in line with social norms, according to Ramey Moore (19). However, drag’s impact is complex and can often be contradictory. While drag has the potential to do the above, it can also reinforce dominant binary and hierarchical systems by appropriating traditional gender displays and expressing conventional desires, as Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor emphasise (113-114). Additionally, in feminist discourse, drag is criticised as potentially offensive to women, as it may be perceived as a form of ridicule and degradation (Butler, *Bodies* 86). Drag can also be seen as a practice that appropriates and objectifies femininity rather than respecting or elevating it (Butler, *Bodies* 86). This reading of drag implies that it has the potential to reinforce negative ideologies, such as misogyny (Edward and Farrier 5; Doonan 138). For example, comedic drag queens have occasionally perpetuated misogynistic elements, which can reflect an underlying revenge against women (Doonan 138). However, Rupp and Taylor emphasise that drag exists as a gender category distinct from traditional femininity or masculinity (Rupp and Taylor 5). It embodies a form of gender ambiguity and subversion that challenges binary constructs through parody (Rupp and Taylor 5). Hence, while drag can be a powerful tool for exploring and questioning gender norms, its impact is

contingent upon its context and execution. Ultimately, drag remains a powerful and provocative medium for exploring and reimagining gender, exhibiting its capacity to challenge binary gender norms and its limitations in evading the constraints of conventional gender representations.

Dance is a crucial component of drag performance, as it enables drag queens and kings to express their gender identities. According to Brian Schaefer, dance provides drag queens with the opportunity to express their emotions in a performative manner, which can enhance their physical confidence and clarity, which are vital for effectively conveying their characters. Dance helps them articulate their exaggerated ideas of femininity and masculinity. Movement, within a drag performance, can explore gender fluidity. Ultimately, the expressive and dynamic nature of dance enables performers to transcend rigid gender norms and engage with gender in new ways. Additionally, drag is a phenomenon that combines humour, extreme cosmetics and theatrical manner, which results in a provocative gender representation. All these elements satirise the rigid norms of what it means to be feminine or masculine while entertaining audiences. Drag is defined by its ability to deliver visually striking and taboo-busting spectacles, whether through the satirical recreation of past styles or fierce and glamorous personas that captivate audiences (Doonan 11, 13, 15). For example, the “killing it” death drop, which is a sudden drop down to the floor from an elevated position, creates an artificial, theatrical environment that transcends traditional gender representations (Doonan 16, 43). This move is present in the Walt Disney Studio’s adaptations, where the two figures of Ursula suddenly drop their head upside down and hang their arms, slowly moving downwards. These variations can be explained by the gravity in water, which does not allow movements to be so sudden. Through this theatrical approach, drag is capable of generating new realities and categories (Senelick 1-2, 7, 10). As a result, drag magnifies and distorts traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity (Senelick 7, 11-12). Therefore, drag, with its combination of comedy, glamour and spectacle, functions as a satirical and transformative force, reinterpreting and expanding the boundaries of gender.

In conclusion, drag has evolved, consistently reflecting changing social attitudes towards gender. This characteristic of reflection has persisted despite its mainstream acceptance. Its main goal is to challenge heteronormativity by exaggerating and deconstructing gender norms. Drag performances expose the absurdity of social conventions and the performative nature of gender, highlighting the divergence between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Drag aligns with performativity, which has been explored throughout the theoretical part of the thesis. Dance is an integral element of a drag performance,

allowing performers to express and explore gender fluidity. Therefore, the movements of the sea witches will be highlighted in all adaptations. All in all, the section of the thesis that contains theories of adaptation, dance, gender studies, queer theory and drag encompasses the framework, enabling the analysis of the seven adaptations.

3. Analysing Queer Sea Witches

3.1 Genderless Sea Witches in *Hans Christian Andersen*

Chronologically, the first anglophone on-screen adaptation of “The Little Mermaid” is the 1952 American film titled *Hans Christian Andersen*, directed by Charles Vidor, produced by Samuel Goldwyn and distributed by RKO Radio Pictures. The film presents a fictionalised account of Hans Christian Andersen’s life, showcasing several of his most famous fairy tales, including “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and “Thumbelina.” The narrative unfolds in an episodic manner, with Andersen’s character daydreaming about his stories, which are then portrayed on screen. This chapter will focus on analysing the depiction of the sea witches in “The Little Mermaid” sequence, examining how they conform to or challenge conventional gender norms. The analysis will scrutinise their movements, costumes, positions and overall imagery in contrast to those of the protagonist. Hence, the most visible markers of gender come from the outward appearance of the antagonists. Additionally, their choreography is supported by and reactive to setting, lighting, editing, angles, camera setups and music, all of which will also be considered in this analysis.

The segment of “The Little Mermaid” begins with a brief written summary displayed on screen: “This is the story of a Little Mermaid who fell in love with a Prince and turned to the terrible witches of the sea because they alone possessed that magic thing – a veil which can make a mermaid human” (*Hans Christian Andersen* 01:26:40). This summary emphasises the role of the antagonists in the narrative, shifting the focus from the Little Mermaid to the sea witches. Notably, there is a change from the singular sea witch to the plural sea witches, as reflected in the use of “they” to describe them. Additionally, their name suggests that they are female, as their designation, “sea witches,” is retained from the original tale (*Hans Christian Andersen* 01:26:40). Their characterisation as “terrible” highlights their villainous nature. Furthermore, their possession of a magical veil that can transform mermaids into humans underscores their authority over other merpeople. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the magical veil shifts the source of their power from their inherent abilities to an external object. As a result, many of the original sea witch’s qualities, such as her omniscience and ability to brew potions that can influence life and bring death, are lost. These abilities make the original character larger than life. In contrast, the film’s portrayal reduces their menace by externalising their power.

The subsequent scene depicts the narrative of “The Little Mermaid” within a staged ballet setting. This choice of the form holds significance, as historically, ballet has mirrored

traditional power dynamics, often resulting in male dominance and female submission, as Marília Del Ponte de Assis et al. point out (450). In classical ballet, the male dancer is typically responsible for controlling and supporting the female dancer's performance (Assis et al. 450). Therefore, ballet has expressed and reinforced traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity. Nonetheless, this adaptation does not necessarily align with the traditional gender order reflected in classical ballet but rather poses a challenge to them.

When the story reaches the sea witches section, the Little Mermaid actively chooses to visit them, akin to the original. According to Jasmine Katatikarn and Michael Tanzillo, the sequence is initiated by the use of green lighting on the stage, a colour commonly associated with terror, fear and sinister characters (106). This colouring is similar to Maleficent in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Cold hues of illumination, such as green, promote a tense mood in films, Mustafa Yousry Matbouly notes (3713). As the narrative shifts to the Little Mermaid's entrance into the realm of the sea witches, the music transitions to a suspenseful tone, featuring Franz Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 S. 514. These waltzes are linked to the story of Mephisto and Faust, where Faust makes a deal with the devil, Mephisto, at the cost of his soul. This tale resonates with the original "The Little Mermaid," where the little mermaid trades her voice for legs.

The scene with the sea witches is divided into seven shots, which this chapter will examine individually. The dark stage creates ample shadows, which further emphasises the potential danger posed by the sea witches, despite the unchanged setting. The camera captures the first interaction between the Little Mermaid and the sea witches in a close-up shot, creating anticipation. It is noteworthy that the sea witches' bodies are fully covered with dark materials, evoking the impression of genderless ballet dancers, as their costumes intentionally conceal the gender identity of the dancers by hiding anatomical differences. Unfortunately, there is no documentation or indication as to who played the sea witches in the film. This role could have even been performed by a mixed-gendered ensemble. Their costumes include large masks with bizarre, exaggerated images of fish, combined with a substantial amount of hair surrounding their upper bodies. This portrays them as devoid of emotion for the entirety of the piece. In contrast to the Little Mermaid, who wears pointe shoes and a white dress that leaves her chest and arms bare conforming to traditional female ballet attire, the sea witches wear ballet slippers, aligning with traditional male ballet wear. Through the use of these fabrics and dark tones, the sea witches' bodies appear large, grotesque and monstrous, especially when

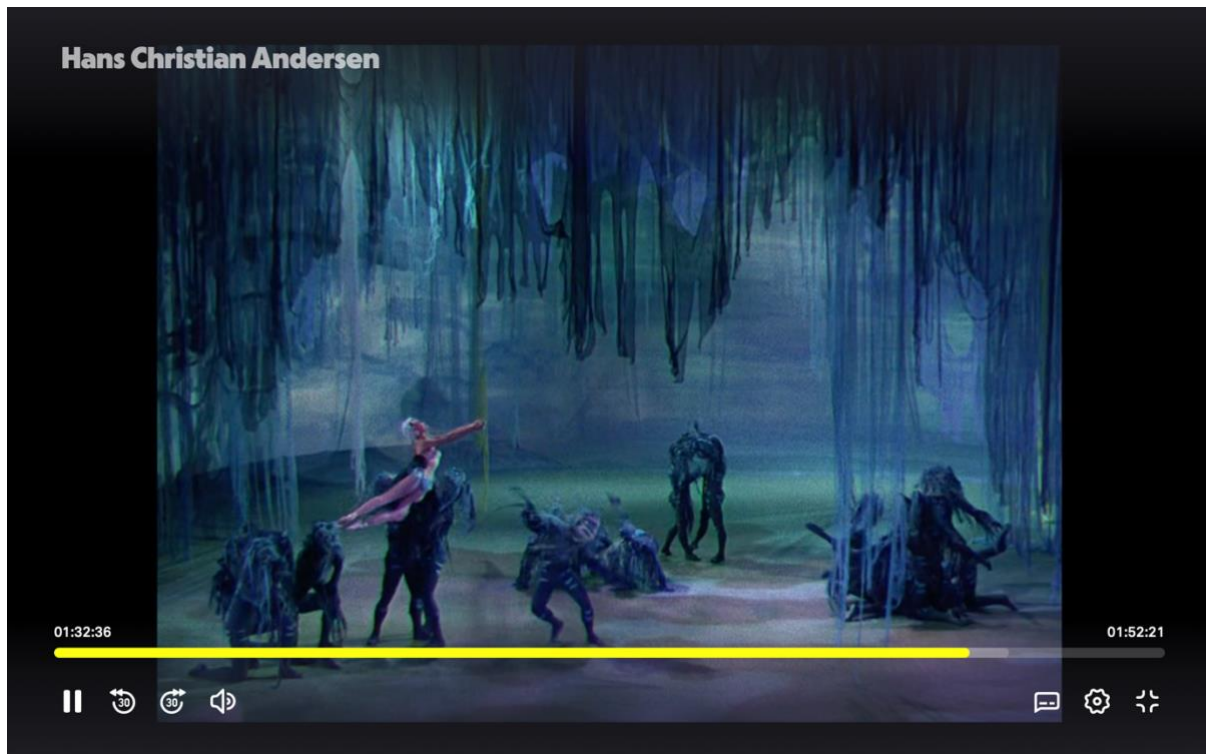
juxtaposed with the Little Mermaid's appearance, which is petite and soft.



(Fig. 1: *Hans Christian Andersen* 01:32:30)

The sea witches start with quick, hard-hitting turns before running into a power-filled formation, within which they showcase their upper body strength through multiple lifts. Within this position, they perform hand gestures that mock the mermaid's hesitance. They also assert control over the little mermaid. This dominance can be decoded as masculine, with the reference to ballet tropes. The Little Mermaid, looking upwards at them, embodies traditional femininity through her delicate movements, which convey frailty and vulnerability, particularly evident in her fearful facial expression as the sea witches surround her. The sea witches appear to have a leader who displays confidence and initiates actions that the others follow. The sea witches dominate the scene as they confine the Little Mermaid to a limited space, outnumbering her and establishing an elevated position through their multiple lifts. Thus, the performance of the sea witches embodies masculinity, especially in contrast to the Little Mermaid's traditionally depicted femininity.

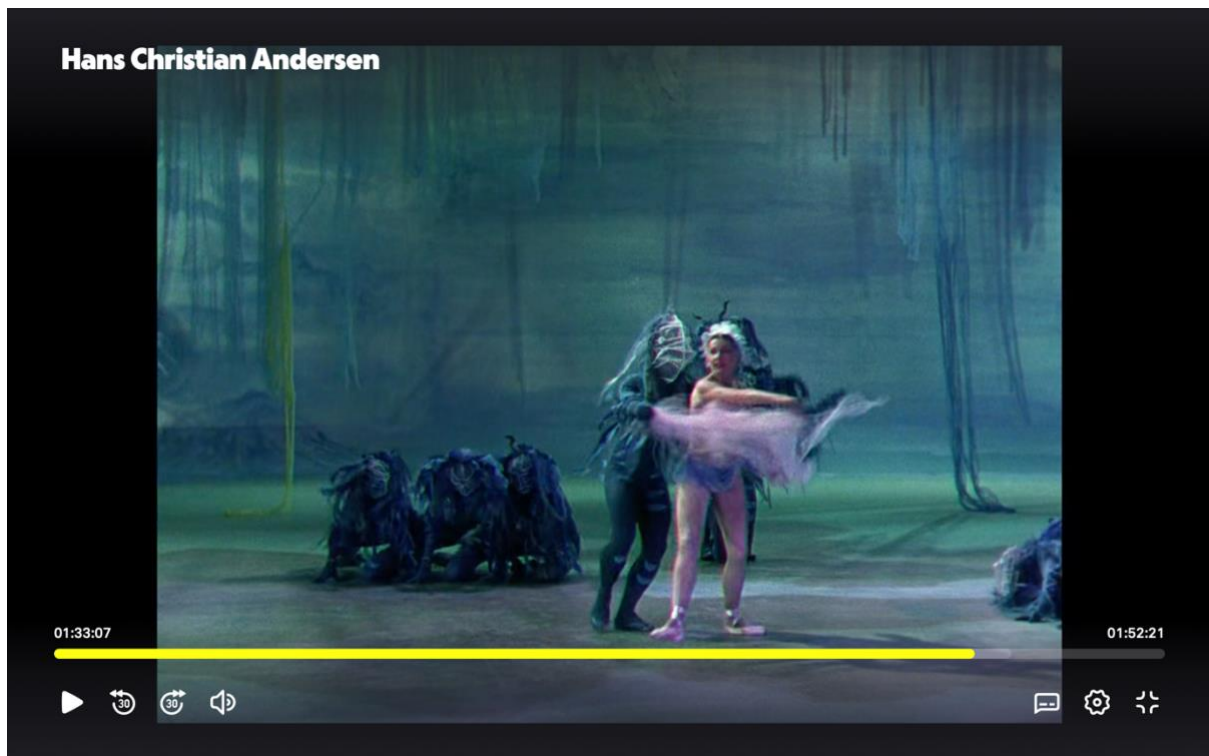
Subsequently, the sea witches' formation disperses into various groups, wherein two of them lift the Little Mermaid.



(Fig. 2: *Hans Christian Andersen* 01:32:36)

This movement suggests that those lifting are male since lifting is seen as a masculine element in ballet. In the interim, the principal sea witch performs quick, aggressive movements, such as leaps and jumps. Meanwhile, the others demonstrate their agility through risk-taking steps. These actions are captured from a farther camera angle, showcasing the entire stage, which signifies the movements of sea witches in an expansive space. This angle represents their authority over their realm. When the white veil, the magical object that allows the Little Mermaid to turn into a human, becomes the focus of the choreography, the leading sea witch starts a pas de deux, a dance duet with the Little Mermaid. Within this duet, they establish and conform to the gender roles in ballet, with the sea witches being male, and the Little Mermaid being female. She is assisted, manipulated and orchestrated, meaning the female's choreography is initiated and controlled by the male, as defined by Susan Leigh Foster ("The Ballerina's" 2). The other sea witches engage in extreme stunts with physical energy, such as handstands, occupying most of the stage. The camera follows the Little Mermaid as the sea witches seemingly fill every corner of the space. This part further emphasises the masculinity of the sea witches, and their dominant position over the Little Mermaid, demonstrating their

power dynamics, as they draw on gendered ballet tropes that mark them as such.

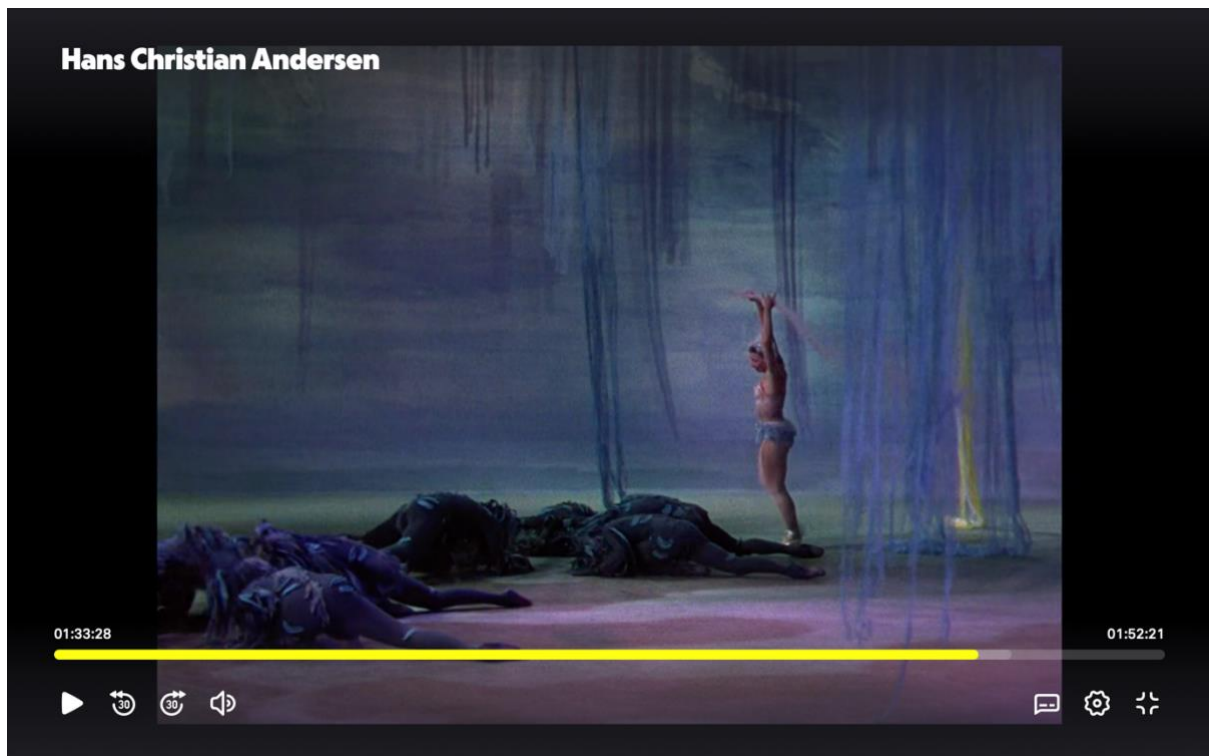


(Fig. 3: *Hans Christian Andersen* 01:33:07)

The pas de deux between the leading sea witch and the Little Mermaid continues. At one point, the Little Mermaid briefly gains possession of the veil, but the leading sea witch quickly reclaims it with strong, quick movements. Subsequently, the sea witch executes energetic arm movements to trick the Little Mermaid with the veil, swiftly redirecting their movements before she can reach it. Meanwhile, the other sea witches perform jumps and floor work, a choreography performed on the floor, at the low spatial level. Eventually, two sea witches lift the Little Mermaid once more, and with their assistance, she is able to snatch the veil again. This is in accordance with conventional ballet choreographies, wherein the male dancer facilitates the female dancer's performance, thereby aiding her in achieving her goal in the narrative (Assis et al. 450). This assistance further reduces the sea witches' menace.

In the next shot, the Little Mermaid has the veil and is positioned in the centre of the frame, whereas the sea witches are in the background. They perform additional tricks, including lifts and turns. Then, they proceed to form three circles on the ground. During this shot, the principal sea witch is not present, and the Little Mermaid with the veil in her hand appears to be growing more confident, while the camera continues to follow her. This change of attitude marks the pivotal moment in the plot, as she claims agency and the power dynamics shift. The final image of this shot depicts her standing tall and the sea witches lying on the floor. She establishes her newly acquired dominance through the aid of the veil and its magical effect on

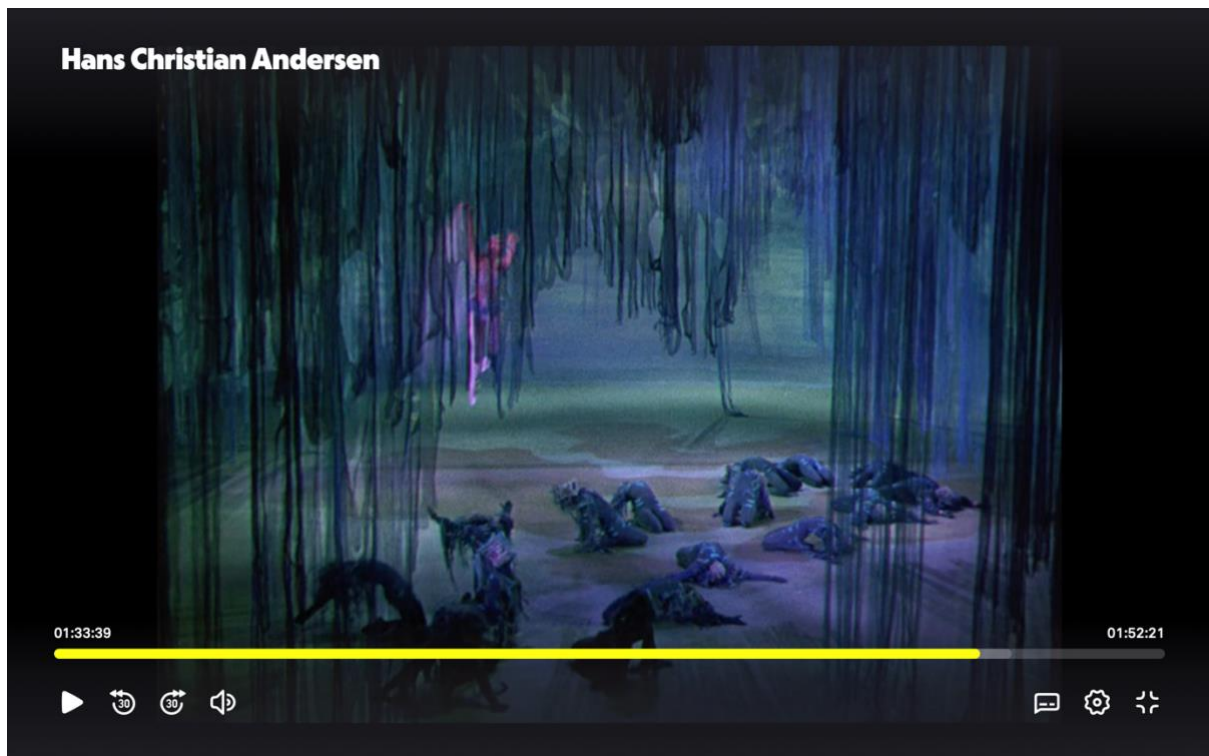
the sea witches. It is the veil that determines power relations, not the sea witches' innate power, which renders the figures of the witches less powerful and, in terms of the language of classical ballet, less masculine.



(Fig. 4: *Hans Christian Andersen* 01:33:28)

Until the final two shots, the relationship between the sea witches and the Little Mermaid is one of dominance, rendered in distinctly gendered terms (Foster, “The Ballerina’s” 1). However, in the penultimate scene, the Little Mermaid starts to dominate the scene, as she occupies the top of the frame, while the sea witches are restricted to the bottom of the frame. She is now responsible for initiating the sea witches’ movements with her graceful arm choreography. The sea witches provide space for her to move, executing slow and flexible upper body movements, under the supervision of the Little Mermaid. This demonstrates the vulnerability of the sea witches, which is commonly associated with femininity rather than normative masculinity. In the last shot, the stage is shown in a long shot, illustrating the mermaid’s escape from the sea witches’ realm, as she flies towards the ceiling with the veil in her hand. Meanwhile, the principal sea witch jumps into the frame, narrowly missing the Little Mermaid’s legs. The witches then lie on the ground and look up at her. The witch’s jump embodies strength and athleticism, which contrasts with their low position and upward-looking face. As such, the figure of the witch expresses feminine and masculine positions and traits,

blurring the distinction between them.



(Fig. 5: *Hans Christian Andersen* 01:33:39)

All in all, there is a shift in power dynamics, as well as in the gender roles of the sea witches. The movements of the sea witches begin to assume feminine and masculine connotations, while the Little Mermaid controls the scene. In ballet choreography, this control would suggest a masculine role. However, apart from camera angles that indicate the Little Mermaid's dominance, her movements do not reflect masculinity.

To sum it all up, the sea witches' performance in *Hans Christian Andersen* adheres to the conventions of masculine ballet choreography, particularly when they dominate the scene through their command and actions for a substantial proportion of the time. This contrasts with their name, "sea witches," which implies femaleness. This characteristic emerges towards the end of the scene when they display vulnerability. Their movements, therefore, embody femininity and masculinity, deviating from stereotypical male and female roles. This approach blurs the distinctions and challenges gender norms by exhibiting fluid and subversive forms of gender identity, including active-passive and dominant-submissive roles. This ultimately results in an ambiguous, queer character portrayal.

Notably, their antagonistic characteristics are diminished by a reduction in their menacing qualities and by the fact that they aid the Little Mermaid in her quest. This is particularly interesting when considering the traditional parallel between queerness and villains. Queering villains can be problematic, as villains represent opposition to the

protagonist and embody negative traits. However, the lessened menacing characteristics lead to a more positive depiction of the sea witches, which results in a more positive depiction of queerness. Later, I will further analyse these findings within the overarching progression of the sea witch character and in relation to the changing perspectives on gender.

3.2 Stop-Motion Animated Sea Witch as the “Other” in *The Daydreamer*

The second adaptation is a live-action and stop-motion animated musical film, *The Daydreamer*, from 1966, directed by Jules Bass and produced by Arthur Rankin, Jr. under the company of Videocraft International Production. The combined efforts of five countries, the United States, Canada, England, France and Japan, created this motion picture, notes Jeff Lenburg (175). It depicts Hans Christian Andersen’s early life as a schoolboy, living with his shoemaker father, representing many of his works, such as “Thumbelina,” “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and “The Ugly Duckling.” The film portrays Andersen’s fairy tales episodically, showing his character daydreaming about these stories instead of studying for school, similar to the previous adaptation, *Hans Christian Andersen*. The teenage Hans is looking for “The Garden of Paradise,” where he can eat candy to acquire knowledge, as his father tells him after Hans complains about being poor and studying dull things. Whenever he dreams, a puppet version of him goes on adventures within his well-known tales. “The Little Mermaid” sequence is the first of the stop-motion animated parts of the narrative.

This adaptation starts with an opening title sequence that combines stop-motion animation, caricatures and live-action techniques when introducing the cast and the characters. For example, it shows the live-action and the stop-motion figures of Hans and a caricature of the actor who plays and voices him. During these titles, Father Neptune is explicitly introduced as the father of the little mermaid. In the meantime, the little mermaid and the sea witch have no specific names. This detail suggests that the figure of the father has a potentially more significant role in the narrative, than in the original fairy tale, as well as, that this character is distinct from other adaptations’ father figures. Additionally, not giving a specific name to the main characters, the little mermaid and the sea witch, implies that they are archetypical, universal and symbolic figures in Western popular culture. The sea witch is voiced by Tallulah Bankhead, a stage actor who, besides her activism for liberal causes, was well-known for smoking a hundred and twenty cigarettes per day and having relationships with both men and women. They called her one of “the most famous lesbians of the twentieth century” and “campy” resonating with drag performances, which acquired a loyal fanbase among gay men, as Randy Jones and Mark Bego note (36-8). Bankhead is defined as a prominent lesbian

performer, who performed gender “in ways that suggestively challenged its presumed biological certainty” in the *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America*, written by Marc Stein (2). This casting suggests a queering portrayal of the sea witch even before the narrative commences.

Before “The Little Mermaid” sequence, Hans follows the Sandman to reach “The Garden of Paradise,” but he accidentally falls asleep in a boat, where the live-action figure and the surroundings seamlessly transition into a stop-motion setting. This is where Hans drowns in the water, and the little mermaid finds him. The mermaid is selfless, as she wants to give anything to have Hans alive. She has a soft voice, and ginger hair, which is very distinct among her sisters, as they have blue hair. She brings Hans into the castle, where Father Neptune explains life and death to her, taking the role of the grandmother from the original fairy tale. In this version, it is one of the little mermaid’s sisters who speaks about the sea witch for the first time. She tells her sister secretly that she has heard that “the sea witch has powers to restore drowned humans, she demands a terrible price for her magic potion,” which suggests that the sea witch is well-known in the sea for her terrible power, which is manifested in brewing potions (*The Daydreamer* 20:17-23). Furthermore, the sea witch’s lair is known to be dangerous with whirlpools and bubbling caves, as the little mermaid’s sisters imply. When the little mermaid enters the sea witch’s realm, she is frightened by a huge skeleton, as well as mysterious creatures, threatening shipwrecks and volcanos. Her lair reflects the menacing force she imposes on the protagonist, which aligns with her antagonistic role.



(Fig. 6: *The Daydreamer* 22:35)

When the little mermaid first sees the sea witch, she sits on a high throne, while the little mermaid occupies the left bottom corner of the frame. This positioning encapsulates the dominance of the witch over the mermaid. This version of the sea witch, portrayed as a mermaid with a black tail, has similar colours to the previous sea witches in *Hans Christian Andersen*, which represents terror and fear. Similarly to the other mermaids, her arms are completely uncovered. She has a huge nose. She also wears heavy make-up, which highlights her eyes. Her hair resembles seaweed, which is, again, very similar to the previous adaptation, apart from the additional snakes in her hair. This draws parallels to Medusa from Greek myth, a well-known symbol of the femme fatale (Hanson and O'Rawe 3). This image makes her monstrous and the face of death. The femme fatale rejects male dominance, which is the explanation behind the sea witch living outside the kingdom of Father Neptune, as an outcast of the society. She also has a snake-like cauldron where she performs her magic.

(Fig 7: *The Daydreamer* 22:59)

Additionally, in the first shot, she plays with an octopus. These two connections with animals align with the witch's representation in Western popular culture. Furthermore, the constant motion of her body and hair adds to her dynamic and threatening presence. The music turns eerie when the little mermaid meets her. She speaks with a very cracking gravelly low voice, a characteristic often associated with masculinity, which contrasts sharply with the soft, gentle voice of the little mermaid. The sea witch tells very similar lines to the original version, saying "I know why you've come," suggesting an all-knowing skill that the original sea witch has

(*The Daydreamer* 22:45-7). All these characteristics resonate with the original sea witch as well as the witch's archetype, except her masculine voice, ultimately marking her as the "Other."

The movements of the sea witch and the little mermaid can be seen as a well-crafted choreography, echoing traditional ballet tropes. Through the lens of adaptation theory, where all adaptations engage in a conversation and are aware of previous works, this sea witch is in dialogue with the ballet-dancing sea witches that came before her. She swims using her tail and arms simultaneously, in contrast to the little mermaid, who swims with only tiny movements, almost appearing still. The sea witch's body is taller and larger than the little mermaid's even when sitting. This physical difference is emphasised by her demanding hand gestures, such as pointing at the little mermaid, and her ability to physically dominate the little mermaid by grabbing her tail, effortlessly lifting and hanging her while explaining what will happen if the little mermaid takes the potion she offers. This physical dominance aligns with traditional masculine traits in ballet. The witch further invades the little mermaid's space with expansive arm movements, causing the little mermaid to lean back in fright. When one of the snakes in the sea witch's hair moves closer to the little mermaid and hisses, the witch tosses her hand back with a quick, demanding movement, which exemplifies her dominance over her surroundings. As she starts brewing her potion with large, sweeping arm movements, the potion's smoke grabs the little mermaid and twirls her under the sea witch's control. Therefore, she can control the little mermaid's movements. The sea witch's theatrical hand gestures and control over her environment through her movements mirror how a male dancer might control and manipulate a female dancer in a ballet, particularly in a pas de deux sequence. This inversion of roles places the sea witch in a traditionally masculine position of control.

To accentuate her authoritative and commanding speech, traits traditionally associated with masculinity, the sea witch uses deliberate hand gestures. For example, when she says, "people must have two clumsy supports, that they call legs," she uses two fingers to imitate walking (*The Daydreamer* 23:24-28). Her dialogue also suggests control, particularly when she demands, "take it," from the little mermaid as she presents the potion (*The Daydreamer* 25:24). The sea witch's cruelty is evident as she instructs the little mermaid to harm the polyps on her way out, laughing at her own suggestion and the prospect of others suffering. Her cruel and manipulative behaviour further complicates her gender representation. Traditionally, cruelty and manipulation have been stereotypically attributed to both genders in different contexts. However, her overt enjoyment of control and dominance leans towards traditionally masculine depictions of villainy in Western culture.

In conclusion, the sea witch's character in *The Daydreamer* adheres to the well-established roles of the sea witch in the original fairy tale, embodying attributes commonly associated with witches in Western popular culture. This alignment positions the sea witch as the "Other" within this adaptation. In contrast to the little mermaid, who embodies feminine traits, the sea witch is portrayed with masculine characteristics through the lens of ballet choreographic conventions. Despite her menacing presence, the sea witch also portrays traditional feminine traits such as physical features, femme fatale characteristics and a connection to nature. This blend of masculine and feminine attributes allows the sea witch to transcend traditional gender boundaries, challenging the presumed biological certainty of gender by subverting conventional gender roles. When analysing the overarching progression of the sea witch's character, I will examine these findings in the broader context of all the analysed adaptations.

4. Analysing Disney's and Disney-Inspired Queer Sea Witches

4.1 Disney's Ever-Changing Agenda

Before discussing the Walt Disney Company's *The Little Mermaid*, it is important to delve into Disney's ever-changing agenda. This chapter will aid in comprehending certain corporate decisions that shaped Disney's sea witch. The representations of sexuality and LGBTQ+ themes in Walt Disney Company productions have changed over the decades, articulating the shifting approaches toward gender and queer theories. The "Disney Universe," which captured audiences worldwide for nearly a century, simultaneously mirrors and reshapes social trends regarding race, gender and sexuality (Dundes ix; Uppal 49; Hine, Ivanovic, and England 73). This chapter explores the politics of Disney from the 1920s to the present, focusing on key moments in the company's attitude to sexuality and LGBTQ+ inclusion. In its early years, Disney's cartoons featured exaggerated portrayals of sexuality, a common characteristic across animation studios. Characters' bodies were depicted as "polymorphous sight of pleasure," where the flexibility of animation allowed artists to explore and manipulate bodily forms creatively (Griffin 9). These early representations served as humorous explorations of sexuality, presenting animation's potential to deviate from dominant paradigms. However, by the 1930s, Disney's approach began to shift. For example, "Mickey's Monastery" emphasised the "naturalness of heterosexuality" (Griffin 3, 5). As audiences demanded a well-behaved Mickey Mouse, Disney introduced characters like Donald Duck and Goofy to embody anger, aggression and goofiness. This allowed Disney to maintain the playful and experimental aspects of its cartoons, and also to cater to the public's need for a saint-like Mickey.

Moreover, *Ferdinand the Bull* (1938) and *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) featured queer-coded main characters through subtly homosexual narratives. While the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 marked a shift towards traditional gender roles and old-fashioned morality, the character of the Evil Queen has been associated with queerness, as John Wills and Katia Perea note (5;38). This reflects evolving gender norms in the depiction of protagonists and their love interests. Simultaneously, Disney consistently portrayed villainous characters as queer, connecting villainy to otherness and gender ambiguity. However, the 1940s marked a departure within Disney from artistic experimentation to commercialism. The company "began to reject the carnivalesque attitude towards sexuality and the body" in favour of lifelike characters that catered to public expectations (Griffin 12). This led to the creation of the "Disney mystique," which moved away from polymorphism and alternative, surrealistic imagery to the embrace of a more realistic world and standard narrative structure (Griffin 11,

20; Perea 32). For example, there is the “Pink Elephants” scene in *Dumbo* (1941) where the elephants are gender-neutral. This scene is almost exactly copied in *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977), where the “Heffalumps and Woozles” scene portrays gendered elephants. Ultimately, Disney started to become more real and less exaggerated (Davis 87-88).

In the 1940s, Disney increased collaboration with the U.S. government and the State Department during World War II, leading to the production of “educational” propagandist films. Walt Disney himself was recruited as a goodwill ambassador to strengthen ties with South America with animations based on cultures south of the Rio Grande that promoted messages of democracy and friendship, states Julianne Burton (55). The company tried to return to the carnivalesque atmosphere, but these efforts were not well-received by reviewers, hence the company abandoned the experimentation of carnivalesque themes (Griffin 38). Therefore, in the 1950s, Disney emphasised conformity, control, and conservatism, aligning the “Disney Culture” with American values, John Wills and Robin Armstrong (69;104). This period also marked the company’s expansion into documentaries, live-action features, and theme parks, all of which reinforced middle-class heterosexual paradigms (Griffin 38). The return to the fairy-tale format solidified traditional gender norms, especially since the genre globally reinforced heteronormativity (Griffin 41). Walt Disney created his image as a trustworthy father figure, who can entertain and educate audiences. However, the villains created during his time, like Maleficent and Cruella de Vil, have been associated with queerness and drag queens due to their exaggerated performances, heavy make-ups, and costumes covering them head-to-toe, traits commonly seen in drag shows (Griffin 73). Meanwhile, live-action TV series, such as *The Adventures of Spin and Marty* (1955) and *Annette* (1985) showcased queer-coded boys and girls who go through straightening, gradually conforming to the traditional gender norms, as the plots progressed (Griffin 80-3).

In June 1969, the Stonewall riots in New York sparked a radical gay rights movement, that popularised the concept of “coming out” (Griffin 94-5). As a response, Disney, in the 1970s, began producing proto-queer boy narratives such as *The World’s Greatest Athlete* (1973) and *The Strongest Man in the World* (1975), which challenged traditional gender roles (Griffin 87). In 1978, the first gay “zapping” happened in Disneyland, when gay activists took over the park unannounced, which was part of a larger movement responsible for making “Gay Pride Week” and other pride parades possible (Griffin 127, 95). However, throughout the 1960s and 70s, Disney struggled to produce compelling films due to the volatile social and political climate in the U.S. (Bell et al. 6).

The 1980s brought the fight against AIDS and significant changes to the Walt Disney Company. The decade started with a controversial event in Disneyland, where a gay couple was escorted off the dance floor during their annual date night (Griffin 126). Despite such incidents, Disney underwent major transformations under CEO Michael Eisner. In 1983, Eisner launched Touchstone Picture, producing PG-rated films targeted at older children, and began hiring openly queer employees (Griffin 107). Eisner did everything to achieve as much profit as possible, even if this went against the company's previous image (Griffin 106). In 1986, Disney released *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, its first R-rated film, which was criticised for being overly sexual (Griffin 190). Moreover, in 1989, *The Little Mermaid* modelled the sea witch, Ursula on a drag queen, which will be further discussed in the next chapter (Griffin 146).

In the 1990s, "Gay Nights" and "Gay Weekends" were introduced in the theme parks, where stores featured merchandise themed around villains, who were particularly beloved by the queer community (Griffin xi, 72). During this period, Howard Ashman, a gay lyricist working on early Disney Renaissance animations, was battling AIDS. His struggles influenced him to create more queer narratives, including an AIDS-like storyline in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) (Griffin 135). Ashman also introduced the concept of "wish songs" in his work, which are centred on characters wanting to find happiness elsewhere, a departure from previous songs sung by the leading characters (Griffin 150). In 1992, Ashman was an influence in *Genie*, a larger-than-life "gay-tinged" figure in *Aladdin* (1992), and the shift toward a more progressive representation with respect to gender, which aligns with the broader Gay Movement during this time (Griffin 147, Wills 126). Simultaneously, lead animator Andreas Deja, who openly acknowledged his queerness, drew inspiration when creating characters like Jafar or Scar in *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* (1993) respectively (Griffin 142). During the 1990s, Disney instituted a non-discrimination policy based on sexual orientation (Griffin 107). In August 1992, the first meeting for homosexuals by homosexual employees took place at Disney, leading to the formation of LEAGUE (Lesbian And Gay United Employees), the first such group in any major Hollywood studio (Griffin 93). LEAGUE offered domestic partner benefits in 1992, making Disney one of the first studios to do so. LEAGUE ALLIANCE grew out of the Floridian park, which was crucial in this conservative state (Griffin 116). In 1993, the LEAGUE participated in a gay rights parade in Washington, coinciding with Disney acquiring Miramax and producing queer-themed live-action films that unfortunately died in production (Griffin 110-11, 153).

In 1994, fundamentalist Christians in Florida protested Disney's allowance of "Lesbian/Gay Weekend" at its theme parks (Griffin xiii). These events were not organised by

Disney, but the fact that the company let it happen on its property outraged these fundamentalists. The following year, Florida lawmakers from the “Bible Belt” sent a letter to Walt Disney World expressing their disapproval of the company’s LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts (Griffin 117-8). Around the same time, Disney was falsely accused of promoting homosexuality through its productions, a claim that was never substantiated (Griffin 220). As a result, The American Family Association boycotted Disney for controversial films, like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*, and the Southern Baptist Convention challenged Disney on its supposed anti-Christian and anti-family content (Wills 126-7). 1996 marked the opening of Disney’s Celebration, a town in Florida designated to promote traditional family values (Wills 108). Nevertheless, tensions persisted, and in June 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas voted to refrain from patronising Disney and its products (Griffin 222, Wills 126). During this period, “Gay Day” celebrations at the theme parks continued to face boycotts from conservative religious groups. Amongst all these attacks, Disney started to provide health benefits to same-sex partners of employees, which can be seen as an act towards more inclusivity (Griffin xv).

The Walt Disney Company, as previously noted, has consistently tried to cater to its audience, which led to increased inclusivity from the 2000s onwards. Since 2007, Disney’s Fairy Tale Wedding programme has begun allowing same-sex couples to participate, even before the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in California (2013) and Florida (2015). However, according to Edward Helmore, during the 2010s, criticism emerged from Democratic-aligned and pro-LGBTQ+ groups, who felt that Disney was not doing enough to include openly gay characters in its films (the first was LeFou in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), followed by Ethan Clade in the animated film, *Strange World* (2022), not including works by Disney’s other studios). Despite these controversies, *Frozen* (2013) marked a more liberal and progressive approach, with Elsa being celebrated as a queer hero (Wills 128-9). However, the political landscape has shifted since then, especially in 2019 with Ron DeSantis becoming governor of Florida and launching a campaign against what he perceives as woke culture, including Disney’s inclusive efforts, notes Daniel Kline. This turning point has been dividing Disney fans, not just in the U.S., but around the world.

In March 2022, DeSantis signed the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act, commonly known as the “Don’t Say Gay or Trans,” which prohibits public schools from discussing sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten to 3rd grade, as Jo Yurcaba notes. At that time, Disney’s then-CEO, Bob Chapek, chose not to take a stance. This controversial move led to protests at the Walt Disney Company headquarters in Burbank, California (Helmore). In

response to the backlash, Chapek eventually issued a public apology (Helmore). In April 2022, one of Walt Disney's heirs, Charlee Corra Disney, came out as transgender, prompting the Disney family to release a statement emphasising that “equality matters deeply to [them]” (Yurcaba). That same month, DeSantis seized control of Disney’s self-governing special district, Reedy Creek Improvement District, where Walt Disney World is located (Helmore). Tensions escalated in April 2023 when Disney sued DeSantis, invoking First Amendment rights in a legal battle over free speech (which was countersued in May 2023) (Yurcaba). During this period, Disney also sought to stop the governor’s attempt to take over their special district. In May 2023, an elementary school teacher in Florida faced an investigation for showing students *Strange World*, with the Florida Department of Education calling it “inappropriate conduct,” according to Victoria Bekiempis. This incident coincided with new legislation promoted by DeSantis, which led to book bans across the state (Bekiempis). The year ended with DeSantis accusing Disney of bribing the board in Florida, which further escalated the ongoing dispute, notes Dawn Chmielewski.

Overall, the Walt Disney Company’s stance on LMBTQ+ rights and representation of queer characters has evolved over the years to reflect the changing viewpoints of contemporary audiences. Disney has gradually adjusted its approach to interpreting the messages of classic fairy tales, which initially reflected conservatism and patriarchy. Today, the company is making more deliberate efforts towards inclusivity. Notably, the portrayal of protagonists has undergone significant change, shifting from representations of gender conservatism to more gender-ambiguous depictions. Meanwhile, Disney villains have been queer-coded, from the Evil Queen to King Candy. However, there is hope for de-villainising queer characters. Since 2014, Disney has begun to represent villains without relying on queer-coding, indicating a move toward more nuanced and less stereotypical characterisation. This trend was not evident in the live-action *The Little Mermaid*, as it featured a character already as queer-coded. Nonetheless, the shift away from queer-coding is apparent in newly created original villains.

4.2 Octopus-Like Sea Witch Performing Drag in *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

The third anglophone on-screen adaptation in chronological order is an American hand-drawn method animated film titled *The Little Mermaid* from 1989. It was directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, produced by Howard Ashman and John Musker, and distributed by Buena Vista Pictures Distribution. It was created by the Walt Disney Pictures production company. This is particularly important considering Disney’s popularity among children, especially in Western culture. Disney films offer potential modelling influences of gender

norms and stereotypes to children through their increased accessibility and repeated consumption, according to Jessica D. Zurcher, Sarah M. Webb and Tom Robinson, as well as Benjamin Hine, Katarina Ivanovic, and Dawn England (2; 74). The 1989 animated film illustrates Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" through various changes regarding the characters and the plot. The success of this film at the box office was instrumental in restoring profitability to the Walt Disney Company's animation department. This success marked the beginning of the Disney Renaissance, which led to the production of numerous acclaimed films, including *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994). The success also resulted in several productions centred on the character of the little mermaid, Ariel. It was also followed by a television series, *The Little Mermaid*, which spanned three seasons from 1992 to 1994. In 2000, a direct-to-video sequel was released titled *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*, followed by a direct-to-video prequel in 2008 entitled *The Little Mermaid: Ariel's Beginning*. Moreover, a stage adaptation of Disney opened in 2007 and has been performed by various casts in multiple theatres worldwide. Recently, in the year 2023, a live-action remake of the original animation with the same title, *The Little Mermaid*, was produced. However, this thesis focuses on the on-screen adaptations of the original fairy tale, rather than sequels and prequels. This chapter will analyse the original animation from 1989, whereas the "Revised Live-Action Witch" chapter will examine the live-action remake.

In this version, the role of the sea witch is critical from the beginning. Ursula's faithful servants, Flotsam and Jetsam, two moray eels, serve as her eyes, observing Ariel's hurried journey to her father's palace through her crystal ball. This act indicates that she possesses the power to observe current events, conferring upon an all-knowing quality that is also evident in the original fairy tale. Her connection with the eels and omniscient characteristic align with the archetypal witch. Conspicuously, the atmosphere undergoes a transformation upon the introduction of Flotsam and Jetsam. The setting shifts to a deeper part of the sea, characterised by a dark and shadowy atmosphere that evokes a threatening environment. The music transitions to a disconcerting tone, similar to Ursula's musical number about unfortunate souls. The frame depicts the way the eels and subsequently Ursula gaze at Ariel, establishing a representation of the male gaze, with Ariel representing a typical female on-screen and Ursula being the male with this masculine power. Her voice is notably low and can be mistaken for that of a male since her body is not yet visible. Ursula's voice is provided by Pat Carroll, who has a low, crisp voice. She was famous for her cross-dressing roles, notes Laura Sells (182). Furthermore, during an interview in *The Making of The Little Mermaid* (1989), she stated that she asked the producer and lyricist, Howard Ashman to perform Ursula's song in preparation

for the role (24:27-25:23). She “stole” several ideas from Ashman when he portrayed Ursula (*The Making of The Little Mermaid* 25:02). Ursula is sarcastic and mocking as she says, “We wouldn’t want to miss old Daddy’s celebration, now, would we? Ha! Celebration, indeed. Oh, bah!,” which characteristics are associated with drag queen performances (*The Little Mermaid* 11:06-16). Ursula’s narrative representation of otherness pertains to queer identity. Even before Ursula, the villainesses of the Walt Disney Company were closely associated with the archetypal witch’s character, being “invariably strong, older, dominating women, usually skilled in black magic,” states Amy M. Davis (137). These features are also correlated with their antagonistic role.

Firstly, she is shown seated in darkness, which makes it difficult to recognise what kind of creature she is. She maintains this enigmatic quality throughout the narrative. The black colour of her lair and dress also highlights her power, authority and mystery, according to a study on colours of cinematic lighting by Matbouly (3695).



(Fig. 8: *The Little Mermaid* 11:11)

While Ursula gazes at Ariel, she occupies the upper right side of the frame, while Ariel is at the bottom. This positioning establishes their power dynamics from the outset, with Ursula dominating and controlling Ariel. Ursula’s lair is a huge shell whose mouth resembles female genitalia, which underlines her femininity. She has heavy make-up, a prominent beauty spot, extensive eyelashes, blue eyeshadows and red lips. She also has red nail polish and accessories like earrings and a necklace. These exaggerated features of femininity align with the aesthetic

style of camp that is related to drag. However, she is fearsome when she eats her food, as the creatures are still alive. This trait reflects her demanding and aggressive nature. Overall, this scene exemplifies the ways in which Ursula represents femininity and masculinity simultaneously. Additionally, Ursula can be interpreted as Black according to Dorothy L. Harley (226). Throughout the majority of the film, Ursula has blue-black skin and a black body, with the exception of when she is Vanessa (Harley 226). Also, the nuances of her speech and movement are more stereotypically Black (Harley 226). These characteristics imply that her character is the Other.



(Fig. 9: *The Little Mermaid* 11:47)

She has an octopus-like lower body that blends seamlessly into a black dress on her upper body. It accentuates her ample breasts and robust, muscular arms, which are not covered. She has short, white hair that aligns with the depiction of the archetypal witch. Her monologue, gestures and movements are theatrical, which highlight the performative nature of gender. She uses extensive gestures with her entire arms and employs her entire body to further articulate what she says. For instance, when Ursula states that she has “wasted away to practically nothing,” she abruptly descends with her arms hanging down rather dramatically (*The Little Mermaid* 11:29-32). This choreography is a version of the “killing it” death drop that was discussed in “The Evolution of Drag and Its Impact” chapter (Doonan 16, 43). She moves her arms with grace, which is associated with female choreography in ballet, or makes quick energetic motions with them, which is perceived as masculine in the same context. I, again, use

parallels between the movement of sea witch and classical ballet, since the language of ballet, and its coded conventions are embedded in the bodies of Disney characters, according to Elizabeth Bell (111). Also, as mentioned before, all adaptations engage in a conversation, hence, this sea witch is in dialogue with the ballet-dancing sea witches. Her massive body is highlighted by her tentacles, especially when they cover the frame. Her laugh is low and evil, which further adds to her menacing characteristic. Generally, her body has feminine features, and her movements are feminine and masculine. Ultimately, Ursula blurs the distinction between conventional binary gender norms.

In this adaptation, the sea witch persuades the little mermaid to come to her and ask for help. Ursula demonstrates that she is even capable of communicating with Ariel through Flotsam and Jetsam with a threatening low voice. She says, “Ursula has great powers,” which underlines her exceptional abilities (*The Little Mermaid* 37:37-42). She refers to herself in the third person, which suggests that she has various personalities, including Vanessa, later in the narrative. She also chooses to act in a particular manner to conform to one of her multiple characters. This idea echoes Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. When Ariel approaches Ursula’s lair, the crab Sebastian calls her, “a demon. ... a monster,” which means that she is commonly known as a villainous character in the sea (*The Little Mermaid* 38:30-2). When Ariel first encounters Ursula, her lair is depicted with elaborate details. The cave itself is a massive sea monster’s skeleton that is portrayed as a dark and shadowy place while Ariel swims through caves that resemble a womb (Sells 184). Ariel is overcome with great fear when she enters the mouth of this skeleton and sees Ursula’s horrible garden creatures, a collection of polyps. These creatures, once miserable merpeople, were unable to meet Ursula’s demands, so she transformed them.

Ariel first hears Ursula’s voice and sees Ursula’s shell, where she hides. Ursula ascends from the shell using her robust arms. Ursula places her hand on her waist and speaks directly to Ariel. Ursula then turns her body, still looking back at Ariel, while wiggling her bottom towards her. She continues to ascend to her dressing table, which resembles that of a theatre dressing room. Ursula styles her hair with foam and applies heavy make-up. She says, “not that [she] blame[s] [her]. He is quite a catch, isn’t he? Well, angelfish,” she refers to Ariel by a nickname (*The Little Mermaid* 39:39-46). She pouts, emitting a smooch sound. This is precisely the moment when her musical number starts. Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, the composer, wrote the musical numbers for *The Little Mermaid*, which resulted in a musical

theatre quality, as they had previously contributed to Broadway musicals.



(Fig. 10: *The Little Mermaid* 39:51)

When Ursula begins performing her song, “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” this trait enhances her theatricality. She has a camp quality, especially through this musical number, which resonates with Divine and other drag queens and camp icons, such as “Joan Collins, Tallulah Bankhead [and] Norma Desmond” (Sells 182). This analogy drawn by Sells holds particular relevance, as in the second adaptation, the witch was voiced by Tallulah Bankhead, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Ursula’s performance ultimately destabilises gender (Sells 182).

First and foremost, Ursula has the ability to alter the appearance of merpeople, as she asserts, “to become a human” (*The Little Mermaid* 39:54-5). This ability is in accordance with the archetypal witch’s ability to shapeshift. When she first comes closer to Ariel, Ursula touches her face with her finger, maintaining a powerful posture, while Ariel attempts to distance herself. This positioning illustrates their power dynamics, especially when Ursula invades Ariel’s space. Her musical number comprises a distinct choreography wherein her tentacles pulsate to the beat of the music, and her arms gracefully move, touching her hair and Flotsam and Jetsam. “Often, [the animators] would use the tentacles to, kind of, accent move or grab Ariel and pull her closer or dance with her,” says one of the animators (*The Making of The Little Mermaid* 13:40-9). This comment suggests that Ursula’s tentacles are a masculine feature

of her otherwise feminine body.



(Fig 11: *The Little Mermaid* 40:12)

Nonetheless, when she uses her tentacles for movement and dancing, they move softly and gently. She sings, “And I fortunately know a little magic. It’s a talent that I always have possessed,” which means that she has an innate power (*The Little Mermaid* 40:34-41). While Ursula dances, she uses feminine-coded movements, highlighting her flexibility, fluidity and softness. However, this is evidently an act, as she wants to persuade Ariel to ask for help. She performs these feminine movements to earn Ariel’s trust. This duality is underlined in one instance when Ursula says, “pathetic” to Flotsam and Jetsam, concealing her mouth with her hand from Ariel (*The Little Mermaid* 40:48-50). This alteration in character is amplified by her voice shifting to a lower tone and her facial expression displaying a brief moment of anger. Ursula’s over-the-top musical number, in which she teaches Ariel how to behave and seduce like a human woman, functions as a camp drag show (Sells 176).

Ursula further emphasises her femininity by singing, “but on the whole I’ve been a saint,” while she drapes a pink seaweed veil over her head, resembling a nun’s veil, and clasps her hands together in prayer (*The Little Mermaid* 41:26-29). She then shimmies into the frame, occupying all the space of the frame and displaying her breasts from a close-up. She grabs Ariel

with her seaweed, with a quick movement.



(Fig. 12: *The Little Mermaid* 41:36)

Ursula changes her gentle movements to a more assertive manner, thereby regaining authority over Ariel's space. Ursula, still tightly hugging Ariel, exerts control over Ariel's movements, leading her to the cauldron. Ursula then explains the terms and conditions of Ariel becoming a human, emphasising that if anything goes wrong, Ariel belongs to her (*The Little Mermaid* 42:18). Again, she uses a deeper voice to demonstrate her power over Ariel. Their power dynamics are further highlighted when Ursula employs one of her tentacles to shut Ariel's mouth during her attempts to speak. Hence, Ursula exerts control over Ariel's actions, and Ariel adheres to her directives. These power dynamics align with traditional gender norms, where the controller is male and the controlled is female.

Most importantly, when Ariel expresses concern about not having a voice, Ursula replies, "you'll have your looks, your pretty face. And don't underestimate the importance of body language!" (*The Little Mermaid* 43:13-22). When Ursula says this, she wiggles her enormous bottom, underlining her message. Again, this statement resonates with Butler's theory of performativity. This musical number demonstrates that "femininity is deliberately and intentionally created," observes Michelle Ann Abate (175). In this musical number, Ursula reveals her connection to drag, whose performances correlate with this idea of intentionally acting in a certain way, especially as Ursula's performance begins backstage with hair mousse and lipstick (Sells 182). Flotsam and Jetsam even swirl around her, forming a "feather boa"

(Sells 182). “This performance is a masquerade, a drag show starring Ursula as an ironic figure” (Sells 182). She teaches Ariel “that performance and voice are manifestations and liberations of gender” (Sells 182). Subsequently, Ursula’s manners become more masculine, characterised by quick and aggressive movements when she puts ingredients into her cauldron and repeatedly invades Ariel’s space. When Ursula finally gets Ariel’s voice, the cave becomes green and her eyes turn red, revealing her true evil nature. Green lighting is commonly associated with terror, fear and sinister characters (Katatikarn and Tanzillo 106). Red lighting is perceived as exciting and strong (Matbouly 3695). This scene highlights the notion that she puts on a performance when she moves in a feminine manner, but when she does not need to be gentle, she reverts to a more masculine persona.

In another scene, she is capable of easily preventing Ariel from having a true love kiss with the aid of Flotsam and Jetsam, thereby showing her authority over the narrative. Nonetheless, she perceives that it was a close miss, hence she must act independently of her helpers. Ursula then demonstrates that she can even shapeshift. She transforms into a petite black-haired girl. She bewitches Prince Eric and controls him with her magic. Ursula’s beautiful alter ego, Vanessa, performs a brief song, this time on land, in front of a dressing table. She uses forceful and aggressive movements with her legs to step on the table and break objects. This behaviour continues at her wedding when she even kicks Eric’s dog on the head. Following that, animals engage in combat against her. When Vanessa turns back to Ursula, she uses her upper body strength to move on land swiftly.



(Fig. 13: *The Little Mermaid* 41:36)

Her arms are extremely strong and masculine, which allows her to move her whole body with them. It also allows her to grasp Ariel's entire body and hold her close without apparent effort, as she plunges into the water. The characteristics of these scenes show her femininity and masculinity simultaneously.

Finally, Ursula faces King Triton, Ariel's father. Within this relationship, Ursula also holds the dominant position, leaving Triton in a subversive role.

(Fig. 14: *The Little Mermaid* 1:11:12)

When Ursula explains her unbreakable power, she occupies the upper right corner, while Triton is unable to do anything and stands still. This contrast is accentuated when Ursula moves around with powerful gestures, whereas Triton hesitates in a state of stillness. She convinces Triton to enter into a new agreement, thereby guaranteeing that both Ariel and Triton are under her control. She then places Triton's crown on her head and grabs his trident. At last, she transforms into an immense monster as a result of her rage towards Ariel and Prince Eric for hurting Flotsam and Jetsam. Ursula's voice begins to take on a deeper tone. She even states that "now [she] [is] the ruler of all the ocean!" (*The Little Mermaid* 1:13:29). With this power, Ursula can direct the waves and all that happens within the water, since everything bows to her

will. Lastly, she is destroyed by a ship that is driven by Prince Eric into her enormous body.



(Fig. 15: *The Little Mermaid* 1:14:50)

The imagery of a ship holing Ursula's whole body has been interpreted as a phallic-shaped object capable of destroying the antagonist, note Patrick D. Murphy and Laura Sells (133; 180). Ursula's death is typical for a femme fatale.

In conclusion, Ursula disrupts gender norms. Despite being identified as female, the excesses of her femininity, combined with her masculine aggression, give her the nuances of gender transgression and reinforce her deviant nature. Ursula "incarnates the menace of gender bending and the rejection of anatomical destiny," notes Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud (53). In the end, Ursula needs to be brought under control and destroyed to restore the social order, akin to the faith of other Disney villainesses. This pattern suggests that Disney demonises characters who are overtly queer. Additionally, Ursula also echoes the archetypal witch as a "revolting, grotesque image of the smothering maternal figure," the femme fatale and the sea witches before her (Sells 181). Overall, Ursula's "femininity is combined with her masculine aggression," according to Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe (95), which blurs the lines between binary gender norms, states.

4.3 Feminine Power and Masculine Dominance in *The Little Mermaid* (1992)

The fourth adaptation is an American direct-to-video animated film from 1992, titled *The Little Mermaid*, directed by Masakazu Higuchi and Chinami Namba, produced by Diane

Eskenazi, and released by Trimark and Golden Films. This adaptation fits into the Golden Films company profile. In the 1990s, they were known for releasing knock-off versions of popular Disney films, such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Beauty and the Beast* (1992) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). Subsequently, one of Golden Films' distributors, GoodTimes Entertainment, was sued multiple times by The Walt Disney Company over their cover art, which resembled Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*'s, notes Peter M. Nichols. They ultimately lost this court case, since their stories were based on the original fairy tales, hence, any distributor is free to produce versions of them (Nichols). Nevertheless, the 1992 version of "The Little Mermaid" closely mirrors Disney's interpretation of Andersen's tale. Notably, the sea witch in this version is voiced by Tress MacNeille, who is renowned for her talent in mimicking and impersonating voices, observes Andy Meisler. Interestingly, MacNeille also voiced a character in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* TV show that same year, and she has also been the voice of Daisy Duck since 1999.

In this adaptation, the sea witch is named Cassandra, a reference to Greek mythology, where Cassandra was a maker of prophecies who foretold disasters, a powerful female figure that reflects the sea witch's abilities. Before Cassandra meets the little mermaid, Lena, she is seen at her house, observing Lena through a portal that shows her in real time. Cassandra remarks, "the beautiful princess, Lena wants to see the above world, eh? Very well, then see it she shall" (*The Little Mermaid* 6:35-45). She then creates a whirlpool that raises Lena to the surface. This reveals Cassandra's power to grant Lena's wish to experience the world above. This scene underlines Cassandra's significant role in the narrative as a key plot-driving force. By enabling Lena to see the prince for the first time, Cassandra sets the stage for the rest of the story.

Lena learns about the sea witch in a manner similar to the second adaptation, *The Daydreamer*, since it is her sister who introduces the idea of seeking out Cassandra: "The only one who knows about the dark powers that can turn merpeople into humans is Cassandra, the sea witch, and father won't let us even talk about her" (*The Little Mermaid* 30:02-11). This line highlights Cassandra's dark powers, and the fear she generates, as even discussing her is forbidden by Lena's father, suggesting the danger she represents. Cassandra's fearsome reputation extends beyond merpeople. She is also feared among dolphins, as Vink, Lena's friend, warns her that Cassandra "knows how to turn dolphins into seashells" and that "she's bad news" (*The Little Mermaid* 30:24-6, 30:27-8). This further emphasises the threat Cassandra poses, not only to Lena but to all creatures under the sea.

Cassandra's home is in a perilous area deep in the sea, surrounded by darkness and whirlpools. When Lena and Vink enter this perilous domain, they are aggressively grabbed by hands emerging from the ground. It is Cassandra who rescues them with quick, demanding and dynamic moves. Her voice, a powerful tool, controls these creatures. She uses it in two distinct ways: a low, commanding tone and a high-pitched scream. Her low, authoritative voice and aggressive, confident demeanour are coded as masculine. Meanwhile, she uses a high-pitched voice when screaming and laughing, which aligns with traditional feminine vocal expressions. The music that accompanies Cassandra is a version of Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," from *Die Walküre* opera, which is about valkyries from Norse mythology who guide dead souls. This reference to female power and force is significant, as in the original context, these female figures unite during this score to sing their battle cry. Cassandra is depicted as a mermaid with an eel tail. This feature differentiates her from other merpeople and links her to the archetypal witch, who is associated with animals, a connection further emphasised by her long white hair. These associations mark her as "Other," within the merfolk community and through the lens of the witch archetype.



(Fig. 16: *The Little Mermaid* 34:19)

Additionally, she wears a long purple cape that highlights her body shape, along with an elegant blouse with a stand-up collar, and her breasts are accentuated with circular shapes. Cassandra also has heavy make-up and huge earrings. All these features emphasise her femininity. Also,

the colour of her cape and make-up is purple, which mirrors Ursula's appearance in Disney's version. Her first actions, voice, overall appearance and music that accompanies her suggest a blend of femininity and masculinity. This duality aligns with the Western portrayal of the witches as figures of otherness, embodying queerness and gender ambiguity.

Cassandra's omniscient nature is highlighted when she remarks, even before consulting with Lena, that she has "got business with this princess" (*The Little Mermaid* 32:14-6). This trait is reminiscent of the original sea witch. Another of Cassandra's powers is her ability to brew a magic potion in her home, which she uses to transform Lena. This act, relying on traditional witch-like attributes, aligns with the stereotypical image of feminine magic. When Cassandra demands Lena's voice in exchange for the potion, Lena expresses concern about not having a voice. In response, the sea witch says, "you will have legs to dance upon and two you are beautiful, oh look at your hair, your eyes," implying that Cassandra believes that Lena can win the prince's heart through her physical appearance. This line suggests a theme of performativity, as it is only with her body that she can convince the prince to marry her. Ultimately, this means that Cassandra believes in performativity that can destabilise the naturalised categories of identity and desire, which results in her embodying an ambiguous gender.

In the following scenes that depict the interactions between Cassandra and Lena, the witch embodies traits that are often seen as masculine, especially in contrast to the little mermaid, who embodies femininity.



(Fig. 17: *The Little Mermaid* 33:29)

Cassandra's facial expression consistently shows anger, illustrated by her intense eye contact and furrowed brows. When she is not using magic, she stands with her hands on her hips and arms crossed, projecting authority. Her tail is also a powerful weapon, which she uses to strike the creatures around her house. In contrast to the little mermaid, who does not use her arms while swimming, Cassandra uses powerful arm strokes, which emphasises her strength. At one point, she asserts her dominance over Lena by grabbing her face. In this scene, Cassandra adopts a position of dominance, with her demanding hand gestures toward Lena while her other hand rests on her hip. She leans over Lena, who tries to back away. Cassandra occupies the centre of the frame, trapping Lena between herself and the cauldron, visually and metaphorically invading Lena's space. This position is often used when depicting a heteronormative relationship. Cassandra assumes the role of a masculinised, dominant figure, and Lena embodies the feminine, submissive role. All these traits of Cassandra are all masculine-coded gender roles used in Western popular culture. Additionally, these also mirror ballet choreographic tropes from the previous adaptations, which adds to their ongoing conversation.

When Cassandra finally holds the cup of the brew, Lena tries to get it, which leads to a duet of movement between them. The contrast in their movement is apparent: Lena floats slowly and gracefully, while Cassandra glides quickly and assertively.

(Fig. 18: *The Little Mermaid* 36:09)

This difference in movement highlights the masculine-coded aggression of Cassandra against the feminine-coded delicacy of Lena. The power dynamics between them become even more pronounced as their meeting concludes, with Cassandra taking a physically dominant position over Lena. From this elevated stance, Cassandra demonstrates her power, releasing visible energy from her hands that control her house and everything inside it, including Lena and Vink. This display of power at the end of the scene reinforces Cassandra's innate abilities and her dominance over the environment and characters around her.

In conclusion, Cassandra embodies the archetypal powerful witches, figures rooted in femininity but feared for their power. This association with witchcraft connects her to themes of otherness, queerness and ambiguity, particularly through her awareness of the theme of performativity. Her portrayal as an aggressive, dominating force with control over her domain reflects traditional masculine traits of dominance and authority. Also, her abilities and power, are rooted in her identity as a witch who defies social norms. These features make her a crucial figure in aiding the protagonist, which ultimately establishes her as an essential part of the narrative as well as society within it. Thus, Cassandra's character is a blend of feminine and masculine traits. I will place these findings within the broader context of all examined adaptations and further inspect the connection between witches and power.

4.4 Drag King Stingray in *The Little Mermaid* (1998)

The fifth anglophone on-screen adaptation is an Australian direct-to-video animation titled *The Little Mermaid* from 1998, directed by Geoff Beak and Susan Beak and produced by Roz Phillips under Burbank Animation Studios. The fifth adaptation mirrors The Walt Disney Company's 1989 animated version. In this adaptation, the previous 1992 version and the Disney animation, the sea witches are similar and certain scenes are almost identical. For example, in the 1992 adaptation, the sea witch, Cassandra, uses a crystal ball to watch Lena, just like Ursula uses her ball to observe Ariel. Additionally, both witches' homes are filled with potions, further emphasising the connection between these adaptations. This adaptation's similarities will be highlighted throughout the chapter. Overall, Disney's popular animation has been a huge influence on the following adaptations of "The Little Mermaid."

The knowledge of the sea witch's existence comes as a surprise, when Miranda, the little mermaid, reveals that she is "gonna ask the sea witch to help [her]" (*The Little Mermaid* 26:03-5). However, her two sisters and her friend, an otter named Acme, appear shocked and saddened, which indicates that they are aware of the sea witch's fearsome reputation. This reaction establishes the sea witch as a well-known, powerful and intimidating figure even

before she is shown on screen. As soon as Miranda goes looking for the sea witch, the music shifts to a suspenseful and mysterious tone, which creates an ominous atmosphere. The Sea Witch, who remains nameless like in the original fairy tale, lives deep in the sea within a shadowy cave, dominated by darkness, and hues of blue and green, which mirrors the first and second analysed adaptations. The cave is characterised by large, sharp, dangerous-looking boulders, which contribute to the menacing environment. In this adaptation, two sharks accompany the Sea Witch. Their characteristics and roles are reminiscent of the eels in The Walt Disney Company's animation, such as their strong connection with the Sea Witch, stupidity and tendency to laugh at everything the Witch says.

The Sea Witch makes a dramatic, performative entrance, as her first appearance is a shadow on the cave wall accompanied by her voice, which creates a fearsome image even before Miranda sees her. The Witch slowly floats into the frame, then she embodies sudden, powerful movements.



(Fig. 19: *The Little Mermaid* 27:41)

Compared to Miranda, the Sea Witch is enormous, resembling a stingray with no clothes. This aligns with the archetype of witches shapeshifting into animals. Her primary colours are shades

of purple, reminiscent of Ursula from the 1989 adaptation. She has a round body, a large nose with a wart and a single tooth, features that reflect conventional depictions of witches. Additionally, her large, sagging breasts highlight the oldness of the sea witch, as well as her femininity as they wriggle throughout her scenes. Furthermore, the Sea Witch has a low, deep voice, speaks with a lisp and has a frightening laugh. Whenever she appears on the screen, she occupies most of the frame, which highlights her power over the narrative and Miranda.

When Miranda approaches the Sea Witch, the witch is initially unaware of her reason for visiting, which suggests that she is not all-knowing. This lack of omniscience diminishes some of the power the original sea witch holds in Andersen's fairy tale. The Sea Witch's movements are graceful and fluid as she floats through the sea. However, when she speaks to Miranda, her movements become quick, hard-hitting and strong to frighten Miranda, even intruding on Miranda's space. This contrast in movement establishes the power dynamics between them, with the Sea Witch's physical presence and dominant position in the frame overpowering Miranda. The duality in the Sea Witch's movements, elegant and fluid when floating, yet sudden and powerful when speaking, suggests a blend of traditionally feminine grace and masculine assertiveness, which are conventional ballet features. This complexity aligns with the established ambiguity of the sea witch's figure across various adaptations.

The Sea Witch positions herself above Miranda, taking up most of the space in the frame, when they talk.



(Fig. 20: *The Little Mermaid* 27:30)

This establishes a hierarchical relationship, with the Witch in the upper right corner, symbolising dominance. Meanwhile, Miranda is in the lower left, portraying vulnerability and frailty. The Sea Witch demonstrates her authority by overpowering her faithful shark servants, using sudden movements with her fins, and even beating them with her tail. Throughout the scene, Miranda and the Sea Witch's servants are controlled by the Witch, reinforcing her authoritativeness and elevated status. The Witch repeatedly turns her back to Miranda, then quickly faces her again with sudden movements. The Witch also uses a vast space as she floats while speaking, which contrasts with Miranda's static presence, especially since she is restricted to a limited space. Their power imbalance resembles roles in traditional ballet choreographies. In these, the female dancer is characterised by stillness and hesitance. In the interim, the male dancer is quick, strong, and active, using an enormous space. This parallel aligns with the established characteristics of the ballet adaptation from 1952.

When Miranda asks for legs, the Sea Witch replies, "well, of course, I can do it, give you legs, got a potion for that ... the potion will give you legs, but it'll take your voice away" (*The Little Mermaid* 28:04-24). This exchange suggests that the Sea Witch's power lies not in herself but in the potion, indicating that she cannot control the subsequences of drinking the potion. As Miranda tries to discuss the matter with Acme, the Sea Witch sits in the right corner of the frame, listening while her tail continuously moves. This shows her never-static nature. Meanwhile, Miranda's emotions are portrayed explicitly, underlining the femininity that the Sea Witch mocks. This mockery resonates with drag practices, which challenge social norms and the concept of a true gender identity. When the Sea Witch's patience runs out, she asserts her control over Miranda by demanding "well, hurry up" (*The Little Mermaid* 29:16-7). Overall, this Sea Witch has less power than the witch in the original fairy tale, which lessens her menace in the little mermaid's life and softens her villainous nature, especially as she ultimately agrees to help Miranda. The incorporation of drag elements into her character casts a more positive light on queer representations in narratives. By aligning less negative attributes with drag, the character challenges traditional gender norms and highlights the fluidity of identity, offering a less traditionally evil portrayal.

In the end, the potion is revealed to be a liquid that comes from the tip of the Sea Witch's tail, which is the most striking example of blurred gender lines. This is unusual, as real stingrays or any other breeds of rays cannot produce liquid from their tails. The imagery of a purple liquid seeping from the end of the Sea Witch's tail is phallocentric. It is even supplemented with sound effects that carry the same erotic undertone. The potion's origin from the Witch's tail, paired with phallic imagery and suggestive sound effects, symbolically ties her to

masculine power. This depiction challenges the traditional notion of power being inherently masculine by presenting a female character wielding it. This concept resonates with the practice of drag kings who wear male signifiers, such as a phallus (Escudero-Alías 179). In these instances, drag kings use this device as a parodic phallic appropriation, which draws attention to the fact that acquiring power is not inherently a male characteristic (Escudero-Alías 182). This appropriation displaces the phallus from heterosexist contexts, creating non-conservative imagery that blurs the lines between what it means to be feminine and masculine (Escudero-Alías 183). The “transferability and expropriability” of these symbols are empowering tools that redefine sexual differences and power relations (Escudero-Alías 183).



(Fig. 21: *The Little Mermaid* 29:41)

The Sea Witch’s influence continues when Miranda’s sisters come to her for help. In this scene, the Sea Witch plays cards with her servants. As she moves towards the mermaids, only her phallus-like tail is shown, leaving the table where her servants continue to play cards.

This highlights her drag king quality as she wiggles her tail across the frame.



(Fig. 22: *The Little Mermaid* 39:25)

Once again, the Sea Witch dominates the scene, occupying most of the space in the frame. She floats into the middle of the frame while the sisters are restricted to the left corner of it.



(Fig. 23: *The Little Mermaid* 40:24)

She demands the sisters' hair in exchange for Miranda's voice, which saves Miranda's prospect of love and a happily ever after. The Sea Witch even poses in front of a mirror with her new hair from Miranda's sisters. This act can be linked to dressing up as the opposing sex and enjoying a new look, much like wearing a costume for the first time. Her theatrical act of looking in the mirror and attempting to represent herself as another identity is reminiscent of drag, where performers often playfully explore different genders. However, her servants laugh at her as she admires herself in the mirror. In response, she hits them again with her tail, adding a layer of comedy to the scene. This moment resembles the comedic nature of drag performances, playfully performing gender exaggeratedly. In her final appearance, the Sea Witch's transformation, enhanced by the beautiful hair of Miranda's sisters, highlights a shift towards a more traditionally feminine appearance.

Overall, in the 1998 adaptation, the Sea Witch displays feminine and masculine attributes, blurring the lines between traditional heteronormative gender roles. These attributes position her as a queer-coded character, paired with less menacing and more positive features, as she ultimately aids the protagonist. Additionally, her embodiment of drag king tropes contributes to a positive portrayal of drag. I will situate these findings within the broader context of all the adaptations and explore the depiction of villainous queer characters in greater depth.

4.5 Revised Live-Action Witch in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

The sixth adaptation is an American live-action film, *The Little Mermaid*, from 2023, directed by Rob Marshall and produced by Marc Platt, Lin-Manuel Miranda, John DeLuca and Rob Marshall. It was distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. It is a remake of their animated adaptation from 1989 reimagined after thirty-four years to a live-action cast to fit today's social norms. As stated in the theoretical section, remakes are unfinished cultural businesses. As a result, various aspects of films, including characters, setting, lighting, editing, angles, camera setups and music, undergo revision over time to cater to the current audiences (Braudy 328, 331). Melissa McCarthy portrays the sea witch, who claims that her career began in drag, according to Joey Nolfi. It was a deliberate decision to cast an actor with a drag background, notes Web Desk. The two sea witch characters from Disney share numerous similarities. However, there are differences that will be highlighted throughout this chapter. The most notable differences are their techniques, as the 1989 version is hand-drawn animation, where all the frames are drawn picture by picture. All the details, like gestures and movements, are well-thought-out and intentional. In the interim, the 2023s version is a live-action remake

that aims to give the characters and the setting more realistic features. This approach results in Ursula's appearance becoming more sinister due to her realistic-looking tentacles and cave. Lighting emphasises these characteristics, which play a significant role throughout this adaptation.

For the first time, Flotsam and Jetsam, the sea witch Ursula's two eels, are depicted in the frame, characterised by their low snarling and chittering, accompanied by eerie music. They are hiding in the shadows of a cave, watching Ariel swim away from them. They are static, staying within their hideout as the camera moves into the cave to reveal them. This camera angle reveals their sneaky, stalking quality. Subsequently, Ursula's voice is heard saying, "yes, hurry home, Princess. We wouldn't want to be late for Daddy's gathering, now, would we? Perhaps I'll join them. Oh, wait, what a shame. It seems that Big Brother forgot to invite Auntie Ursula to the party. Again" (*The Little Mermaid* 13:18-39). She mocks Ariel, which can be linked to drag performances. This is an attribute she displays throughout the film. It is also revealed that Ursula has familial ties with Ariel, as Ursula is the younger sister of King Triton. This connection makes the sea witch appear even more cruel, as she deliberately hurts her family members. This characteristic is the opposite of stereotypically feminine traits, such as domesticity, being helpful and taking care of others (Windsor 893). Her voice significantly differs from that of Pat Carroll in the 1989 version, which is notably deep and low. It is possible to mistake that for a man, whereas McCarthy's voice is unmistakably female.

Ursula observes Ariel through the eyes of her servants, aided by her crystal ball, which mirrors the male gaze. The gaze emphasises Ariel's role as a passive female, through the lens of the camera and Ursula's eyes. This act of gazing is a manifestation of power, indicating the power dynamics between the two characters. Hence, Ursula exhibits normative masculine traits in her relationship with Ariel, including dominance and manipulation. Her authority is underlined by grabbing the ball with one of her tentacles. Then, with swift and powerful movements, she seizes one of the shrimps with her tentacles and long, sharp nails, and consumes it while it is still alive. This act illustrates her cruelty. It is shown that she has an enormous body and crawls slowly, while her tentacles move gracefully. Slowness and grace are associated with female choreography in classical ballet. These tropes have been discussed in previous chapters, and since adaptations are in conversation with each other, they are used in this chapter as well. Moreover, her face is first shown through the mirror effect of the crystal ball, highlighting her two sides, a feminine and a masculine, blurring the lines between these binary norms. This blurring results in a gender-ambiguous character. Throughout her first scene, her face is not shown directly, as her cave is dark and shadowy, presenting a threatening

introduction to the sea witch's character and generating suspense. During her scene, the lighting is dim, so she remains in the dark most of the time. This introduction of her movements and manners bears a resemblance to the 1989 version. However, her body is different, with glowing tentacles and fully-covered arms.



(Fig. 24: *The Little Mermaid* 14:14)

In her next scene, Ursula watches Ariel again through her crystal ball. Then, Ursula's face is revealed for the first time, characterised by heavy make-up resembling that of drag queens, with drawn eyebrows, overused eyeshadows, red lipstick and white powder that renders her face pale. Additionally, she has an elaborate hairstyle and adorns herself with jewellery, such as earrings, rings and a necklace. Her costume is constantly in motion and glittering, covering her entire body except for her cleavage. She mocks Ariel again by saying, "and now she found her soulmate," which ultimately mocks heteronormative love (*The Little Mermaid* 32:12-6). Furthermore, she plans to gain more power, as she says, "finally get to rip the power away from Triton that should've been [hers] all along" (*The Little Mermaid* 32:32-9). Her hopes underline her power and power hungriness, which motivates her to actively participate in Ariel's life, which resonates with normative masculinity.

When she first speaks to Ariel, she is capable of transporting herself to where Ariel is, using her crystal ball. She speaks slowly with a soft voice, "poor child. Poor sweet child. He [King Triton] can be so angry. He thinks he knows everything" (*The Little Mermaid* 49:31-42). This line shows intimate understanding, care and empathy, which are perceived as feminine

traits as empathy is seen as the lack of logic, which is associated with masculinity. This display reinforces the concept of binary gender roles. Thus, Ursula navigates between these two gender roles, embodying both. Nevertheless, this gentleness is a deliberate attempt to manipulate Ariel. This performance supports the concept of performativity. Then, she becomes annoyed by Ariel calling her a “Sea Witch,” which suggests that she is putting on an act, trying to be someone other than her true self, a witch (*The Little Mermaid* 49:52-3). This performativity resonates with drag queens and kings who disguise themselves to portray the opposite gender. Ursula eventually convinces Ariel to follow Flotsam and Jetsam into her cave.

Ursula’s cave is depicted as a perilous place characterised by volcanic eruptions, a gigantic monster-like skeleton, a merfolk skeleton and Ursula’s aggressive garden of creatures with her collection of polyps. The latter attempts to hurt Ariel. Ariel first encounters Ursula when Ursula sits on her shell bed. Ursula’s position when Ariel arrives makes their power dynamics obvious, Ursula taking the upper right corner of the frame while Ariel is restricted to the bottom left corner. The camera angles also emphasise this power dynamic throughout their interaction, displaying Ariel from an upper angle and Ursula from a lower position.



(Fig. 24: *The Little Mermaid* 53:20)

Ursula says, “Daddy’s been so unfair to both of us [Ursula and Ariel], controlling everything we say and do” with theatrical hand gestures and leaning back (*The Little Mermaid* 52:34). Ursula orchestrates Ariel only with her tentacles, while her upper body remains still. These ways of moving are perceived as masculine as well as feminine in classical ballet

choreographies. She then moves closer and closer to Ariel with quick, energetic movements, eventually invading her space, using her tentacles to grab her and hold her head. Additionally, Ursula gives nicknames to Ariel and Prince Eric, similar to the 1989 version. In this version, her tentacles, which were originally six in the 1989 version, and now she has eight, have their mind, and she argues with them.

Ursula floats to her dressing table, which resembles a dressing room in theatres. She watches herself through her mirror, putting on cream and make-up, and grabbing her breasts to rearrange them while she says, “become a human” (*The Little Mermaid* 53:52). This scene is similar to the 1989 version. Both scenes represent the shapeshifting characteristic of the archetypal witch and a backstage of drag performers. Ursula’s musical number, “Poor Unfortunate Souls” starts. She graciously uses her arms, pointing, while she moves throughout the space with her tentacles. During the performance, she is very theatrical and displays exaggerated femininity and masculinity. Notably, she sings, “but [Ariel]’ll find that nowadays / [she]’[s] mended all [her] ways / Repented, seen the light / And made a switch,” highlighting the notion that she made a switch, which can refer to gender-bending and switching from one gender to another (*The Little Mermaid* 54:24). This line is also present in the 1989 adaptation. Ursula uses skulls, grasping them with her hands and tentacles, demonstrating her monstrous characteristic that killed those unfortunate merfolks. She displays strong, energetic arm movements, complemented by power positions, as well as ascending and shimmying her breasts, covering the frame with her enormous body. For example, she shimmies her breast in both adaptations.

Ursula then hugs Ariel tightly and explains their deal. She mocks heteronormative love again when she says, “the kiss of true love,” with her tentacles making the shape of a heart (*The Little Mermaid* 56:00-3). Ursula suddenly grabs Ariel with all her eight tentacles from behind her cauldron, pulling Ariel closer and closer to herself, showing how long and flexible her tentacles are. This act resembled femininity and masculinity, as she displays confidence and control, aligned with masculinity, and flexibility, which correlates with feminine movements in classical ballet. Ursula says, that if Ariel is unable to receive the kiss, then she belongs to her (*The Little Mermaid* 56:14-8). This again demonstrates their power relations, with Ursula maintaining a masculine role in their relationship. Moreover, her voice alternates between soft and strident on multiple occasions. She employs her soft, feminine demeanour to persuade and

manipulate Ariel, thereby gaining her trust.



(Fig. 26: *The Little Mermaid* 56:18)

However, she cannot conceal her true self with a vociferous approach to the matter. When Ariel is not committed to their deal, she becomes angry, which she accentuates with a huge turning of her entire body. This movement is feminine-coded.

When Ursula is angry about not finding the right potions, she uses quick, energetic movements with her hands and tentacles to look for them. She then throws them into her cauldron. Subsequently, she performs turns again, while she continues with her musical number. She induces Flotsam and Jetsam to bring Ariel closer to her with an inviting hand gesture, demonstrating her power to direct all things within her cave. As the final ingredient, Ursula needs a scale and a drop of blood from Ariel. She confides in her servants, “Flotsam, Jetsam / Now I’ve got her boys” (*The Little Mermaid* 57:50-3). This comment is hidden from Ariel, as Ursula still does not want to show her true self to Ariel, playing two roles simultaneously. Ursula controls the potion with only her hands, which makes it turn green, representing corruption and danger. With Ariel’s scale and blood in the potion, she forgets her acting and deceit, so she flexes her arm muscles and shouts at Ariel, demanding her voice. This scene highlights how Ursula uses her feminine side to persuade Ariel. Therefore, femininity is just a performance to her.

A tentacle from the potion reaches out and grabs Ariel’s voice from her throat. This creates a phallic imagery, wherein the tentacle enters the mouth of the little mermaid. This act

is consistent with a drag king wearing a phallus (Escudero-Álías 179). The scene is similar to the previous adaptation. However, this is even more powerful due to Ursula's ability to penetrate Ariel's body. Ultimately, Ursula acquires her voice, resulting in her abandoning any acting. As a result, she laughs while the cave explodes with volcanic activity. She then mocks Ariel again, stating, "look at her stupid little feet!" (*The Little Mermaid* 59:07-10). With this, Ursula's musical number concludes. There is a notable difference between this and the 1989 adaptations. The part of the 1989 version where Ursula sings about body language was eliminated. The writers were aware of the criticism that Disney had received regarding *The Little Mermaid* (1989), for its sexist content, hence they modified that content, according to Kailash Koushik and Abigail Reed (132). The Walt Disney Company's aim to cater to its audience is continuously prevalent. For example, Disney altered Princess Tiana's colour after audiences critiqued her light skin in the trailer of *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). Recently, Disney has changed its live-action depiction of the dwarfs in *Snow White* (2025) due to audience criticism.

Ursula persists in watching Ariel, ridiculing her inability to speak and further mocking her. She affectionately pats her servants, revealing her feminine side. Subsequently, she resides in her shell bed and awaits her retribution against King Triton, possessing her daughter, Ariel. From her bed, she can prevent Ariel from having the true love's kiss with the help of Flotsam and Jetsam. Nonetheless, she becomes agitated as it appears that Ariel will get out of her hands. Therefore, Ursula aggressively pushes the crystal ball off her table out of anger, demonstrating her masculine side. When it seems like she will not get what she wants, she screams in desperation. She wants to see King Triton suffer, as she says, "[she]'ll see him wriggle like a worm on a hook" (*The Little Mermaid* 1:30:12-6).

As a final result, Ursula transforms into Vanessa and bewitches the prince. As Vanessa, she is petite and beautiful, resembling the 1989 version. Vanessa fully controls Prince Eric, as she grabs his arm and speaks instead of him, "it's what we [Vanessa and Eric] both want" (*The Little Mermaid* 1:39:06-8). This shows her authoritativeness even over Prince Eric, who is seduced and manipulated into a marriage. Vanessa and Eric's power dynamics are inverted from conventional gender roles, as Vanessa exhibits masculinity while Eric is constrained to femininity. Masculinity sustains men's dominance over women, observes Elroi J. Windsor (894). She seeks victims, and her abilities enable her to overpower Eric. This gender socialisation determines gender inequality, which can be seen in their relationship (Windsor 893). This power dynamic is traditionally associated with a husband and wife, wherein the wife

is simply a puppet under the control of the husband. These roles are completely reversed in their relationship, demonstrating the possibility of fluid gender roles.

In the next scene, Vanessa is seen in her room putting on the necklace with Ariel's voice in it. She depicts femininity with graceful movements, touching her face and body with gentle hand gestures. She breaks things in her room, showing her aggressive nature, which is associated with masculinity. She then stretches on her sofa with feminine-coded movements, while her voice changes back to Ursula's voice. Subsequently, she watches herself in the mirror, which shows her as Ursula. This duality reflects her two sides, her femininity and masculinity. During the wedding ceremony, she is attacked by animals, which she responds to with aggressive arm movements. Vanessa wrestles with Ariel, showing her true aggressive nature. Ariel asserts that Ursula has "bewitched [Eric]," while Vanessa shouts at her in a low and demanding tone (*The Little Mermaid* 1:45:59). Vanessa laughs at Ariel when she turns back into a mermaid. Vanessa transforms back into Ursula, amidst purple mist, and knocks people down with her tentacles. Ursula reaches Ariel with the help of her strong, muscular arms, knocking Eric out of the way.



(Fig. 27: *The Little Mermaid* 1:46:43)

Ursula eventually grabs Ariel and dives into the sea with her. Ursula drags Ariel towards her cave in the water until they are halted by King Triton. When Ursula swims next to Triton, she is taller and larger, establishing their power relations by moving behind him while conversing with him. She then orders her servants to stop Ariel from escaping with electric shocks, which

make her suffer. She then obtains Triton's trident, while Flotsam and Jetsam attack King Triton with electric shocks. It appears that they have killed Triton, hence Ursula puts on his crown. When Ariel attempts to reach her, she effortlessly hits Ariel with a tentacle.

Ursula then approaches Ariel, forcing her to back away and lean on a rock, demonstrating that Ursula invades Ariel's space literally and metaphorically. This position is often used when depicting a heteronormative relationship. Ursula is a masculinised power figure, whereas Ariel is an oppressed female. Ursula is attacked with an arrow thrown by Prince Eric, prompting her to direct her servants to retrieve Eric, which they accomplish. However, when Ursula tries to hit Eric with power from the trident, Ariel hits her so that the power is directed towards Flotsam and Jetsam and destroys them. Ursula screams, "my babies" (*The Little Mermaid* 1:50:00-1). This line shows her emotions towards her servants, which align with maternal feelings, a characteristic of the archetypal witch. As a result, she becomes extremely mad. Hence, she transforms into an enormous monster. Her voice changes into a deeper voice due to her size, and her facial expression remains angry with her eyebrows crossed. She laughs and says, "now [she] rules the seas and all will be helpless under [her] power!," while she strikes a power position (*The Little Mermaid* 1:51:17-25). She attempts to hit Ariel and Eric with her tentacles, looking down at them. This positioning maintains their power relations. She then produces a whirlpool with the help of her trident. Lastly, she is destroyed by a ship that is driven by Ariel into her immense body. This scene differs from the 1989 version, as Prince Eric kills Ursula in that film. This change represents a positive change towards feminist ideas, as Ariel can defend herself and others. However, this change is only true to the protagonist, and no change is made to the end scene regarding the antagonist.

To summarise, Ursula's portrayal in the Walt Disney Company's live-action remake is remarkably similar to that of the 1989 version. The only differences are Ursula's appearance as a real-life-like monster with the aid of lighting and visual effects, her familial relationship with Ariel, the omitted part of "Poor Unfortunate Souls" about body language and the ending scene in which Ariel destroys Ursula. This lack of change does not correspond to shifting social norms. However, the portrayal of the protagonist mirrors those evolving gender norms. The depiction of Ariel coincides with Disney's increasing tendency to repackaging the fundamental principles of social movements in a manner more conducive to their global market interests (Koushik and Reed 122-3). Nevertheless, the antagonist remains unchanged, depicted as a queer-coded character who embodies femininity and masculinity. Ursula's characteristics are villainised, as she disrupts the protagonist's quest and needs to be destroyed at the end.

4.6 “Disneyfied” Femme Fatale in The Asylum’s *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

The seventh and most recent, as of 2024, anglophone on-screen adaptation is an American animated film, *The Little Mermaid*, released in 2023. Directed by Michael Johnson and produced by David Michael Latt, this adaptation bears a resemblance to the Walt Disney Company’s 1989 *The Little Mermaid*. The studio behind this film, The Asylum, is known for producing “mockbuster” films, low-budget films designed to capitalise on the popularity of blockbuster hits by mirroring their content and releasing them simultaneously. This particular animation was strategically released in the same month as Disney’s live-action *The Little Mermaid*. This marketing strategy echoes the 1992 version to profit from Disney’s established popularity. The ongoing conversation between these adaptations highlights the enduring influence of Disney’s versions on subsequent productions. A notable feature of this adaptation is the casting of Dee Wallace as the voice of the sea witch. Wallace is recognised as a “scream queen,” for her roles in several prominent horror films, such as *Cujo*, *Halloween* and *The House of Devil*. This choice reinforces the sea witch’s connection to the femme fatale archetype, a common trope in horror films, hence linking the character to themes of gender ambiguity.

In this version, the little mermaid, Sereia, is introduced to the sea witch, Revina’s power by her sisters, a narrative element that resembles previous adaptations. They tell her that their grandmother “was studying to become a sea witch” with Revina (*The Little Mermaid* 13:49-50). Following this revelation, Sereia seeks answers from her grandmother, much like in the original fairy tale. Her grandmother provides the backstory for Revina, explaining, “the only way for a mermaid to become human is through dark magic. That’s why your grandfather and I banned Revina, set up the whirlpool forest and stopped her from ever entering the kingdom again” (*The Little Mermaid* 17:14-28). This dialogue suggests that witchcraft and dark magic are learnt skills, which means Revina’s powers are not necessarily innate. This concept resonates with multiple of the previous adaptations. Interestingly, the story uses the terms witchcraft and dark magic interchangeably, highlighting that in this fantastic world, they are perceived as the same. When the sea king, King Jasper, overhears Revina’s name, he enters the room and declares her dangerous. Hence, even someone as powerful as King Jasper fears her. Sereia even states, “Revina is the only one who can make me human,” which indicates that these powers are exclusively Revina’s (*The Little Mermaid* 19:49-52). The sea witch’s forbidden knowledge and authority reflect the archetypal witch’s role, where power lies in the hands of those who challenge the patriarchy.



(Fig. 28: The Little Mermaid 21:36)

Sereia decides to visit Revina to ask her to turn her into a human. Revina, who was banished by Sereia's grandparents, lives deep in the ocean, surrounded by hostile whirlpools. Her lair is eerie, except for the creatures in her garden that resemble seaweed. These creatures grab Sereia's turtle friend, Seldon, just before Sereia and he enters Revina's home. In this adaptation, the sea witch appears as a regular mermaid, though with distinctive features. Revina has wavy blue hair, heterochromatic eyes, one dark, one light and wears a head accessory. Her black clothes cover most of her upper body, except for her hands, which bear glowing red marks of magic. These red marks on her hands contrast with the blue marks that other mermaids have. She also has large black nails and a red tail. She speaks with a low, crisp voice. First, Revina talks about her dangerous potions, which grant her abilities like shooting lightning from her hands. She reveals that she has "been expecting [Sereia]," hinting at her all-knowing nature, which she attributes to being a witch (*The Little Mermaid* 22:02-4). This revelation explicitly connects Revina to the archetypal witch. Revina also demonstrates her abilities by appearing and disappearing quickly, one moment standing by her bookcase and then suddenly occupying Sereia's space. At one point, Revina is even seen in both places simultaneously, floating in front of the bookcase in the background while talking to Sereia in the foreground. Additionally, Revina has a menacing laugh and moves quickly, using hand gestures to highlight her words. Her fierce demeanour is matched by the danger of her potion, which must be consumed at a precise moment and is irreversible, heightening the risk involved.

Revina explains the rules of the potion to Sereia, sarcastically commenting on her curiosity about the world above the sea. Her sarcastic and mocking attitude, which can be associated with drag practices, is evident throughout the exchange. Revina claims that love makes the potion effective, and mentions Prince Lucas as Sereia's motivation for wanting to

become a human. However, Sereia angrily replies, “that’s not the only reason” (*The Little Mermaid* 24:23-5). This response is a departure from other adaptations where she is more dependent. Revina then remarks, “I don’t make the rules” (24:28-30). This also marks that she is not the ultimate authority but merely follows the rules of this magic. She maintains a mocking, exaggerated attitude while inspecting her nails as she insists that she is only trying to help. Revina needs Sereia’s voice in exchange for the potion. With quick, energetic movements, Revina prepares the potion, which is green and even features a hidden Mickey, which is a commonly used “Easter egg” in the Walt Disney Company’s productions. She then uses hand gestures to transfer the potion into a phial. When Sereia reaches for it, Revina quickly pulls it away, showing her control over the situation. She also has a crystal ball that allows her to see events as they unfold. All in all, despite the many similarities with Disney’s version, the sea witch’s power is diminished in this adaptation, making her queering character less villainous.

When King Jasper and his mother visit Revina, they first knock on her door, but when there’s no response, King Jasper forcefully knocks it down. This mirrors traditional depictions of masculine power. However, Revina confidently declares that he “[has] no power here” (*The Little Mermaid* 52:44-6). She further explains that nothing can reverse the spell on Sereia. She could even be punished, but that would not change the outcome of the spell. Revina enjoys this aspect of her power since she laughs at the helpless passivity of King Jasper and his mother. Later, when Sereia’s three sisters visit the sea witch, she again appears out of thin air, scaring the sisters. Revina offers them another trade: the sisters must give up their beautiful hair in exchange for Revina’s help. In the end, Revina reveals that she is bald, blaming the sisters’ grandmother for her condition, as one of her spells had gone wrong in the past (once a mermaid cuts her hair, it never grows back). The sea witch’s baldness reflects the archetypal witch as completely shaved, as they were believed to hide the devil in their hair otherwise.

In the end, Revina gets her hair back with the help of dark magic. Similar to the original fairy tale, the sea witch also wants the little mermaid to steal the voice of the prince and his bride. When the sisters agree to the trade, Revina declares, “those princesses are as good as mine” (*The Little Mermaid* 1:16:47-51). With her new long, dark hair, Revina gains the ability to shapeshift into a huge monster. This transformation is the outcome of Sereia and the sisters not adhering to the trade’s principles, which now binds them to Revina. The witch can even stop time during the fight with Sereia. She creates a massive whirlpool that destroys everything in its path and uses hand gestures to control the prince and his bride, making them levitate while she takes their voice. She traps Sereia in a whirlpool that drags her deep into the ocean, which prevents Sereia from interfering in Revina’s business. Revina can effortlessly destroy

the soldiers of the kingdom, boasting “[they] cannot stop the power of the sea witch” (*The Little Mermaid* 1:23:20-4). She then transforms the sisters into creatures of her garden with lightning-like energy from her fingers. Finally, when King Jasper and his mother discover what has happened, they confront Revina. Only through magic are they able to defeat the sea witch, ultimately destroying her and trapping her in a phial. In the last scene, Revina’s voice shifts into a deep tone that could be mistaken for a male’s. Revina’s end correlates with the figure of the femme fatale.

In conclusion, this adaptation represents the sea witch similar to all adaptations before it, not creating any new attributes of her. The main purpose of creating this film was to cash in on Disney’s new live-action film, hence it is obvious that they took inspiration from Disney’s 1989 animation. Revina has attributes that conform to femininity and masculinity, echoing archetypal witches. Most of Revina’s characteristics mirror Ursula’s from the animated film, as she interferes multiple times and must be destroyed at the end. This results in the vilifying of the sea witch, who represents queer features. This is a problematic depiction, especially in 2023. I will further discuss these findings in the subsequent conclusion.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I will draw conclusions from the seven portrayals of the sea witches, reflecting on the changing social norms in Western popular culture through seventy-one years from the first adaptation in 1952 to the latest versions in 2023. The centre of the analysis was the characters' markedly queer representations. Therefore, the previous chapters consisted of accounting for the physical attributes and behaviour traits of sea witches, such as gestures and movements across these adaptations. This examination was supported by an exploration of settings, lighting, editing, camera angles and music in each version of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." Ultimately, the findings reveal that these sea witches challenge conventional gender boundaries by blending expressions of femininity and masculinity. This chapter will first focus on the adaptations' changing depictions of the sea witches, then, the parallels of these with social norms. Finally, I will examine the images of these sea witches as villains in opposition to the protagonists and how these representations illustrate queerness as a defining attribute of the antagonists.

In the 1952 adaptation of "The Little Mermaid," the sea witches are portrayed as less villainous since they aid the protagonist in her quest. This rather positive characteristic diverges notably from traditional depictions of witches in Western popular culture. In a typical portrayal, the witch's queerness is linked to villainy. However, this adaptation differs from and challenges this conventional association. The scene of "The Little Mermaid" is presented as a classical ballet, where the little mermaid embodies traditional feminine traits while the sea witches are depicted with genderless characteristics. The feminine aspect associated with the sea witches is their name, briefly mentioned in a written summary in the beginning of the scene. This summary refers to them as "the terrible witches of the sea." Despite this, their overall representation is less aligned with the otherwise more nuanced portrayal of witches, which can be found in the subsequent adaptations. The portrayals of the sea witches suggest that the villainisation of queerness is not prominently present in this adaptation.

In the 1966 adaptation, the sea witch distinctly exhibits feminine and masculine traits. When this sea witch moves, she is portrayed with masculine characteristics through the lens of ballet choreographic conventions. On the other hand, her physical features, femme fatale characteristics and connection to nature represent traditional feminine traits. These traits are also highlighted by her connection to the archetypal witch, who is perceived as the "Other." Queer-coded behaviours and manners mark this stop-motion animated sea witch's portrayal, especially, since she is voiced by a camp icon, Tallulah Bankhead. Her ambiguity blurs the

lines of what it means to be feminine and masculine in Western society. Notably, the sea witch helps the little mermaid. Hence, the overall portrayal of the sea witch links her gender-ambiguous quality to a helping hand for the protagonist, which depicts queerness in a positive light.

In the 1989 adaptation, the sea witch embodies drag practices, showcasing a queer-coded performance throughout the narrative. Most notably, the animated Ursula is stylised within camp as she puts on a drag show during “Poor Unfortunate Souls.” These elements, combined with her villainous and deconstructive nature, contribute to a depiction of queerness as demonic and threatening. She is the “monstrous other” (Davis 215). This portrayal is significantly problematic even though it predated the 1990s, a period when drag and queerness were becoming mainstream, popular and normalised. Nonetheless, this characterisation aligns with the recurring pattern in the Walt Disney Company’s films, where villains are commonly depicted as queer characters. The ending of this adaptation further reinforces the negative portrayal, as the sea witch is killed, which refers to the *femme fatale* trope.

In the 1992 adaptation, the overall characteristics and the role of the sea witch closely mirror those of the sea witch in the second adaptation. Cassandra embodies traits commonly associated with the archetypal witch. Also, she simultaneously represents femininity and masculinity, making her a queer-coded, gender-ambiguous character in opposition to the feminine protagonists. Unlike the previous adaptation, this animated witch helps the little mermaid and then does not interfere. In the end, she is not killed and instead depicted in a positive light. This depiction does not entirely villainise the witch’s queer character. This portrayal aligns with the shifting social norms around heteronormativity and gender fluidity, which suggest a progressive and inclusive cultural change.

In the 1998 animated film adaptation, the Sea Witch evidently embodies drag practices, such as possessing a parodic phallus-like tail and putting on a wig and looking in the mirror. She combines femininity with masculinity. The Sea Witch’s graceful and fluid movements align with feminine movements in classical ballet. On the other hand, she uses quick and strong movements when speaking, which reflects masculinity. This mirrors the ambiguity of the sea witches across the adaptations. Notably, she assists not only the little mermaid but also her sisters. This benevolent nature portrays her in a positive light. In the end, she is not killed, as she does not interfere. As a result, her overall image reflects the growing popularity of drag during the 1990s.

In the Walt Disney Company’s 2023 live-action film adaptation, the portrayal of the sea witch is almost identical to the third adaptation, as it is a live-action remake. However, its

problematic depiction of the villainised queer character is not justified by changing social norms. The corporate image of Disney is significantly influenced by the pursuit of profit-oriented objectives. Since Ursula's figure is extremely popular among audiences, the changes the creators have made regarding this character are minimal. In the end, Vanessa, Ursula's alter ego, is in a relationship with Prince Eric, albeit their gender roles are completely reversed, demonstrating their fluidity. In contrast to the 1989 version, Ariel kills Ursula. This act does not change the overall depiction of the sea witch, but it still sheds light on feminine power and feminist discourses. The depiction of the sea witch demonstrates that Disney stigmatises characters who are explicitly queer, notes Cassandra Primo (149).

In The Asylum's 2023 adaptation, the sea witch has feminine and masculine attributes, which makes her character gender-ambiguous. Revina also aligns with the archetypal witch's depiction, with her forbidden witchcraft and baldness. Moreover, her character bears significant resemblances to the 1989 version, as it purposefully exploited Disney's established popularity to generate profit. However, Revina's power is reduced, in contrast to Ursula's, making her queer character less villainous. Ultimately, it presents a villainised queer character who persistently interferes with the protagonist's quest and must be eradicated at the conclusion of the narrative, referencing the femme fatale trope.

Overall, there are correlations that can be drawn between the representations of the sea witches and social norms. The first depiction represents sea witches who are not gendered. However, the "The Little Mermaid" segment is only a small part of the film. Therefore, the figures of the sea witches do not play an important role in the overall narrative, rendering them as side characters. This portrayal challenges the representation of gender norms in Western popular culture during the 1950s. The second portrayal of the sea witch highlights queerness as a characteristic of the villain, yet she lends her assistance to the little mermaid, resulting in a positive perspective. This representation reflects the changing attitudes towards queer people during the 1960s, when the gay rights movement started. Nevertheless, in the first two adaptations, "The Little Mermaid" sequences constitute only fragments of the entire films, which diminish the prominence of the sea witches' characters. In the third adaptation, it is evident that the sea witch was inspired by a drag queen. The overall portrayal of Ursula villainises her queer-coded character. This representation supports the portrayal of villains by the Walt Disney Company from 1937 until 2014. Its release coincides with the popularisation of drag performances and the increasing acceptance of queer people. Due to its release, it fails to yet reflect the subsequent social norms changes. Also, Disney is renowned for its family-

oriented entertainment, and feminist and LGBTQ+ ideals have been coming slowly into the screen (Davis 167).

The fourth and fifth adaptations both came out during the 1990s, when these norms were shifting towards acceptance and positive depictions of queer characters. Both films align with these changing attitudes, showcasing queer-coded characters in a positive light. However, the most recent adaptations from 2023 do not reflect today's acceptance of queerness. Their lack of adherence can be explained by their purpose. The live-action remake of Disney was designed to cater to its existing audience, whereas *The Asylum's* animated film was made to capitalise on Disney's success. Therefore, there were no significant changes in the depiction of the sea witches' characters. Ultimately, these two adaptations are problematic when viewed through today's lens, as they are not in line with social developments regarding the role of queer people. However, in Western popular culture generally, these types of villains have been slowly disappearing. This is due to the damaging representations of queerness being "openly criticized for perpetuating negative, even dangerous narratives about sexual non-normativity and gender nonconformity" (Díaz-Faes 23).

When analysing the sea witches in the adaptations, there is a recurring theme, which is villainising queerness. It is present in all adaptations, though in different measures. This correlation holds particular importance in their interactions with the protagonists. The protagonists embody the evolving social norms regarding women. The little mermaids of 2023 are more powerful than their predecessors. This is due to their gendered characteristics, as well as their active participation. These representations of female characters fit into the modern age, while their counterparts, the sea witches, lack this development. This demonstrates that gender portrayals of villains are not in accordance with social developments in gender equity. In the first and second adaptations, the sea witches help the little mermaids, but they receive nothing in return. These acts show them in a positive light. Meanwhile, the third adaptation's sea witch is vicious and tries to acquire as much power as possible. Hence, she must be killed in the end so that the protagonist can achieve her goal. This destructive attitude showcases the sea witch as a demonised character. In the fourth and fifth adaptations, the sea witches demand prices for their services, but they do not interfere later in the narratives. Thus, these sea witches are placed in a more positive light. Lastly, the sixth and seventh adaptations portray the sea witches almost identically to the third adaptation, resulting in a demonised depiction. All in all, both of the Walt Disney Company's adaptations and *The Asylum's* version's portray their sea witches as villainised queer characters as the primary antagonists, whereas the other adaptations depict their sea witches as neutral enablers in a limited part of the narrative.

In conclusion, this master's thesis explores the portrayal of the sea witches in the seven anglophone on-screen adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," and contends that the characters challenge conventional gender boundaries. Their characteristics reflect femininity and masculinity, leading to gender non-conformity. This thesis examined the physical attributes and behavioural traits of sea witches, such as gestures and movements, and considered their broader cultural and historical contexts. These findings demonstrate how the development of the character articulates the prevalent attitudes towards the ideas of gender studies and queer theory across different periods. Specifically, there was a shift towards positive representations of queer characters during the 1990s, but in recent years they have returned to villainising queer characters. These representations are especially important as the analysed adaptations are intended for young children. Thus, these retellings of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" have been instrumental in promoting gender fluidity among children in various ways. However, the Walt Disney Company has an immense influence on society due to its popularity. Hence, their representation of the sea witch is exponentially imperative. As a result, when we consider the sea witch, we associate her with Ursula, whose queerness is villainised. This is a negative portrayal that can lead to discrimination, bullying and violence. This is the reason why, Disney is reevaluating its formula and making an effort to promote more inclusivity. Subsequently, it is possible to de-villainise queer characters and portray more nuanced and less stereotypical characters, which can lead to equality and inclusivity on screen and in society.

Word count: 30,640

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7. Appendix: Abstract

English Abstract

In exploring the portrayal of the sea witch in various anglophone on-screen adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," this master's thesis contends that the character's development challenges conventional gender boundaries, offering an examination of femininity and masculinity. By analysing the physical attributes and behaviour traits of sea witches, such as gestures and movements, as well as considering their broader cultural and historical contexts, this study aims to discover how the development of the character articulates the prevailing attitudes toward the ideas of gender studies and queer theory during different periods. My study seeks to examine how representations of the sea witch, especially through movement, have served to challenge and blur character traits traditionally associated with femininity and masculinity at their respective time. Secondly, the study investigates how these depictions articulate or contest established theories within the gender studies and queer theory. Lastly, this thesis sheds light on changing attitudes and perspectives surrounding gender norms. The thesis follows a qualitative approach, when exploring the sea witches' characteristics and movements. It will include close viewing as well as historical and cultural context analysis, as these contribute to investigating the impact of cultural changes on the character and its articulation of evolving gender norms. Data has been collected from all seven on-screen adaptations of "The Little Mermaid": *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952), *The Daydreamer* (1966), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Little Mermaid* (1992), *The Little Mermaid* (1998), the Walt Disney Company's *The Little Mermaid* (2023) and The Asylum's *The Little Mermaid* (2023).

German Abstract

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Darstellung der Meerhexe in verschiedenen anglophonen Verfilmungen von Hans Christian Andersens „Die kleine Meerjungfrau“ und stellt die These auf, dass die Entwicklung der Figur konventionelle Geschlechtergrenzen in Frage stellt, und legt dadurch eine Untersuchung von Weiblichkeit und Männlichkeit nahe. Ziel der Arbeit ist es, durch die Analyse der körperlichen Attribute und Verhaltensweisen von Meerhexen, wie z. B. Gesten und Bewegungen, sowie durch die Betrachtung ihres breiteren kulturellen und historischen Kontexts, herauszufinden, wie die Entwicklung der Figur die vorherrschenden Einstellungen und Ideen von Gender Studies und Queer Theory in verschiedenen Epochen zum Ausdruck bringt. In meiner Studie wird untersucht, wie Darstellungen der Meerhexe, insbesondere durch deren Bewegungen, dazu dienen, Charaktereigenschaften, die zu ihrer jeweiligen Zeit traditionell mit Weiblichkeit und Männlichkeit assoziiert wurden, in Frage zu stellen und verschwimmen zu lassen. Darüber hinaus untersucht die Studie, wie diese Darstellungen etablierte Theorien innerhalb der Gender Studies und Queer Theory bestätigen oder in Frage stellen. Schließlich beleuchtet diese Arbeit die sich wandelnden Einstellungen und Perspektiven in Bezug auf Geschlechternormen. In dieser Masterarbeit kommen eine qualitativer an Methoden zur Anwendung, bei der Erforschung der Merkmale und Bewegungen der Meerhexen kombiniert werden. Sie umfassen sowohl eine genaue Betrachtung als auch eine Analyse des historischen und kulturellen Kontexts, da diese dazu beitragen, die Auswirkungen kultureller Veränderungen auf die Figur und ihre Artikulation der sich entwickelnden Geschlechternormen zu untersuchen. Es wurden Daten aus allen sieben Verfilmungen von „The Little Mermaid“ gesammelt: *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952), *The Daydreamer* (1966), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Little Mermaid* (1992), *The Little Mermaid* (1998), *The Little Mermaid* (2023) der Walt Disney Company und eine weitere *The Little Mermaid* (2023) von The Asylum.