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## Do you want to be a Feminist? *Frozen* (2013)

*Hailed as “the best Disney Film since The Lion King,”<sup>1</sup> grossing almost \$380 million to date at the USA box office, and winner of two Academy Awards, the studio’s 2013 release Frozen is also one of its most controversial animated features. The heated debate that launched a rather impressive number of blog entries over the past few months centers on the question of the film’s feminist content. ‘Is Frozen the most feminist Disney film to date?’ ‘Is it feminist enough?’ and ‘Is it feminist at all?’ are the conflicting issues raised by the movie’s vehement attackers and defenders. More than a simple media dispute, the theoretical battle around Frozen offers a window onto a whole range of issues that revolve around contemporary feminism, readership, and textual construction.*

“What if I told you that Disney Animation just released a movie with not one, but two lead female characters who star in that movie as sisters who love and care about each other and are not ‘saved’ by any men?” asks Shelby Rosten on *Feminspire*, an online platform featuring a collection of global voices. While Rosten suggests that the film represents a “complete reversal and subversion of the Disney Princess convention”<sup>2</sup>, Dani Colman’s response in “The Problem with False Feminism” is the opposite of enthusiastic.<sup>3</sup> *Frozen*, argues Colman, is not only not progressive, but in some

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Fallon: “*Frozen* is the Best Disney Film Since *Lion King*”. BrockmannEntertainment.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/25/frozen-is-the-best-disney-film-since-the-lion-king.html#url=/articles/2013/11/25/frozen-is-the-best-disney-film-since-the-lion-king.html>, 25.11.2013 (cited 19.03.2014).

<sup>2</sup> Shelby Rosten: “Disney’s *Frozen*: The Feminist Fairy Tale We’ve Been Waiting For (With No Prince Charming)” *Feminspire*. <http://feminspire.com/disneys-frozen-the-feminist-fairy-tale-weve-been-waiting-for-with-no-prince-charming>, 02.12.2013 (cited 19.03.2014).

<sup>3</sup> Dani Colman: “The Problem with False Feminism. Or why *Frozen* left me cold”. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/disney-and-animation/7c0bbc7252ef>, 01.02.2014 (cited 19.03.2014).

areas shockingly regressive. Following a methodological approach, she lists the arguments being made to support the film as a feminist trailblazer and then refutes them in minute detail by offering previous examples from within the Disney canon.

According to Colman, her analysis has been viewed over two hundred thousand times<sup>4</sup>, and has led to a polarization of opinions on the internet. Among the camp firmly ‘against’ is Lindsay Ellis, author of “The problem with “The Problem with False Feminism””<sup>5</sup> – which addressed each of the numerous points raised by Colman in a strongly worded rebuttal. This, in turn, led to Colman’s own “A Politely-Worded Response (or the Problem with “The Problem with “The Problem With False Feminism””)”<sup>6</sup> – and here matters came to a halt. Other direct but significantly less acrimonious responses to Colman’s initial blog entry include Steena Williams’s “We Only Have Each Other: Disney’s *Frozen*, Feminist or Not?”<sup>7</sup> and Rhiannon Thomas’s “Why *Frozen* Isn’t ‘False Feminism’”<sup>8</sup> on *Feminist Fiction*. Clear lines are drawn and a theoretical battle is in progress.

It has been argued that the internet has enabled a shift from ‘third-wave’ to ‘fourth-wave’ feminism. First-wave feminism is generally associated with women’s rights movement, particularly the fight for women’s suffrage, while second-wave feminism is recognized for drawing attention to the impact of patriarchy and sexism on women’s everyday lives. Third-wave feminism is linked to academic investigations, especially of queer theory, as well as highlighting the

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<sup>4</sup> Dani Colman: “A Politely-Worded Response”. *Medium*.

<https://medium.com/p/a620f32e2882>, 15.02.2014 (cited 19.03.2014).

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Ellis: “The Problem with ‘The Problem with False Feminism’- A Strongly Worded Rebutal”. *Chez Apocalypse*. <http://chezapocalypse.com/thefrozenthing>, 04.02.2014 (cited 19.03.2014).

<sup>6</sup> Dani Colman: “A Politely-Worded Response.” *Medium*.

<https://medium.com/p/a620f32e2882>, 15.02.2014 (cited 19.03.2014).

<sup>7</sup> Steena Williams: “We Only Have Each Other: Disney’s *Frozen*, feminist or not?” *Paper Droids*. <http://www.paperdroids.com/2014/02/19/disneys-frozen-feminist>, 19. 02. 2014 (cited 17.03.2014).

<sup>8</sup> Rhiannon Thomas: “Why *Frozen* Isn’t ‘False Feminism’.” *Feminist Fiction*. <http://feministfiction.com/2014/02/07/why-frozen-isnt-false-feminism>, 07.02.2014 (cited 17.03.2014).

existence of intersectionality and multiple feminisms. Currently, as noted by Ealasaid Munro:

the internet has created a “call-out” culture [...] indicative of the continuing influence of the third wave, with its focus on [...] challenging sexism and misogyny insofar as they appear in everyday rhetoric, advertising, film, television and literature, [and] the media.<sup>9</sup>

While the internet might represent only an alternative platform for the micro-political actions which correspond to third-wave feminism (making the appellation of a ‘new era’ problematic), it is increasingly clear that it has enabled “the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism”.<sup>10</sup>

Within this context, the debate on *Frozen* becomes symptomatic of a larger phenomenon, and it will be productive to theoretically stroll along the barricades of what may at first glance appear to be a simple ‘is it’ or ‘isn’t it’ debate. This paper will identify and discuss some of the main points raised and positions currently occupied by the feminist critics of *Frozen*, and highlight the complexity of the arguments made on both sides. It is not its aim to enter the debate and firmly champion one stance. Instead, the argument will be partly internal, and partly external to the discussion. From a somewhat meta-critical position, the analysis will touch on issues such as contemporary feminism, (implied) readership and textual construction.

The intersection of gender studies with Disney texts and the disagreements that ensue are certainly not unprecedented: in recent years, animated features from *The Little Mermaid*<sup>11</sup> onwards have

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<sup>9</sup> Ealasaid Munro: “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?” *The Political Studies Association*. <http://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave> <no date noted> (cited 17.03.2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Zaron Burnett: “Is Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* A Feminist Film... Or Not?” *Thought Catalog*. <http://thoughtcatalog.com/zaron-burnett-iii/2013/07/is-disneys-the-little-mermaid-a-feminist-film-or-not>, 14.07.2013 (cited 18.03.2014).

been placed under the scrutiny of feminist values. The 2010 release of *Tangled*, which largely follows the Rapunzel story-line, was hailed as a feminist step forward<sup>12</sup> by some critics while deplored as nothing more than “faux-feminism” of the “leap before you look” variety<sup>13</sup> by others. The same stark division of positions was replicated, as faithfully as the reflection in a non-magic mirror, with the 2012 Pixar-Disney collaboration *Brave*, which features Merida, a tomboyish Scottish princess who resolutely refuses to marry. While Merida’s role is generally praised – especially in the context of a dearth of strong female leads in animated films – the phrase “if only *Brave* were bolder” echoes throughout the discussion like a faint but consistent call to arms.<sup>14</sup>

Enter *Frozen*, a film loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale “The Snow Queen”. The fact that little is left of the original storyline or indeed characters has been a cause of dismay in itself for a number of viewers, but the question of what the movie does to fidelity lies forgotten in the wake of what it apparently does for feminism. *Frozen* has been claimed far and wide as a groundbreaking feminist triumph, and in “The Problem with False Feminism”, Dani Colman lists the reasons most frequently heard to substantiate this claim. In no particular order, these arguments – which Colman profoundly disagrees with and proceeds to dispute or disparage – are that: the movie does not end in a wedding; it passes the Bechdel test (there are two or more women in this movie and they talk to each other about something other than a man), unlike

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<sup>12</sup> (Anon.): “Don’t Tell Me What I Can’t Do: Why *Tangled* Is A Feminist Film”. *Accio YA Books*.

<http://accioyabooks.wordpress.com/2010/12/04/66>, 4.12.2010; and

(Anon.): “*Tangled*: A Feminist Review”. *Not Another Wave*.

<http://notanotherwave.blogspot.de/2010/12/guest-post-by-whitney-last-friday-i-saw.html>, 17.12.2010 (both cited 18.03.2014).

<sup>13</sup> (Anon.): “Disney’s *Tangled* – The Most (Faux)feminist Movie Ever”. *Eve Bit First*. <http://evebitfirst.wordpress.com/2011/04/29/tangled>, 29.04.2011 (cited 18.03.2014).

<sup>14</sup> Mary Pols: “Why Pixar’s *Brave* Is a Failure of Female Empowerment” *Time. Ideas*.

<http://ideas.time.com/2012/06/22/why-pixars-brave-isa-failure-of-female-empowerment>, 22.06.2012 (cited 14.03.2014).

other Disney princess movies; it has two strong female characters / protagonists; both have clearly defined goals, which are not just about finding love; Anna is relatable; Elsa is relatable – as an “antagonist who claims her identity”; “Elsa claims her sexuality as well as her individuality”, similarly to a modern woman; there is a gay character in the movie; the words “You can’t marry a man you just met” are spoken; a female protagonist does not have a romantic interest; the true love is the love between sisters; and finally, Anna “takes charge and makes her own decisions”.

Colman’s essay is extensive, and conducts textual analysis touching on plot and characterization, referencing the original script as well as the film’s visuals, and researching producers’ and voice actors’ interviews. In addition, it provides statistical comparisons between the feature and previous Disney movies. In brief, her main point is that *Frozen* is setting itself up as ‘more feminist’ than its predecessors in a particular way, which includes an amount of mocking of certain generic tropes. However, remarks Colman, this is nothing more than an elaborate trick covering up the fact that the film is in fact highly traditional. The point is an eminently interesting one. Yet there is a problem with Colman’s analysis, and it surfaces when she is arguing simultaneously on two fronts. In a number of places within the essay, it appears that what Colman is saying is that since *Frozen* is no more feminist than its predecessors, it is not feminist at all. Inevitably, this provokes a knee-jerk reaction of denial in others.

For instance, with the aid of several tables and numerical comparisons, Colman easily debunks the notion that *Frozen* is the first Disney Princess movie not to end in a wedding or an engagement. Furthermore, while the movie does pass the Bechdel test, so do many other Disney movies. Yet as Rhiannon Thomas, author of *Feminist Fiction*, observes, both of these points are not exactly against *Frozen* being feminist, but rather issues to remember when comparing it to other Disney movies. It is exactly this intertextual framework that is significant: and Colman shows that statistically, while many Disney movies tend not to end in a wedding, the great majority may be said to have a “romantic happily ever after” and *Frozen* (traditionally) conforms to the pattern.

Colman also notes that what is lacking in *Frozen*, as compared to almost every other Disney princess movie, is “a roster of supporting female characters”. Here, the argument takes a convoluted turn. While explicitly claiming not to disapprove of Disney’s adaptation techniques, and giving a nod to the non-patriarchal setting of the story, Colman simultaneously criticizes the eradication of the whole cast of female characters found in Andersen’s “Snow Queen”. In a move that gestures towards the happy union of feminism and fidelity, Colman deplors that Disney replaced an entire lineup of interesting female characters found in the original text with a large number of (presumably significantly less interesting) men. Thomas’s response to this accusation is that the constellation present in *Frozen* is far from arbitrary: the movie is “structured around Anna and Elsa’s isolation and loneliness” and their close relationship (or lack thereof) is the focus of their characters. Female friends and family would detract from the intensity of the sisters’ desire for a relationship with each other, argues Thomas, however, this might have something to do with the nowadays prevalent tendency towards plot over-simplification, rather than represent a necessity, and as such is a debatable point.

Moreover, according to Thomas, there is a need for male characters demanded by the very nature of the romantic narrative trope, which is expected and desired by audiences. Ultimately, this is a further matter open for debate. Last but not least, two secondary characters that Cole counts as male - snowman and reindeer - are brought in solely for comic relief. Making the non-talking reindeer female is hardly Thomas’s, and indeed anyone’s idea of representation. Note that here, the debate moves away from the field of intertextual relationships (actual or surmised) between *Frozen* and representatives of its immediate genre, the Disney (Princess) Movie. The new debate expands to include adaptation and fidelity issues such as links kept or severed to the original text on the one hand, and the intra-textual coherence of the movie itself on the other.

Perhaps one of Colman’s essential points of criticism, around which many of the remaining ones revolve, is her view that Anna and Elsa are not “strong” characters. According to Colman, Anna is unintelligent, self-absorbed, rude, and only interested in finding love, while Elsa is “an absolute mess of [...] self-blame and

avoidance". Thomas's reply is that while both characters are indeed flawed, they have redeeming qualities. Anna is loyal and loving, and cannot be called unintelligent "because the villain used her loneliness and desperation against her".<sup>15</sup> Elsa, "like many real women, has spent her life trying to keep her emotions locked away. She's been forced to deny who she really is, and it's left her with serious issues".<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the protagonists both learn and evolve during the film. For Thomas, Elsa's act of claiming ownership over herself is precisely what makes her feminist. Here, feminism is connected to contemporary, realistic and identifiable characteristics and processes.

Incidentally, the topic of agency is a much-debated one. Colman excoriates the trolls for taking agency away from Anna, and leaving her in the dark about her sister's powers. Thomas points out that having knowledge / agency withheld or taken away does not detract from a character's feminism. While the troll debacle is certainly a weakness in the story, it is unclear how or why a conflict and obstacle-free plot would be (more) feminist, or what a 'feminist plot' might look like at all. There is, for instance, intense disagreement on whether the inclusion or exclusion of romance, or a romantic happy end, can be said to be feminist or not. This is also a reminder that the debate takes place on several levels at once, and it includes both character and plot construction.

Ultimately, there appears to be a stark discrepancy between the two terminologies employed in the debate, namely what Colman terms "strong characters" and what Thomas sees as "feminist characters". The former, although not formally defined, appears linked to moral strength, intelligence, and agency, including the ability to make decisions and act ethically and with full awareness. The latter, as can be inferred from the critical response, refers to flawed, "realistic" characters that are primarily subject to development. However, the distinction is less clear-cut than that – or rather, both definitions are not unproblematic.

Colman's expectations for "strong characters" have been criticized by Lindsay Ellis – who rightly points out that Anna is sentenced by

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<sup>15</sup> Rhiannon Thomas: "Why *Frozen* Isn't 'False Feminism'" (cf. fn. 8).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Colman both for having a “token” flaw, clumsiness, as well as a number of character flaws such as naiveté and overconfidence.<sup>17</sup> The latter in effect, leave a lot of room for development, which Ellis argues happens in the movie. The questions raised by Ellis in a tongue in cheek manner are whether vulnerability is the enemy of feminism, and if characters must spring “fully formed [as] strong independent women” or may be allowed to start from an immature point and grow from there. Notably, in this respect, Ellis’s position coincides with Thomas’s. Yet while this criticism towards Colman is in essence well deserved, what further complicates the questions of “what is a feminist character?” and “must a feminist character always be a strong character?” is the dimension of the “role-model” brought up by all three parties, as well as several by other influential blogs.

Controversially, Colman states that Anna, in her view the only protagonist of the movie, is no more of a role-model for little girls than the most shallow character from a typical high school movie. While Thomas defends Anna’s character, pointing out her qualities, Ellis questions whether the characters must represent role-models at all. And hers is not the only dissenting voice. Yet to pose such a question within the context of the Disney Studios might be seen as a bit idealistic. As Colman explains:

[...] there is one context I can call to mind in which it is absolutely appropriate to discuss a character’s suitability as a role model, and that is a Disney Princess movie. Not because they are typically morality tales for children, but because the Disney Princess franchise is a merchandising enterprise. There is a deliberate, vested interest in creating role-model characters in these films, because the more young girls that want to be Elsa or Anna — and the more parents who are on board with that — the more Elsa and Anna dresses, dolls, accessories and singing toothbrushes the Disney Company sells. We’re talking about characters who were deliberately

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<sup>17</sup> Ellis: “The Problem with ‘The Problem with False Feminism’- A Strongly Worded Rebutal” (cf. fn. 5).

designed to be role models, so yes: it is entirely appropriate to criticize them as such.<sup>18</sup>

In her blog entry „We Only Have Each Other: Disney’s *Frozen*, Feminist or Not?“, another response to Colman, Steena Williams not only applauds the movie’s “love story between two sisters” as feminist, but makes the interesting contention that in the long lineup of Disney Princesses, “even if the feminist changes are small when viewed through a retrospective lens, each of these princesses did have a monumental, dramatic shift because each one is someone’s first.”<sup>19</sup> For Williams, intriguingly, the Disney princesses are feminist (role-models) just by virtue of being there: “I’m sorry *Frozen* wasn’t a big enough leap for some people. But I’d ask them to keep in mind that Anna and Elsa are some girl’s first taste of women in media” she writes. Logically, this appears invalid at first: Just because a category – let’s call it *feminist character* – is subsumed into the category *female character*, it does not necessarily follow that all *female characters* are *feminist characters*. Or does it? What Williams appears to be upholding is not only that old side of the argument that any presence of female characters in the media is a good (enough) thing. It is also that the films possess an almost inviolate in-the-moment aura, wherein any feminist representation takes on an absolute quality, which may not even be productively compared with what came before. Which raises the next, and perhaps most salient question: “How is a feminist reading position constructed?”

In 1999, Stephens and McCallum argued that one substantial effect of feminism has been the construction by adolescent fiction of an implied reader who occupies a feminist reading position.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Colman: “A Politely-Worded Response” (cf. fn. 6).

<sup>19</sup> Williams: “We Only Have Each Other: Disney’s *Frozen*, feminist or not?” (cf. fn. 7).

<sup>20</sup> John Stephens / Robyn McCallum: “Discourses of Femininity and the Intertextual Construction of Feminist Reading Positions.” *Girls Boys Books Toys. Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture*. Clark. Eds. Beverly / Margaret Higonnet. Baltimore 2000 [1999], p. 131-141.

Such a reader is often constructed intertextually, out of a dialogue between the current narrative and particular pre-texts or more general plots implicit in the genres that the narrative uses or evokes. With these dialogic strategies, writers challenge the ideological gendering both of genres and of social practices directed at young people, exposing the processes whereby femininity is constructed and naturalized in texts and enabling more autonomous forms of female subjectivity to be expressed.<sup>21</sup>

The “implied reader”, a term originating in the reader response theories promulgated by Wolfgang Iser, Seymour Chatman and others, designates one of the participants in the narrative communication situation. The implied reader is distinct from the “real reader,” the counterpart of which is the “real author”. According to Chatman, the implied reader’s counterpart is a construct termed “implied author”.<sup>22</sup> The implied author (different both from the real-life author and from the text’s narrator) is “the governing consciousness of the text as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work”.<sup>23</sup> The implied reader, like the implied author, is a construct. However, a type of implied reader is always present in a metonymical way and is necessary in order to reconstruct and make sense of its world.

Reader-response theorists advocate that the production of a text’s meaning always involves a reader.<sup>24</sup> Theoretically, the text projects an image of a reader’s competence, as well as shapes such a reader through the process of reading. This dynamic act presupposes both a freedom allowed to the reader, and a shaping, controlling power of the text. There is a distinction between the “real” reader and the “theoretical construct, implied or encoded in the text, representing the integration of data and the interpretative process ‘invited’ by the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., here p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> Seymour Chatman: *Story and Discourse*. Ithaca, New York 1978, p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: *Narrative Fiction*. London / New York 2002, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Iser: “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response to Prose Fiction.” *Aspects of Narrative*. Ed. J. Hillis Miller. New York 1971, p. 2-3.

text”.<sup>25</sup> For the sake of simplification, it is this latter definition by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, which also inadvertently incorporates the one by Stephens and McCallum, that I will refer to when using the term “implied reader” henceforth.

The communicative model described by reader response theorists may cautiously be applied to a text on film as to one in prose.<sup>26</sup> Let us examine the current disagreement on *Frozen* in connection to the complex relationship among implied author, implied reader, and actual reader. For instance, it may be inferred from Stephens and McCallum’s assertion that the intertextual construction of a feminist reader of adolescent fiction will inevitably lead to the construction of a ‘unique’ reading position. Furthermore, the boundary between real readers and implied readers may be seen in this case as very much a permeable one, with the former always striving to achieve the status of the latter. This might work if we think of adolescent fiction as targeted specifically to (presumably female) adolescents who – allowing for deviations in cultural backgrounds, levels of competence, and personal interpretation – might acquit themselves satisfactorily of closing the gap between the real reader and the implied reader. This is, however, a gap which would arguably best be left in place.

There are several arguments for maintaining this conceptual gap. If the communication model which includes the real author / real reader and implied author / implied reader pairs is considered in connection with Disney animated features, the superimposition yields troubling results. There is a similarity between adolescent fiction and Disney movies in that both not only reach, but are created in mind with, a rather wide audience. Within the process of constructing a text, its real target readership, synthesized at some point into an ideal model, must be taken into account. Most authors seeking mainstream success have probably found this inclusion necessary throughout the ages. Yet there is an element of intentionality hiding in this discourse that supports the text as a

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<sup>25</sup> Rimmon-Kenan (cf. fn. 23), p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> With the general exception that the narrator / narratee is often, although not always, dispensed with in the medium of film.

work which can and should be read in one way only. This, as Howard Jacobson half-jests, was a perspective upheld:

[before] theory came along with such equally mimsey concepts as it all depends who's reading (which it doesn't), and 'cultural context', as though you need to check Shakespeare against what others say about Elizabethan England to be certain he'd got it right.<sup>27</sup>

There is a recognized 'family-friendly' quality of Disney films, and yet the films have to "speak to" a doubled viewer: on the one hand, children and teenagers, and on the other, older siblings, parents, and grandparents. Among this audience, it is relatively easy to locate the feminist readers. Within the second category, a large section consists of viewers who are not only aware of and embrace feminist values, but also have grown up with Disney movies themselves. They are those who will occupy the "feminist reading position" as described by Stephens and McCallum – a position constructed precisely in the light of their knowledge and understanding of previous Disney films and tropes. They are the ones who will expect the challenge to ideological representations of genders and genres, the exposure of the devices serving the textual construction of femininity, and the novel forms of expressing female subjectivity.

But can these particular viewers be described as the (feminist) implied reader coming to grips with the implied author? It is of course from feminist reader positions that Colman and her fellow bloggers speak. Through extended intertextual comparisons with previous works belonging to the same genre (and studio) they are attempting to re-construct not only the text, but an entire *œuvre*. Arguably, when they criticize the plot for upholding or shedding patriarchal values, including Colman's quibbling about agency, they are addressing nothing other than the norms and structures that make up the fabric of the implied author. Yet at the same time, they act from a critical position, according to a half-century old tradition of feminist criticism.

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<sup>27</sup> Howard Jacobson: *Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It*. London / Berlin 2011, p. 153.

Like feminism itself, feminist criticism experienced several phases. The earliest years, according to Elaine Showalter, are linked to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s, and "concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature [...], the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history".<sup>28</sup> The second phase of feminist criticism included the discovery of a women's literature whose merits had been overpowered by patriarchal cultural values, aiming for a mapping of the territory of female imagination through recovery and rereading.<sup>29</sup> Other questions posed in this period revolved around the lesbian nature of female creativity. By the 1980s, attention was redirected to notions concerning the female poetic of affiliation, especially to mothers and mother-daughter relationships. The third phase of feminist criticism concerned itself primarily with research into and development of theoretical and conceptual structures. Feminist criticism thus required not simply "the recognition of women's writing but a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing".<sup>30</sup>

The feminist readers of *Frozen* are therefore in a large sense programmatic – as they exercise what appears to be a combination of all phases of feminist criticism – exposing misogyny, exploring the (possible) territory of female imagination and effectively (re)imagining feminist plots and characters, and revising theoretical assumptions about the text. Yet to act critically, I would argue, is not equivalent to being a "feminist implied reader" – if such a thing is indeed possible. The first and probably the most blatant issue with a "feminist implied reader" is the assumption that there is such a thing as a "feminist implied author" – especially in the context of varying definitions and interpretations of "feminism", as exemplified by Colman, Thomas, Ellis and Williams.

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<sup>28</sup> Elaine Showalter: "The Feminist Critical Revolution". *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Ed. Showalter. New York 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1985.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Fragmentation and the co-existence of “feminisms” is a feature of the contemporary feminist movement, and that is certainly very productive. Yet if the implied reader and the implied author have to meet in some middle for the production of meaning within a text (bearing in mind that both are constructs), it would be difficult to accomplish a meeting and speak of a “feminist” text if the rules for feminism are polymorphous, fluid, or contradictory. Admittedly, a text may be classified as feminist even when several definitions of feminism coexist. The question, then, is according to which norms of feminism is the text structured – or, under which rules can the implied author operate?

The second problem is connected to the feminist reader’s act of criticism. Crucially, the feminist reader is programmatic not only on her own behalf, but on behalf of a second type of reader, represented by the children. The child, who Steena Williams claims will have her first contact with the “Disney Princess” in a void of intertextual knowledge, will undoubtedly experience the characters as “feminist (enough)”. Undoubtedly so, as this will occur in the absence both of a point of comparison and of a sophisticated means of evaluation. However, as Disney texts most patently do address children, they need to evoke a juvenile implied reader, and this is and at the same time is not connected to feminism. As reader-response theorists contend, in the process of meaning formation, the reader’s competence shapes and is in turn shaped by the text. In this case, there is an exchange along those lines – assuming a certain age, a child’s knowledge of her culture, environment, language, and narrative tropes are the tools by which she shapes the meaning of the text, and this knowledge is refined and enhanced through the viewing. If the child is considered a blank-slate where feminist and intertextual sensibilities are concerned, it is the text’s formative duty to lay the ground work for the child’s future competence, and this can be criticized by the adult feminist reader.

Which leads to the third and last issue made obvious by the current debate. The adult feminist reader, in her quest for a text replete with feminist educational models for children, easily overlooks a series of perspectives which may nevertheless be fundamentally connected to feminism. A case-in-point is represented by the criticism received on the topic of Elsa. While admitting that Elsa is the first Disney

Princess to become a queen and rule (without needing a consort), Colman spends a lot more energy concentrating on Elsa's sparkling outfit, deeming it "aesthetically motivated" and 'objectifying'. In the article "I Can't 'Let It Go'"<sup>31</sup>, Dana Stevens similarly decries the makeover Elsa gives herself while creating her ice-palace. "My daughter loves Frozen, but that weird come-hither makeover in its show-stopping ballad leaves me very cold" writes Stevens. Both critics focus on the sexual and aesthetic dimension of the transformation, while simultaneously neglecting to mention that Elsa is a first in many significant respects.

Elsa is the first Disney Princess not only to become an independent ruling figure, but also to be depicted as the wielder of tremendous, imagination-defying magic. There is, to my knowledge, little comparison to date between Elsa's skills and those of previous princesses. Snow White, Cinderella, Belle and Ariel have traditionally 'female' skills and interests: they can cook, clean, sew, sing, read, and dance. Tiana wants to open a restaurant, but it all boils down to cooking in the end. Rapunzel is sporty (and feisty with a pan), but her most impressive skill is her healing magic – emphasising women as 'alternative' healers. Mulan is the only one to enter a traditionally male career, that of a soldier, but this is gained only through the subterfuge of assuming a male persona. Elsa does none of those things. Instead, she has a skill that allows her to be creative on a very large scale, and is the first Disney Princess who is also, in addition to everything else, an architect. And it is this, perhaps, rather than her glass slippers and toss of the head, that should be on the table.

Or perhaps not. The sexualizing of Elsa is an equally and relevant fascinating topic. It has been established by Colman's research that the sexual image during the makeover (including tight dress, sashaying, loosened hair, and head toss) was fully intended by the producers. So the question here, again, is what is the message and who are its intended recipients. If the message is a not-so-veiled one

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<sup>31</sup> Dana Stevens: "I Can't 'Let It Go'". *Slate*.

[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2014/02/\\_let\\_it\\_go\\_idina\\_menzel\\_s\\_frozen\\_ballad\\_it\\_sends\\_the\\_wrong\\_message.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2014/02/_let_it_go_idina_menzel_s_frozen_ballad_it_sends_the_wrong_message.html), 14.02.2014 (cited 19.03.2014)

that a woman simply cannot be in a position of power without being traditionally beautiful and sexual, I can see how Dana Stevens, representative of the adult feminist reader, would cry in outrage. However, if we are being realistic, it is equally feminist to ask why an adult female who is deemed fit to rule a country cannot wear the outfits she likes and embrace any subtle sexual mischievousness she desires. The confusion of viewers before and after the film who think that Elsa should have been the villain (as indeed was the case in the original Andersen story) is perhaps a reflection that the old angel / whore dichotomy is fully functional.

Discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and described as 'eternal types' that male authors have invented for women, the 'angel' and the 'monster' are doubles which must be killed in order for female creativity to be freed.<sup>32</sup> In their discussion of another fairytale, Gilbert and Gubar analyze the character of Snow White as the passive angel, transformed into an inanimate object of art by patriarchy. The Queen, with her feminine wiles, sexual energy, and magical knowledge, is the unruly monster. Yet despite their differences, the two share goals, and eat from the same apple. They are "in some sense one".<sup>33</sup>

While Elsa starts as docile as Snow White, she, unlike her fairy-tale counterpart, does not end up repressing the Queen in herself. Elsa displays a femininity and sexual aura typically associated with the monster but, significantly, it is an aura divorced from true evil intention. When she unleashes a creative magical energy, she occupies the role of a "father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch"<sup>34</sup> of architectural texts. It is a precarious and innovative blending that upsets the dichotomy internalized not only by viewers, but probably also by some of *Frozen*'s producers. Clearly, feminist reflection upon these connections has hitherto tended to be too narrow in scope. To form an accurate picture, a discussion on

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<sup>32</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert / Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer In the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*. New Haven / London 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

whether *Frozen* is a feminist text should extend to include not only representatives from the genre of Disney movies, but rather to a wealth of feminist literature that the film might reasonably reference, allude to, or evoke.

The current debate around *Frozen* thus reveals that rather than being straight-forward, the act of reading and interpreting the animated feature as feminist is riddled with a series of perplexing problems. These include the challenges in constructing a feminist reader and the precariousness of the communication model involving a (feminist) Disney text. There is an underlying anxiety and insecurity symptomatic of a communication model which is, in fact, attempting to reach at least two types of different readers: the fully-fledged feminist (in her myriad aspects) and the feminist-in-training. Some, like Colman, adopt the cynical view:

Throwing the doors open to women with a new generation of intelligent, capable female characters [...] is a smart move, and Disney knows it. That's why Disney has been beating the "More Feminism" drum for years now: not because they believe it, but because the children of millennials are being brought up in homes that champion intelligent, outspoken women, and that's where the ticket sales are coming from. But Disney has, and has always had, a fine line to tread between breaking new ground, and maintaining the comfort of tradition, or it risks losing the millions in ticket sales and merchandise that comes from the old vanguard. *Frozen* walks that line like a tightrope, but not by actually breaking new ground.<sup>35</sup>

While undoubtedly correct about the mercantile endeavours of Disney and their fine-balancing act, Colman assumes an infinite authorial intention and control behind the text which is problematic. This more or less implies that the real author(s) can dictate the shape of the implied author to the smallest detail. It also implies that there is only one, fixed model of feminism which can

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<sup>35</sup> Colman: "The Problem with False Feminism. Or why *Frozen* left me cold" (cf. fn. 5).

be adopted or subverted by Disney. The debate about *Frozen*, however, serves to prove both points wrong – its viewers create and re-create the text as feminist or not according to their reading competence, previous knowledge, flexibility, and interpretative skills, and disagree strongly on definitions of feminism. Without adhering too strictly to reader-response theory, it is not only because the feminists quoted are real readers, and not implied readers, that they sometimes remain unclear about what part of the communication is intentional, and what is slippage and excess. It is also because to some extent meaning, and especially meaning connected to feminist values, is fluid and individually (re)created in every act of new reading. Thus challenged not only to strictly assess the text's values, but also to constantly decide their next move in a complex and elusive interpretative game, the adult reader of *Frozen* represents a fascinating player in a discussion on feminism and textuality which, due to its very premises, is destined to remain open.