

Nobody puts Ursula in a corner - except Triton, and he should feel bad about it: A comparative speech analysis of Ursula between the movies 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989 and 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Mieleenpainuvat fiktiiviset hahmot ovat menestyneiden tarinoiden keskiössä. Päähenkilöt ovat katsojien keskuudessa yleensä suosituimpia, kun taas pahishahmot korostavat päähenkilöiden vahvuuksia omilla heikkouksillaan ja moraalittomuudellaan. Pahikset rikkovat usein sääntöjä, käyttäytyvät huonosti ja toimivat vastoin odotuksia luoden draamaa ja kaaosta elokuvaan. Pahikset ovat usein kuitenkin pidettyjä sen takia, että he poikkeavat muista hahmoista.</p> <p>Disney on tehnyt tunnetuksi useita naispahiksia, ja tämän tutkimuksen kohteena on elokuvan <i>Pieni merenneito</i> naispahis Ursula. Feministinen tutkimus on jo pitkään ollut kiinnostunut Disneyn naishahmokuvauksista ja siitä, millaisia viestejä ne välittävät sukupuolesta. Disneyn naispahiksia yhdistää seuraavat ominaisuudet: iäkkyys, epätavallinen ulkonäkö ja ilkeä luonne. Disneyn prinsessaelokuvissa nämä ominaisuudet on valjastettu kuvaamaan epäviehättävää tai vähäpätöisempää naiseutta, kun taas prinsessahahmot kuvastavat yhteiskunnan ihanteita naisille. Tutkimukset osoittavat, että Disneyn tapa kuvata naishahmoja heijastelee yhteiskunnan stereotypioita naiseudesta ja mieheydestä, feminiinisestä ja maskuliinisesta, minkä takia elokuvat ovat myös arvokkaita tutkimuksen kohteita.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus keskittyy analysoimaan Ursulan puhetta <i>Pieni merenneito</i> elokuvissa, joista toinen on vuoden 1989 animaatioversio ja toinen vuoden 2023 live-action versio. Hahmon rakentumista tarkasteltiin Blumin (1995) hahmonluontimallissa esitettyjen kysymysten kautta, ja analysoinnissa käytettiin sekä kriittistä diskurssintutkimusta että sosiaalisen konstruktionismin teoriaa sukupuolen viitekehyksessä. Tutkimuksesta selviää, että sukupuolen stereotypioita käytetään keinona rakentaa naispahishahmoa. Hahmojen välisissä valta-asetelmissä heijastuu yhteiskunnan taipumus asettaa miehet valta-asemaan ja naiset vähäpätöisempään asemaan. Uudessa live-action versiossa Ursulalle on luotu syvällisempi taustatarina perheenjäsenenä, minkä voi nähdä kehityksenä Disneyn kerronnassa. Uudesta live-action versiosta on myös poistettu kokonainen säe Ursulan laulusta ‘Poor Unfortunate Souls’, jonka sisältö liittyy naisten vaientamiseen, ja sen pois jättäminen osoittaa valvutuneisuutta Disneyltä.</p> <p>Kattavampi tutkimus voisi tarkastella Disneyn live-action versioiden naispahishahmoja rinnakkain, jotta Disneyn hahmokerronnan kehityksestä voisi tehdä tarkempia johtopäätöksiä. Disneyn elokuvien tutkimista tulisi jatkaa, koska ne tarjoavat arvokasta tietoa nykypäivän asenteista ja käsityksestä sekä sukupuolta että ihmisyyttä kohtaan.</p>	
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1 Introduction

Memorable fictional characters are at the heart of successful stories. Each character has their part in conveying meanings and in influencing the course of the story: the main characters are at the center of action, and other supporting roles influence the progression of the storyline. Commonly, the main characters are the ones most appealing to the audience, counterbalanced by the antagonists who emphasize the main character's strengths with their own weaknesses and immoral behavior. Villain characters often break rules, misbehave, and act contrary to expectations, thus, creating drama and chaos. However, villain characters are not necessarily perceived as unpleasant by the audience, but rather they are appreciated as a beloved part of the story due to their eccentric personality or other redeeming qualities. Therefore, analysing the antagonistic character type provides knowledge on the characteristics that are perceived as villainous in fiction and, more broadly, what traits are seen as unconventional in society.

Disney has featured several female villains in their princess movies, including Maleficent from 'Sleeping Beauty', Evil Queen from 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves', and Lady Tremaine from 'Cinderella'. They are portrayed alongside a virtuous female lead, and their essential role is to illustrate evil alongside goodness. The common denominator of Disney's female villains is mature age, unusual looks, and a scheming nature. Female villains are often the only manifestation of evil shown in the films, creating a juxtaposition between them and other characters. Feminist research has long been interested in Disney's female character descriptions and how they construct reality about gender. The significance of Disney's character descriptions has been studied in relation to both the development of children's gender views (Coyne et al., 2016) and their impact on maintaining certain ideas on femininity and masculinity on a societal level (England et al., 2011). Disney's formulaic representation of gender has spawned studies that report on the creation of stereotypes, the cultivation of unrealistic beauty ideals, and the lack of diversity in gender portrayal (Schuchter, 2019; Shawcroft et al., 2022; Towbin et al., 2003; Wellman, 2020; Wohlwend, 2009). While princess characters reflect society's ideals for women, female villains depict unattractive or inferior femininity.

The present study examines Disney's two different movie versions of 'The Little Mermaid' and focuses on the character of sea witch Ursula. The studied films are the animated version of 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989 and the similarly titled live-action version from 2023. These movies were chosen for the study because they allow for a timely comparison between the old and the new, thus, providing information on the current state of Disney's female character depictions. The study focuses on analysing Ursula, the movies' female villain character, from a linguistic perspective. Focus is drawn on Ursula's speech, which is analysed to understand the conventions of creating a female villain character. As other studies on Disney's female villain characters have highlighted their problematic appearance (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2009; Schuchter, 2019), this study focuses solely on verbal elements, consequently, filling a research gap. The objective of the study is to bring forward explicit and implicit gender related messages that Ursula's speech conveys. Also, the study will discuss whether a development has taken place in Disney's productions in the portrayal of female characters. The method of analysis is critical discourse analysis, and the study aims to broaden knowledge in the realm of feminist research.

2 Background

2.1 Disney movies and their potential influence

Disney Studio was created in the early twentieth century (Hobbs, 2022, p. 1). The first animated princess movie 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' was released in the 1930's, and it gained immediate popularity and praise (Wills, 2017, p. 1). Since then, Disney has released an abundance of beloved movies, such as 'Cinderella', 'The Little Mermaid', 'Aladdin', 'The Lion King', and 'Frozen'. Disney has grown into an intergenerational phenomenon that unites adults and children time after time (Hobbs, 2022, p. 73). Disney's most characteristic productions have long been feature-length animated movies and the target audience families and children. Although the company has expanded further in recent years, and the target audience and genre of productions vary widely, princesses and other classics continue to fascinate the viewers. In fact, Disney has invested especially in marketing the princess characters and princess related products for young girls (Wills, 2017, p. 124), which

is probably the reason for the popularity of Disney animated movies as a subject of feminist research. The Walt Disney Company, as it is known today, is among the most prosperous companies in the world (Guttman, 2023) which is why its productions and character representations should be viewed critically.

Some researchers have raised worries about the gendered patterns of portraying characters in Disney movies and the effects that they might have on children. The content children consume on television has been found to correlate with the formation of gender stereotypical views (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996, as cited in Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1909). In the study conducted by Coyne et al. (2016, p. 1921) they found that female characters create more stereotypes of women, for both female and male children, than male characters do of men. In Disney princess movies, the relationship between a female and a male character is often a relationship between the submissive and the dominant (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 65). For instance, Cinderella is being pursued by a famous and eligible prince, the active character, while she is portrayed subservient in domestic conditions, albeit forced by circumstances, thus, being the passive character of the story. Similar arrangements occur in 'The Little Mermaid' in which a powerful woman is subjected to the power of an even stronger man, as the relationship of the sea witch Ursula and Ariel's father Triton demonstrates. This type of relationship pattern arises from hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, meaning a social tendency to place women in passive roles and men in positions of power (Hilton, 1996, p. 35, as cited in Wohlwend, 2009, p. 65). As Disney's princess characters can be viewed as potential role models for children, especially young girls, the ideals that they convey need to be assessed critically.

2.2 Studying Disney films from a feminist perspective

To understand some of the general issues raised in feminist research, a few terms are necessary to define. First, gender is a socially constructed phenomenon that encompasses general beliefs about masculinity and femininity and that is practiced daily in relation to societal norms (Holmes, 2008, pp. 2, 134). Second, socialization is the process by which beliefs and understanding of the existence of two opposite genders are maintained (Holmes, 2008, p. 3). Socialization correlates with institutionalized speech because schools and

workplaces are common spheres where people are categorized by gender (Holmes, 2008, p. 3). Also, as Disney has established its place as one of the most influential entertainment companies, it is reasonable to observe Disney movies as distributors of gender socialization. Finally, patriarchy is the result of unequally divided possibilities and power between male and female, and it is rooted on persistent ideas of masculine superiority (Holmes, 2008, p. 3), which is discussed in the study in relation to the analysed movies.

Gender inequality and presentations of gendered behavior are evident in Disney's productions. In the study conducted by Shawcroft et al. (2022, p. 361) they found that most Disney animated movies have been directed by a man or in assistance with men. Another result of the same study (Shawcroft et al., 2022, p. 359) was that the movies have significantly more male than female characters. With regard to Disney princess movies, there are underlying messages on gender-related behavior, such as princesses' passivity due to their lesser position of power and princes' control over their emotions by not showing weakness (England et al., 2011, p. 563). According to Towbin et al.'s (2003, p. 30) study of Disney feature length movies, the characteristics that are emphasized and valued in female characters are beauty, dependency, and a desire for marriage and family life. However, male characters are found to be portrayed as independent and competent decision makers who are not afraid to use their power, even in situations involving risks (Matti & Lisosky, 1999). Consequently, the movies construct an interplay between weakness and strength: female characters struggle to appear strong due to being constantly portrayed alongside a male character who possesses more obvious manifestations of strength, such as physicality and high standing in the community. Such storytelling does not support diverse depictions of gender, and it reinforces unequal perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Disney's approach on portraying otherness is debatable. In this context, otherness refers to a woman who deviates from Western patriarchal conception of women (Harris, 2003, p. 168). Lacroix (2004) points out that some of Disney's female characters are sexualized because of their cultural background. Compared to Disney's portrayal of White princess characters who are depicted more conservatively, exoticism and physicality are emphasized with non-Western characters, such as Jasmine in 'Aladdin' from 1992 and Pocahontas in 'Pocahontas' from 1995 (Lacroix, 2004, p. 222). In addition to sexualization, some Disney movies ridicule female characters representing divergent womanhood. An example would be Ursula in 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989: her character is overfeminized to the point that the character

becomes excluded from the traditional conception of a woman, thus developing into the “other” woman (Bell, 1995; Sells, 1995; as cited in Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2009, p. 95). However, whilst Jasmine’s and Pocahontas’ otherness is perceived as mysterious and alluring, which is shown in depictions of their good nature and attractiveness, Ursula’s otherness is recognized as undesirable and unwelcomed because she defies conventional ideas of being a woman. To a certain extent, Ursula becomes a villain due to not settling into patriarchal regularities, which is a problematic basis for constructing a female villain character. Sexualization of female characters can be linked to patriarchal structures and, especially, to the concept of objectifying gaze: Nikunen et al. (2001, p. 55) argue that the entertainment industry has presented women as passive symbols of heterosexual fantasies. To achieve character depictions that originate from women’s point of view and their experiences in the male-driven society, increasing the number of women in movies’ production processes is necessary.

2.3 Previous criticism on Disney princess films

Disney’s princess films have been criticized for creating characters that portray womanhood from a narrow and unrealistic perspective. The princesses are seen to be characterized by a tendency towards submissive disposition, and their idealised physical appearances have been criticized for creating unrealistic beauty standards (Wellman, 2020; Coyne et al., 2016). Additionally, the one-sided portrayal of Disney princesses does not only create stereotypical ideals on women but also counter-conceptions on what is seen as undesirable. These counter-conceptions are usually reflected in the antagonist female characters that represent the opposite of the princesses. Schuchter (2019, p. 56) illustrates the matter by describing the contrast between Cinderella and Lady Tremaine, Cinderella’s stepmother, in the movie ‘Cinderella’ from 1950: Cinderella’s appearance follows the standards of Western ideals of beauty while Lady Tremaine’s appearance is seemingly more masculine and rugged. Further, Cinderella is the prototype of an obedient woman, which is seen as a norm in patriarchal society, whilst Lady Tremaine is characterized by her furious nature (Schuchter, 2019, p. 56). The visual unattractive depictions, as well as the idealizing ones, can further consolidate false views on femininity and womanhood, and they can serve in favor of misleading gender

socialization. However, according to Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2009, p. 104), the 21st century's enlightenment about societal issues regarding women has resulted in fewer problematic female characters in movies, although they still remind that female characters have a limited range of characterization.

One example of a progressive female character is portrayed in Disney's live-action movie 'Maleficent' from 2014. The movie depicts the well-known female villain Maleficent, originally known from the Disney movie 'Sleeping Beauty' (1956), from an advanced viewpoint (Wendranirsa, 2014). Initially portrayed as evil, the live-action movie tells Maleficent's story from her early childhood to being an adult, which creates a more complex depiction of her character. According to Wendranirsa (2014, p. 72), at the beginning of the movie, Maleficent is portrayed as powerful, brave, and kind. The character is not portrayed as inherently evil but as a victim of evil actions. Maleficent's change in nature occurs when her long-time love interest, a male character called Stefan, betrays Maleficent by cutting off her magical wings, one source of her power, and leaves her mentally and physically wounded. The action sequence can be seen as an allegory of gender-related violence because the origin of Stefan's actions stems from the fear of losing power, and it is taken back by force (Wendranirsa, 2014, pp. 73-74). In consequence, portraying the development of Maleficent's nature by elucidating the male-related dehumanizing events, the focus shifts from condemning the villain of her actions to the circumstances that caused the change in her character. Therefore, 'Maleficent' can be argued to be a progressive movie by taking a stand on addressing the involvement of men in the formation of female's lesser position of power in society. In my own research, I will study the two different movie versions of 'The Little Mermaid', made in different decades, and evaluate if similar development can be found in the depiction of the movies' female villain Ursula.

3 The present study

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to broaden the understanding of how female characters are constructed and presented in Disney animated movies, and the analysis is linked to other

feminist studies. Additionally, the movies' implications on social discourse on femininity are lightly touched on. Concentration is on verbal, linguistic features through which the questions are studied upon. The research questions are:

- 1) How is Ursula's villain nature constructed through her speech using Blum's (1995) character creation model?
- 2) How has the portrayal of Ursula changed between the animated and live-action version of 'The Little Mermaid'?
- 3) What kinds of assumptions can be found in Ursula's speech on womanhood and femininity, if any?
- 4) What implications does the portrayal of Ursula have on society's view on women then and now?

3.2 Data

The study is centred on the analysis of two Disney movies: 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989 and 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023, and the character I concentrate on is the female villain, Ursula. These movies were chosen based on their topicality, as the live-action version has only recently been released and allows comparison between the old and the new. The movies were watched on the streaming service 'Disney+'. Even though there are critical studies conducted on Disney movies, most of them focus on the princess characters in the lead role and their appearance in relation to their disposition. The current study focuses on the character in a supporting role, the female villain, and their speech in relation to their perceived villainity. Given the limited extent of the bachelor's thesis, efforts were made to find the most noteworthy points in the films in relation to my research questions. Therefore, concentration is primarily on Ursula's speech and her actions, even though a more extensive study could analyse more in-depth her interactions with other characters.

The movies' plot mostly remains the same, as the live-action version is a remake of the animated film. The movies' protagonist is Ariel, a young mermaid princess who lives in an underwater kingdom alongside her father, King Triton, and her sisters. Ariel is curious about

the people living on land. One day, Ariel gets involved in a boat accident and saves Prince Eric from death. From there on, Ariel's main objective is to pursue her love for the prince. Consequently, the sea witch Ursula becomes interested in Ariel because she sees an opportunity to use her for personal gain. As it occurs, Ursula has been driven out of the kingdom, and she has become an outcast determined to deprive Triton of his power. Therefore, Ursula lures Ariel to a malicious contract designed to trick power away from Triton: she convinces Ariel to give up her voice in exchange for being transformed into a human. Ursula convinces Ariel that the lack of her voice would not influence her quest for love, although Ursula knows that taking Ariel's voice away will complicate Ariel and Eric's relationship. Despite Ursula's acts of sabotage, Ariel finally gets her voice back, wins Eric's love, and defeats Ursula.

3.3 Methods

The study is a qualitative one and uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method of analysis. The premise in CDA is that language creates discourses that are established patterns through which different themes and topics are understood in everyday life. CDA's function is to uncover and analyse these patterns and evaluate the power they have on creating the lived reality (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 24-25). In this instance, the language these two movies contain carry social influence and consolidate institutionalized ideas on gender, ethnicity, and other cultural issues (Lin, 2012, p. 1). As CDA is concerned to discover the power relations that lie in language and how the shifting power positions shape the surrounding reality (Lin, 2012), it is appropriate to use CDA to examine movies because they create an interplay with the viewer. Therefore, CDA is used to examine the reality created between the film and the viewer and to examine the power relations within the film. The study investigates how a villain character is constructed through language, and analysis is done on how gender is portrayed through the character.

To make the analysis more systematic, Ursula's character is studied through questions that Blum suggests in their book (1995, pp. 73-74). Blum presents eight questions to guide the character creation process for screenwriters, but I use only four of them. The other four

questions were omitted because they are unnecessary for the purpose of this study and including them would potentially make the study lengthier than what is suitable for a bachelor's thesis. The chosen questions are: (1) what is the (character's) super objective, (2) what is the character's intention, (3) what is the character's motivation, and (4) what is the character's sense of urgency. The first question answers why a character is created in the first place; what is the character trying to achieve by their existence, and what is their ultimate goal. The second question concerns a character's desire in a particular scene, and what physical action does the character take in relation to the desire. The third question concerns the reason for a character to pursue certain things; what psychological reasons guide a character's disposition. Furthermore, the fourth question answers how great a need a character has to achieve their goal; a greater need correlates with a bigger emotional attachment that ultimately is a tool for drama.

Additionally, this study leans into feminist studies. The method that is used to analyse the transcripts from the movies is social constructionist theory, the basic assumption of which is that gender is an artificial construct (Baxter, 2013, p. 2). Gender is more learned and reflective of societal norms than something innate, which is why it should be viewed critically (Baxter, 2013). As previous studies have shown, Disney's portrayal of women characters has been problematic from a feminist point of view (Lacroix, 2004; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Schuchter, 2019; Wendranirsa, 2014). Therefore, a feminist analysis of a newer Disney production, 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023, in comparison to an older version of the movie, 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989, is relevant to establish the present state of Disney's portrayal of female characters and whether the company's productions have progressed along cultural change. Also, as the studied female villain is portrayed as the only oppressed character of the kingdom led by a man, it provides an extreme basis for linguistic observations for gender-based differences and polarization in relation to feminist studies. This study's method can be identified as a feminist CDA which provides implications on today's construct of gender in the western society.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Super objective

Ursula's super objective remains the same in both films: it is to defeat King Triton and usurp power from him. However, in the live-action version from 2023, Ursula states her objective more straightforwardly than she did before. In the new movie, Ursula describes that her objective is to use Ariel in her "little game" and that she will "rip the power away from Triton", as exemplified in Extract 3. In the 1989 movie, Ursula's objective becomes apparent when she schemes "Triton's undoing" (Extract 1) and states that she is after a "bigger fish" (Extract 2), referring to Triton. The change in Ursula's delivery from an indirect manner to a more straightforward one could be an intent to focus viewers' attention on her speech as a means to narrate her villain nature rather than using an imposing appearance to do so. In that case, it would be a development in the portrayal of female villain characters, the portrayal of whom have been criticized for an appearance-centered premise (Schuchter, 2019).

- 1) Ursula: She (Ariel) may be the key to Triton's undoing.
- 2) Ursula (to Ariel): It's not you I'm after. I've a much bigger fish to (catch).

Extracts from 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989

- 3) Ursula: Then I'll use her (Ariel) as a prawn in my little game and finally get to rip the power away from Triton that should've been mine all along.

Extract from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

Additionally, a character's super objective defines the reason for their creation. Ursula's character is created for Ariel to have an opportunity to transform into a human, which ultimately enables the love-story between Ariel and Eric and the reconciliation between Ariel and her father Triton.

4.2 Intentions

The movies present four major intentions for Ursula which remain the same in the older and the newer version of the movie, albeit some differences in tone can be found. First, Ursula wants to take revenge on King Triton and depose him of his power, as exemplified by Extracts 1-3. Second, Ursula tries to lure Ariel into a deceitful contract that seemingly helps Ariel to get what she wants but, eventually, only benefits Ursula. In both movies, the contract remains the same, verbatim, as exemplified by Extract 5 and Extract 8. Nevertheless, there are differences between the movies in the manner Ursula pursues Ariel to sign the contract. The 1989 version presents a more simplistic portrayal of Ursula's deviousness: she makes a proposition to Ariel, appealing to her good intentions by calling Ariel a "dear, sweet child" and by saying that she lives for helping those in need, as exemplified by Extract 4. In the 2023 movie, Ursula appeals both to Ariel's empathy and to her anger with her father who has forbidden Ariel to explore the human world. Ursula tries to build common ground with Ariel by describing them both as victims of Triton's unfair acts, as demonstrated by Extract 6. She also tries to convince Ariel of her selflessness by seemingly understanding Ariel and Eric's love, as exemplified by Extract 7.

- 4) Ursula: My dear, sweet child. That's what I do. It's what I live for. To help unfortunate merfolk, like yourself, poor souls with no one else to turn to.
- 5) Ursula: So here's the deal. I'll whip up a little potion to make you human for three days. Got that? Three days. Before the sun sets on the third day. You and Princey must share a kiss. And not just any kiss. The kiss of true love. If you do, you will remain human permanently. But if you don't, you'll turn back into a mermaid. And you belong to me.

Extracts from 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989

- 6) Ursula: I wouldn't choose to live like this, believe me. Daddy's been so unfair to both of us, controlling everything we say and do. In a way, we're the same, you and I.

- 7) Ursula: You're so young. Don't you see? You're meant for each other. And I can't bear to see you suffer like this. As it happens, I can help you.
- 8) Ursula: So here's the deal. I'll whip up a little potion to make you human for three days. Got that? Three days. Before the sun sets on the third day. You and Princey must share a kiss. And not just any kiss. The kiss of true love. If you do, you will remain human permanently. But if you don't, you'll turn back into a mermaid. And you belong to me.

Extracts from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

Ursula's third intention is to sabotage Ariel's mission to capture Eric's heart. Ariel comes close to kissing Eric when they are rowing a boat at nightfall after spending the day together. However, Ursula succeeds in preventing the kiss by sending her eel servants to overturn the boat and congratulates them for an accomplished mission, as exemplified by Extract 9. As Ariel does better at accomplishing Eric's liking than Ursula presumed, she becomes aware that drastic actions will be needed to prevent Ariel and Eric becoming any closer, and she takes "matters into her own tentacles" (Extract 10; Extract 12). Ursula transforms herself into a human and puts a spell on Eric that convinces him to get married with Ursula's human form, Vanessa (Extract 11).

- 9) Ursula: Nice work, boys. That was a close one. Too close.
- 10) Ursula: Well, it's time Ursula took matters into her own tentacles. Triton's daughter will be mine!
- 11) Ursula/Vanessa (singing): *What a lovely little bride I'll make. My dear, I'll look divine. Things are working out according to my ultimate design.*

Extracts from 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989

- 12) Ursula: That was close. Too close. I don't get it. I didn't think that little barracuda stood a chance luring him in without her voice. How's that even possible? Well, we're not gonna let that happen again. It's time Ursula took matters into her own tentacles.

Extract from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

After the three days have passed and Ariel has not received a true love's kiss from Eric, Ursula's scheme succeeds, and, according to the contract, she now owns Ariel (Extract 5;

Extract 8). Therefore, her fourth intention is to use Ariel as collateral against Triton and make him surrender to Ursula to save his daughter, as exemplified in Extracts 13 and 14. For a brief moment, Ursula achieves everything she has wished for and obtains Triton's power.

However, her triumph gets interrupted by Ariel who steers a ship's bow towards Ursula that results in her death.

13) Ursula: You see? The contract's legal, binding and completely unbreakable, even for you. Of course, I always was a girl with an eye for a bargain. The daughter of the great sea king is a very precious commodity.

Extract from 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989

14) Ursula: Of course, I always was a gal with an eye for a bargain. What do you say to a trade, hmm? What's your precious little Ariel worth to ya?

Extract from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

4.3 Motivation

Ursula's motivation is resentment and a hunger for power. However, the motivation slightly alters between the analysed two movies because, in the live-action version, Ursula's character is given more depth and emotional subtext. In the first movie from 1989, Ursula's motivation seems to be rooted in anger and resentment due to being prevented from gaining power in the kingdom. In the 2023 movie, the motivation seems to be based more on a long-standing sense of injustice due to living in Triton's shadow as a family member. The live-action version presents Ursula as King Triton's sister, changing Ursula's position from an alien sea witch to an estranged and avoided family member. According to Ursula, Triton has neglected her by not inviting her to the kingdom's common gatherings (Extract 15, *The Little Mermaid*, 2023), and he has forced her to live in a place of exile, as demonstrated by Extract 16 (*The Little Mermaid*, 2023). Ursula's "dim little crevice" can be seen as a sort of prison and as a literal reflection of Ursula living in Triton's shadow. Also, placing the characters in these social positions, Triton as the ruler and Ursula as the oppressed, has a point of resemblance to Holmes's ideas on masculine superiority: men are more likely to achieve power, and women

struggle to gain autonomy (Holmes, 2008, p. 3). The exact reason for Ursula's eviction is not discussed in either of the movies but it can be interpreted as being the outcome of her rebellious and scheming nature. In the final stages of the 2023 movie, Ursula encounters Triton and reveals to him the motivation for her acts, which is to see Triton suffer (Extract 17, *The Little Mermaid*, 2023).

15) Ursula: Perhaps I'll join them. Oh wait, what a shame. It seems that big brother forgot to invite Auntie Ursula to the party. Again.

16) Ursula: And now look at me, the family pariah. Wasting away to practically nothing. Banished and exiled, driven halfway to madness in this dim little crevice for 15 long years. While Daddy and his spoiled little mer-brats celebrate the Coral Moon.

17) Ursula: I want to see you suffer, like I've suffered all these years.

Extracts from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

4.4 Sense of urgency

Since Ursula's super objective is to defeat King Triton and seize power from him, her sense of urgency directly correlates with the difficulties she faces whilst trying to conquer Triton. The scenes in which Ursula's mission is jeopardized, usually leading to her losing temper, are the ones that show Ursula's desperation for achieving her goal. One of these scenarios is when Ariel refuses to commit herself into the contract and Ursula gets momentarily furious, as exemplified by Extract 18 (*The Little Mermaid*, 2023). The scene shows both Ursula's childlike incapacity to accept not getting what she wants but also the scale of Ursula's emotional burden that culminates in Ariel's rejection - Ursula's patience has reached its limits, erupting in hostile behavior and intense tunnel vision in defeating Triton. This can be interpreted as a counter-reaction to the long-lasting subordinate relationship between Ursula and Triton, and Ursula's behavior acts as an extreme opposite for obedience which, in this case, is used to create female villainity. Furthermore, Ursula's urgency creates scenarios where her approach to managing each situation corresponds more to the active behavior perceived as more characteristic of a man (England et al., 2011, p. 563; Matti & Lisosky, 1999) which is arguably also used as an element to create female villainity.

Another scenario that portrays Ursula's sense of urgency occurs when Ariel and Eric are about to kiss on the boat before the three days have passed and Ursula manages to sabotage it from happening. This is exemplified by Extract 12 (*The Little Mermaid*, 2023) as Ursula gets upset for things not following her plan. The intense urgency leads Ursula to transform herself into a human to seduce Eric herself in order to make sure of her victory. As the movie progresses, Ursula notices that her devious contract is not bulletproof after all, and the drama intensifies as Ursula becomes closer to acquiring Triton's power.

18) Ariel: No. This is wrong. I can't do this.

Ursula: Fine, then, forget about the world above. Go back home to Daddy, and never leave again!

Extract from 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023

4.5 Womanhood and femininity

In both analysed 'The Little Mermaid' movies, Wohlwend's (2009, p. 65) notions on Disney's unequal gender portrayal come true: the female character Ursula is portrayed as the submissive one, being forced under the rule of Triton, and the male character Triton is portrayed as the dominant one, being the ruler of the kingdom. The story portrays King Triton as the one who has exiled Ursula from the kingdom and compelled her in the position of a pariah. Ursula appears to be a powerful persona herself who has threatened the wellbeing of the kingdom and, perhaps, Triton's position as a king. In the 2023 live-action, Ursula seems more humane because of her position as an abandoned family member. However, when compared to Wendranirsa's study (2014), 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023 does not redeem Ursula's character in the same way 'Maleficent' from 2014 redeemed Maleficent. Whilst Maleficent was shown as benevolent young who was later betrayed by her loved one, making her turn evil, Ursula is portrayed as someone who has always had a tendency to trouble-making. Additionally, placing Ursula in the antagonist's position alongside a more powerful male character and a beautiful princess follows Disney's narrative pattern of the

princess movies: a juxtaposition is created between good and evil, and youth and old age, that is personified in a younger and an older female character (Schuchter, 2019).

To continue, the script has been altered in an interesting way to the new live-action movie in one particular scene. Ursula sings ‘Poor Unfortunate Souls’ in both films while trying to lure Ariel into the devious contract. The song has otherwise remained the same in the movies but the live-action from 2023 has omitted the following part that was in the 1989 movie:

*The men up there don't like a lot of blabber
 They think a girl who gossips is a bore
 Yes, on land it's much preferred
 For ladies not to say a word
 And after all, dear, what is idle prattle for?
 Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation
 True gentlemen avoid it when they can
 But they dote and swoon and fawn
 On a lady who's withdrawn
 It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man*

The extract refers to Ariel having to give her voice away in order to transform into a human. Ursula is trying to convince Ariel that having a voice is rather a liability than an asset amongst humans to get her to sign the contract. The message of the extract can be summarized with the idea that women are better when they are quiet. Although the song reflects Ursula’s malicious intentions of getting Ariel to agree to the contract by any means necessary rather than facts about life, the words still convey a message. The message can be understood as a humoristic manner to convey an unembellished truth. As studies on Disney’s movies (Shawcroft et al., 2022; England et al., 2011; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2009) have concluded, women in the entertainment industry and female characters have a smaller range of opportunities compared to their male counterparts, resulting in that their voices have remained unheard. Especially the part where Ursula sings about men who “dote and swoon and fawn on a lady who’s withdrawn” has correspondence with Nikunen et al.’s (2001) thoughts on objectifying gaze, which refers to the entertainment industry’s tendency to present women as objects of male fantasies, emphasis being on women’s passivity.

To conclude, Shawcroft et al.'s (2022) findings on most Disney's productions being directed by a man comes true in both of the analysed movies, as the data retrieved from IMDb (n.d.; n.d.) shows. The 1989 'The Little Mermaid' consists of two male directors, Ron Clements and John Musker, and the 2023 live-action is also directed by a man, Rob Marshall. Further, the movies' writing credits are solely addressed to men, and only four of the sixteen producers of the movies are women. These conclusions are drawn from the assumption that the listed crew members are male or female based on their name. As these production roles are particularly relevant to the film's formation, a greater inclusion of women would be a development towards diversification of the productions, and it would provide a more equal starting point for gender representation through characters.

5 Conclusion

Previous studies suggest that Disney's portrayal of female characters has been problematic. Princess characters arguably promote unrealistic beauty standards and gender stereotypical behavior, and female villain characters act as examples of undesirable femininity. A tendency to divide female characters' representation of femininity into good and bad can be found especially in Disney's princess movies. This sort of portrayal engages in creating an oversimplified vision of womanhood. This study's aim was to find out how Disney portrays their female villain characters on a verbal level because prior research has focused on characters' appearance in relation to their disposition. The study's focus was on the female villain character Ursula in two movies: 'The Little Mermaid' from 1989 and 'The Little Mermaid' from 2023.

In both movies, Ursula's villain nature becomes apparent through her speech. Her objective is to take revenge against King Triton, which she carries through by lying and manipulating. She uses empathy and caring as tools to gain trust from others as her true intentions are selfish and harmful to everyone else. Ursula's motivation stems from resentment towards Triton because she has evicted her to a prison-like place outside the kingdom, preventing her

from gaining power. However, the 2023 movie contains references to their family relationship because Ursula is portrayed as Triton's sister, which changes her motivation to defeat Triton to be more based on being excluded from the family. Moreover, Ursula's intense urgency in defeating Triton highlights her disobedience to him, which is arguably used as a tool to create female villainity because her behavior deviates from the patriarchal ideals of an obedient, passive woman.

The portrayal of Ursula has changed between the two analysed movies, but it has mostly changed in relation to Disney's way of portraying the character rather than changing the character itself. Portraying Ursula as an abandoned family member, instead of a stranger, creates complexity in the narration of the character in the 2023 movie. Also, in the new movie, Ursula's intentions are made more transparent through words, which can be seen as a point of development because Disney has been criticized for leaning towards appearance-based narration in explaining a character's disposition. However, Ursula's character remains fairly the same in both movies: she is maliciously sarcastic, resentful, and conniving. In both movies, she selfishly promotes her own cause without concerning how her actions affect others.

Regarding womanhood and femininity, it seems that the 2023 'The Little Mermaid' acknowledges some shortcomings that the 1989 version of the movie presents on femininity and womanhood by altering the script. For example, an extract of the song 'Poor Unfortunate Souls' was removed from the new movie because it explicitly discusses silencing women's voices to attract the attention of men. Nevertheless, both films portray the relationship between Ursula and Triton as a dominant-subordinate relationship that has a point of resemblance to masculine superiority, meaning a societal tendency to place men in positions of power instead of women. Based on these films, Disney continues to follow their systematic pattern of the princess movies by placing certain feminine characteristics as desirable and deviant features as reprehensible in creating a female villain character.

This study participates in the discussion of feminist research and increases knowledge on the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies. The results of the study imply that Disney's representation of female characters is not only problematic when appearance is examined in relation to a character's disposition, but also when examining a character's speech as

detached from other elements, admitting that Disney's live-action movies indicate development on the matter. As the conducted study is a qualitative one, the study's results are based on well-informed subjective views, but the results may vary depending on the researcher. This study is limited by the fact that Ursula's speech was analysed separately from other characters of the movies, which left little room for exploring the interaction between the characters. A more extensive study could analyse Disney's female villain characters from different live-action movies in parallel to form a better understanding of the present state of Disney's character portrayals. Continued research of Disney's productions is essential to assess the successfulness of their character portrayals because, as the study shows, these movies convey messages not only about fictional characters but also about society's views on gender and humanity.

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