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Queer coding in the Disney Renaissance: Locating queerness in Disney animated musicals and their remakes.

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Abstract

This project concerns *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994) and their live action remakes. Each of the original films was released during the so-called Disney Renaissance, a period during which Disney saw a return to commercial success. Each of the films has become notable for the presence of queer coding. This project establishes that there are characters, Jafar and Scar who have queer theories based on stereotypes while there are also others who rely on details of the plot. The original versions each received more positive reviews than their remakes and this project discusses whether changes to queer coded characters have impacted this. I focus on Disney's acknowledgement of the importance of queer representation. Ultimately concluding that while we, as the audience, are entitled to interpret characters in any way we like Disney, because they know the importance of queer representation, should provide more openly queer characters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The period between 1989 and 1999 marked a resurgence in the popularity of films released by Disney. This success followed a period of declining popularity following the death of Walt Disney in 1966. Consequently, this decade was christened the “Disney Renaissance.”¹ During this period, the studio returned to techniques they used while Walt was in charge. The predominant change was the decision to release animated musicals. Throughout this decade, Disney received generally positive reviews accompanied by consistently breaking their own profit records. To illustrate this, the film released the year before their Renaissance started, *Oliver & Company* (1988), grossed \$100 million.² In comparison, the next year, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) grossed over \$200 million.³ Their approach was already doubling their revenue from individual films. Their subsequent releases generally trended upwards in terms of revenue until *The Lion King* (1994) which remains one of the most successful films of all time with over \$1 billion in revenue.⁴ A number of these Renaissance films have retained their popularity over the last two decades and have been remade in live-action format in the latter half of the 2010s, with other films being planned for the 2020s.

The films of the Disney Renaissance are: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999). Most of these films were praised, particularly for their animation and appeal to both adults and children.⁵ Furthermore, each film was nominated for at least one

¹ Hahn, Don, dir. 2009. *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Disney.

² Box Office Mojo. 2022. “Oliver & Company.” Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0095776/>.

³ Box Office Mojo. 2022. “The Little Mermaid.” Box Office Mojo. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0097757/?ref_=bo_se_r_2.

⁴ Box Office Mojo. 2022. “The Lion King (1994).” Box Office Mojo. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0110357/?ref_=bo_se_r_1.

⁵ Richmond, Wendy. 1993. “Smarties just won’t miss this little gem.” *Hammersmith & Shepherds Bush Gazette*, December 3, 1993, 58.

Academy Award with six of the films winning at least one. Six of them won Best Original Song, five of which also won Best Original Score.⁶ In addition, *Beauty and the Beast* became the first animated film to be nominated for Best Picture. The films were not the only way in which Disney earned money during their Renaissance. Anna Coogan, in the *Dublin Evening Herald* said that the merchandise and advertising made *Aladdin* unavoidable, even if you did not watch it.⁷ This speaks to the amount of publicity there was for these ten films and how much excitement built before and after their release.

In this project, I will focus on the first three animated musicals which have had live-action-style remakes as musicals. These are: *Beauty and the Beast* (1991 & 2017), *Aladdin* (1992 & 2019), and *The Lion King* (1994 & 2019). *Mulan* (1998) was remade in live-action format in 2020 but not as a musical. The recent release of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) means that I am unable to include a detailed discussion in this project however, I will briefly discuss this live-action version in the final chapter.⁸ In particular, I will examine the queer coded characters each film contains. These are Jafar in *Aladdin*, Le Fou in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Scar, Pumbaa and Timon in *The Lion King*. I will analyse the construction of the characters and make comparisons between the original films and the new versions to establish whether the queer coded elements have been retained. I will also search newspaper archives from both the UK and USA for reviews of the films to establish how these characters were received by audiences. Furthermore, I shall use research by Will Letts about “camp” to establish ways in which queer coding can be used to critique attitudes towards queer people in society.⁹

⁶ Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2022. “Awards Databases.” Oscars.org. <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/awards-databases-0>.

⁷ Coogan, Anna. 1993. “Billion pound stroke of Genie-us.” *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, November 12, 1993, 16.

⁸ IMDb. 2022. “The Little Mermaid (2023).” IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5971474/>.

⁹ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

In this introductory chapter I will discuss the cultural context during which each of the films was released and the historical record Disney has in terms of queer representation, racial diversity, antisemitism, and the portrayal of gender. I will explain the Disney Renaissance by putting it in the context of Disney's history and introduce the films, characters, songs, and creatives I will discuss in the upcoming chapters. I will then outline the concept of queer coding, examine how it can be constructed, talk about whether it is intentional, and introduce the idea of queerbaiting. I will then present the positive and negative impacts it can have on the queer community.

Cultural Context

In order to contextualise the queer theories surrounding these films, it is important to understand the attitudes towards queer people and queer representation during these eras. The first versions of the films were released during the 1990s. Howard University's School of Law describes this decade as a "pivotal" time for gay rights in the USA.¹⁰ They state that it was a decade during which younger people began to realise that LGBTQ+ people experienced discrimination and they started to speak out against this. However, these issues were still politically contentious which led to discriminatory legislation being introduced during this period.

The 1993 "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" U.S. military policy was a compromise used by Bill Clinton to lift the ban on gay men serving in the military while simultaneously retaining the ban on homosexual activity. The year before, in Colorado, voters approved the ballot measure "Amendment 2" which made it illegal for municipalities to create anti-discrimination laws to protect queer people. This law was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1996 but was a

¹⁰Howard University School of Law. 2023. "HUSL Library: A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: The 1990s, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and DOMA." Howard University Law Library. <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/lgbtq/90s>.

contributing factor to the 1993 march on Washington for queer rights. The same year Amendment 2 was struck down, the Defence of Marriage Act was signed into law by Bill Clinton. It legally defined marriage as being between one man and one woman. It was not until 17 years later that this law was struck down. There was a stark contrast between the desire of the queer community for acceptance and equality and the policies being enacted by the US government. This shows the social context of legal oppression that was present against queer people during the 1990s.

The Proud Trust (an organisation based in the UK which supports young LGBTQ+ people) states that this queer representation is important because it highlights to young people that having a queer identity “is not a barrier to reaching [their] aspirations.”¹¹ By the time the first of Disney’s remakes was released, there was increased queer visibility in popular culture, as John Paul Brammer writes in his 2019 essay.¹² Celebrities and politicians coming out as members of the LGBTQ+ community or declaring themselves allies improved queer visibility and gave the community voices with large audiences. The Defence of Marriage Act had been struck down and gay marriage was legal in several states around the USA.

Despite the increased queer visibility and celebrity allyship, opposition has continued. This became particularly prevalent after the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. In 2022, Ron DeSantis, Florida Governor, signed the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill into law which forbade any discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in classrooms.¹³ This bill works in opposition to the interests of the queer community and

¹¹The Proud Trust. 2023. “Why Representation Matters.” The Proud Trust. <https://www.theproudtrust.org/trusted-adults/lgbt-icons/why-representation-matters/>.

¹² Brammer, John P. 2019. “The decade in LGBTQ: Pop culture visibility but stalled political progress.” NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/decade-lgbtq-pop-culture-visibility-stalled-political-progress-ncna1108786>.

¹³ Woodward, Alex. 2022. “What is Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill?” <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/dont-say-gay-bill-florida-desantis-b2074720.html>.

prevents children from being exposed to queerness as a normal part of society. The Human Rights Campaign states that between 2021 and 2022 in the USA, there was a 13.8% increase in hate crimes based on sexual orientation and a 32.9% increase in hate crimes based on gender identity.¹⁴ They attribute this to the toxifying discourse surrounding queer rights and the “wave of harmful and discriminatory legislation.”¹⁵

Both time periods were contentious for queer rights and had dichotomies between the desires the general public and the laws enacted by governments. However, in the 2010s, legal rights for queer people advanced significantly. Same-sex marriage became legal in the USA and queer people were legally protected from discrimination. Yet, legal protection is not preventing hate crimes which are still prevalent in society today. The Proud Trust states that representation shows that “being LGBTQ+ is a ‘normal’ identity.”¹⁶ Representation can therefore protect queer people from violent hate crimes by encouraging a more tolerant society. The live-action remakes of the 1990 Disney films were released in the context of these calls for further representation. This therefore highlights the importance of work like this which explores how queer people are or are not being represented.

¹⁴ Luneau, Delphine. 2023. “FBI's Annual Crime Report — Amid State of Emergency, Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate Crimes Hit Staggering Record Highs.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/fbis-annual-crime-report-amid-state-of-emergency-anti-lgbtq-hate-crimes-hit-staggering-record-highs>.

¹⁵Luneau, Delphine. 2023. “FBI's Annual Crime Report — Amid State of Emergency, Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate Crimes Hit Staggering Record Highs.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/fbis-annual-crime-report-amid-state-of-emergency-anti-lgbtq-hate-crimes-hit-staggering-record-highs>.

¹⁶The Proud Trust. 2023. “Why Representation Matters.” The Proud Trust. <https://www.theproudtrust.org/trusted-adults/lgbt-icons/why-representation-matters/>.

The State of Diversity in Disney and their Films

The Walt Disney Company, which throughout this dissertation shall be known as “Disney,” was founded in 1923 by brothers Walt and Roy O. Disney. It was then known as Disney Brothers Studio but was quickly renamed as Walt Disney Studio and then Walt Disney Productions. The succession of names shows the important role that Walt had in the creative side of the company. In 1928, under the direction of Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, they produced *Steamboat Willie* (1928), one of the first animated films with synchronised sound and the first outing of Mickey Mouse who has later become a mascot of the company and thus one of their most recognisable characters.

Nine years later, Disney released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) which was their first feature-length animated film. This film was also the first ever film to have a soundtrack album released concurrently with the film itself. This shows both the importance of the songs and music to the success of the film and the company’s ability to find new and inventive ways to generate income. There was reportedly a standing ovation by the audience watching the premiere and critics agreed that the film was fantastic and a “work of art.”¹⁷ During the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, they developed their own revolutionary version of the multiplane camera Lotte Reiniger first created.¹⁸ This enabled them to create depth in their backgrounds using glass layers with drawings on. The film was therefore revolutionary in several ways: the techniques they used for animation, the length of the animation, and the importance of music to the film’s commercial success.

After the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, they had several other popular animations including *Pinocchio* (1940), *Bambi* (1942), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

¹⁷ Kinni, Theodore, and The Disney Institute. 2011. *Be Our Guest: Revised and Updated Edition: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*. Disney Book Group.

¹⁸ Denney, James, and Pat Williams. 2004. *How to Be Like Walt: Capturing the Disney Magic Every Day of Your Life*. Health Communications, Incorporated.

Alongside this continued success, Walt found yet another avenue through which to generate income. The development of his idea to create amusement parks has grown into the now successful division of Disney: “Disney Parks, Experiences and Products.” Walt’s health declined and he eventually died in December 1966. The last animated film he contributed to was *The Jungle Book* (1967) after which, the company’s focus switched away from animation to live-action films. This was followed by a decline in the popularity of their films illustrated by the reduction in Box Office takings from *The Jungle Book* which took \$378 million¹⁹ to *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) which took only \$17.87 million.²⁰

Michael Eisner was appointed as CEO in 1984 which was a turning point. *The Little Mermaid* (1989) marked a return to animated musicals. It was followed by nine successful films, as mentioned previously. The increased quality and popularity of these films has allowed this period to be named “The Disney Renaissance.”²¹ The company began to see success that had become rare for them since the death of Walt. In the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (2009), animator and producer Don Hahn attributes some of the resurgence in popularity to the return to animation after Disney’s management had considered it a dying art after Walt’s death.

Queerness and Heteronormativity

While Disney’s animations are generally popular, none of them is without its problems. Francesco Piluso comments in a 2023 article that in most Disney films, the protagonists are unquestioned in their heterosexuality.²² In their first feature-length animation, *Snow White*

¹⁹Mallory, Michael. 2003. “Tooned in: Disney’s ani classics set the bar and lit the way for future generations.” *Variety*, (October).

²⁰ Nash Information Services. 2023. “Bedknobs and Broomsticks (1971) - Financial Information.” *The Numbers*. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Bedknobs-and-Broomsticks>.

²¹Hahn, Don, dir. 2009. *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Disney.

²²Piluso, Francesco. 2023. “Above the heteronormative narrative: looking up the place of Disney’s villains.” *Semiotica* 2023, no. 255 (November): 131-148.

and the Seven Dwarfs, Snow White can only be saved by the nameless Prince and in *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora can only be saved by Prince Phillip. Not only does this put heterosexuality at the centre of the film, but it also portrays heterosexuality as a way in which people can be saved, therefore suggesting it is necessary or desirable for a happy life. Every Renaissance film from *The Little Mermaid* to *Tarzan* includes such a detail. In the former, Ariel's entire story is about wanting legs to be able to marry Eric²³ and in *Tarzan*, Jane falls in love with Tarzan and ultimately stays in the jungle with him.²⁴

Piluso comments that Disney regularly utilised queer stereotypes when depicting antagonists during the 20th century.²⁵ Not only do the majority of Disney Renaissance films have at least one queer coded character, this has continued into the 21st century. Sabrina Mittermeier comments that *Frozen* (2013) includes queer coding and can be an allegory for the queer experience.²⁶ Mittermeier uses the lack of a male love-interest for one of the protagonists, Elsa, as evidence for her being a lesbian. This is a somewhat problematic theory as it portrays heterosexuality as the norm. While throughout the history of Disney this has been the case, this should not be perpetuated as it paints queer people as outcasts. Yet, Elsa's lack of interest in love has resonated with the asexual and aromantic communities. Mittermeier writes that this clashes with the calls for Elsa to be given a girlfriend with #GiveElsaAGirlfriend trending on twitter in 2016.²⁷ Neil Hayward Cocks states that *Frozen*, and specifically the song "Let it Go" can be described as an allegory for the

²³ Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1989. *The Little Mermaid*. Disney.

²⁴ Lima, Kevin, and Chris Buck, dirs. 1999. *Tarzan*. Disney.

²⁵ Piluso, Francesco. 2023. "Above the heteronormative narrative: looking up the place of Disney's villains." *Semiotica* 2023, no. 255 (November): 131-148.

²⁶ Mittermeier, Sabrina. 2021. "Disney's Queer Queen – Frozen's Elsa and Queer Representation — Fantasy/Animation." *Fantasy/Animation*. <https://www.fantasy-animation.org/current-posts/disneys-queer-queen-frozens-elsa-and-queer-representation>.

²⁷ Mittermeier, Sabrina. 2021. "Disney's Queer Queen – Frozen's Elsa and Queer Representation — Fantasy/Animation." *Fantasy/Animation*. <https://www.fantasy-animation.org/current-posts/disneys-queer-queen-frozens-elsa-and-queer-representation>.

queer experience as queer people can relate to the isolation that Elsa feels.²⁸ Furthermore, the song “Let it Go” shows Elsa accepting who she is and has become an anthem of empowerment and self-acceptance for queer people.

In 2019 Disney was given a “perfect score for workplace equality.”²⁹ Therefore, one can assume that they are progressive, and their actions should reflect this. However, in a 2022 letter to Disney executives, Pixar (a subsidiary of Disney) employees stated that they were “forced to censor overtly gay affection in their films.”³⁰ Additionally, Disney was heavily criticised for their tepid response to the so-called “Don’t Say Gay Bill” in Florida.³¹ Disney initially seemed reluctant to condemn the legislation, causing outrage within the company. Employees staged walkouts because the large number of LGBTQ+ staff members at Disney were furious and began to question how safe they were at their workplace. Eventually, Disney claimed their goal was to strike down the bill once it had passed. This delayed response has led people to question the priorities of Disney. This inconsistent messaging highlights a cultural issue at Disney where they acknowledge the importance of queer representation but do not follow through in their films and with their actions. This is why this research is important as it can bring issues like this to the forefront.

²⁸Cocks, Neil H. 2022. “Letting Go, Coming Out, and Working Through: Queer Frozen.” *Humanities* 11, no. 6 (November): 146.

²⁹ The Walt Disney Company. 2019. “Disney Earns Perfect Score for LGBTQ Workplace Equality.” The Walt Disney Company. <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-earns-perfect-score-for-lgbtq-workplace-equality/>.

³⁰ Clark, Conor. 2022. “Disney censors “overtly gay affection” in Pixar films, letter from staff claims.” *Gay Times*. https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/disney-censors-overtly-gay-affection-in-pixar-films-letter-from-staff-claims/?utm_campaign=later-linkinbio-gaytimes&utm_content=later-25230063&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkin.bio.

³¹ Associated Press. 2022. “Disney workers walk out over 'don't say gay' bill as company sends mixed messages.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/mar/22/disney-workers-walk-out-dont-say-gay-bill-mixed-messages>.

Gender

It is important to acknowledge that people have multifaceted identities. Queer people can be oppressed for reasons beyond their queer identities. I am therefore briefly going to explore Disney's history of representation beyond queerness. The portrayal of gender and gender roles is also problematic. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, being the first film of its kind, originated the Disney Princess stereotype. Even though she is the titular character, Snow White's fate is dictated exclusively by a Prince. He kisses her and wakes her from her "eternal sleep".³² The Prince plays a minimal role in the film up to this point and his gender seems to enable him to save Snow White. Not only does this raise the issue of an imbalance of power, but there is also the issue of consent as the Prince is not questioned about kissing a sleeping woman.

Twelve years later, the gender roles in *Sleeping Beauty* are unchanged but during the Disney Renaissance there was an attempt to alter this pattern. *Beauty and the Beast* is a notable example. Allison Craven, in a 2002 article, comments that there are "feminist sentiments" to Belle that set her apart from other princesses.³³ She is depicted as an intelligent young woman who has ambitions further than her sheltered upbringing and has a love for reading.³⁴ Female protagonists were not portrayed in this way in Disney's earlier animated films, giving Belle a level of independence of which other Disney Princesses could only dream. Belle is also depicted as brave. She chooses to replace her father as prisoner in the castle, she saves her father's life, and she repeatedly rejects Gaston's advances when in previous films, Princesses had been unable to reject advances from handsome men. However, Craven comments that it is the "feminist sentiments" attributed to Belle that

³² Hand, David, dir. 1937. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Disney.

³³ Craven, Allison. 2002. "Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (May): 123-142.

³⁴ Trousdale, Gary, and Kirk Wise, dirs. 1991. *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

make her an outcast within her community, undermining the positive, feminist message of a female protagonist with agency and intelligence.³⁵

Race

There are also criticisms of the racial stereotypes present in many of the earlier Disney animations. Films such as *Fantasia* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) now include content warnings on Disney+ to warn viewers of offensive content.³⁶ *Song of the South* (1946) has largely been removed from circulation because this live-action film perpetuated racist stereotypes. Whoopi Goldberg has suggested it be re-released in order to educate people about “where it came from and why it came out.”³⁷ This has not happened yet, but it shows that people want Disney to use their problematic past to educate people about equality. Goldberg’s voice is not only relevant here because she is an activist who fights for racial equality, but because she starred in *The Lion King* (1994), so her voice has more weight to Disney.

Before a 1991 release of *Fantasia*, John Carnochen edited out a scene where a black centaur was seen polishing the hooves of a white centaur.³⁸ Carnochen said that having the black centaur in servitude to a white centaur in this way was “appalling” and should have been removed sooner.³⁹ In Evan Marmol’s chapter of Salvador Murguía’s *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films* (2018), he lays out the criticism of *Dumbo*. The criticism came

³⁵ Craven, Allison. 2002. “Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland.” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (May): 123-142.

³⁶ Grant, Joe, and Dick Huemer, dirs. 1940. *Fantasia*. Disney.
Sharpsteen, Ben, dir. 1941. *Dumbo*. Disney.

³⁷ Polowy, Kevin. 2018. “Whoopi Goldberg Wants Disney to Bring Back 'Song of the South' to Start Conversation About Controversial 1946 Film.” Yahoo Entertainment. https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/whoopi-goldberg-wants-disney-bring-back-song-south-start-conversation-controversial-1946-film-154030256.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG0C9tT7mYQBxAXmEmHwARiZjuN.

³⁸ Grant, Joe, and Dick Huemer, dirs. 1940. *Fantasia*. Disney.

³⁹ Daly, Steve. 1991. “Changes in the restored version of 'Fantasia.'” *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/article/1991/11/29/changes-restored-version-fantasia/>.

from the fact that the only Black people represented on screen were the workers putting up the circus tent.⁴⁰ The chapter also criticises the crow characters as they speak in a stereotypical Southern African American Dialect. While some of the voice actors of the crows were Black, the lead crow was voiced by White actor, Cliff Edwards.

Antisemitism

Academics have also criticised Disney because of antisemitic tropes present in some of their films. In her article “Why Do So Many Villains Look Like Me?” Tatum Schutt discusses the antisemitism that is present in the portrayal of villainy in several Disney films.⁴¹ Her first example of this is Mother Gothel in *Tangled* (2010). She comments on the curly black hair and the hooked nose which are “stereotypical to Jews.”⁴² Additionally, the story follows Blood libel which is an antisemitic canard (unfounded rumour or story⁴³) which falsely accuses Jews of murdering Christian boys to use their blood in religious rituals. She also states that Hades’ thick New York accent and use of Yiddish phrases in *Hercules* both contribute to this antisemitic portrayal of villainy. Essentially, the origins of several Disney villains are antisemitic caricatures of Jews. Schutt traces these caricatures from their origins, through the Grimm fairy tales which are “rife” with antisemitism through to the Disney films which are based on these fairy tales.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Murguía, Salvador J., ed. 2018. *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

⁴¹ Schutt, Tatum. 2022. “Why Do So Many Disney Villains Look Like Me?” Hey Alma. <https://www.heyalma.com/why-do-so-many-disney-villains-look-like-me/>.

⁴² Schutt, Tatum. 2022. “Why Do So Many Disney Villains Look Like Me?” Hey Alma. <https://www.heyalma.com/why-do-so-many-disney-villains-look-like-me/>.

⁴³ Oxford English Dictionary. 2017. “Canard.” Oxford English Dictionary. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/canard_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

⁴⁴ Schutt, Tatum. 2022. “Why Do So Many Disney Villains Look Like Me?” Hey Alma. <https://www.heyalma.com/why-do-so-many-disney-villains-look-like-me/>.

Queer Creatives

Throughout its history, Disney has employed many queer creatives to make their films. Howard Ashman is particularly notable. He wrote the lyrics for *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. He started as the lyricist for *Aladdin* but died of AIDS before the film was complete, so Tim Rice helped Alan Menken finish the film's songs. There is a correlation between Ashman's first involvement in Disney's films in *The Little Mermaid* and the beginning of the Disney Renaissance. According to Don Hahn's documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (2009), his involvement was one of the key changes Disney made to their filmmaking process in order to revitalise them.⁴⁵ Peter Kunze writes about how *Beauty and the Beast* is framed as an AIDS allegory.⁴⁶ Specifically, he describes how the director of the 2017 remake, Bill Condon, states how Ashman himself considered the film a metaphor for his struggle with AIDS. This illustrates the importance of queer people and queer stories to the success of Disney's films in their renaissance. However, as I state in chapter two, this claim is disputed by Howard Ashman's sister.

In chapter three, about *Aladdin* I will analyse the cut song "Humiliate the Boy." This is a song written by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken which was to be sung by Jafar. Ashman's sister, Sarah granted me access to the lyrics of this song, and I will quote them during chapter three. Being able to access this cut material from the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. gives me an insight into the development of Jafar's personality. While they are available online, the access I had enabled me to see Ashman's notes and changes during the writing process. This is because there are two different versions of the lyrics showing two different stages of the song's development.

⁴⁵ Hahn, Don, dir. 2009. *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Disney.

⁴⁶Kunze, Peter. 2021. "Revise and resubmit: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), live-action remakes, and the Disney Princess franchise." *Feminist Media Studies*, (August).

Another queer musician involved in the Disney Renaissance is Elton John. He wrote the songs, with lyrics by Tim Rice, for *The Lion King* (1994). Tim Rice suggested they bring Elton John onboard after their first choice, Alan Menken, was unavailable. While Menken wrote both the scores and songs for *Aladdin* and *Beauty and The Beast*, John only wrote the songs. There is no sinister reason for this as Hans Zimmer was selected to write the score because of his previous experience writing for films based in Africa (*A World Apart* (1988) and *The Power of One* (1992)). John's involvement further highlights the importance of queer people to Disney's history and the contributions they have made to their films.

Walt's Record

In order to analyse Disney's record of representation, it is important to look at Walt Disney's record briefly because it will establish the foundations from which the company was grown. He has been accused of both antisemitism and racism. Manohla Dargis outlines the accusations of antisemitism against him in her 2011 article.⁴⁷ In this, she states that he gave "Hitler's pet filmmaker," Leni Reifenstahl, a tour of the studios.⁴⁸ When he discovered who his guest was a few months later he said he did not know who this person was. Yet, on Reifenstahl's return to Germany, she used her visit to push anti-Jewish propaganda. The accusations of racism against Walt stemmed from the use of racial stereotypes in his films. Biographer Neal Gabler, speaking on *The Early Show* in 2006 said that Walt was never actively racist.⁴⁹ However, he called him "racially insensitive" and justifies this by saying many people were at the time. This is unconvincing as Gabler appears to be suggesting that being "racially insensitive" is somehow acceptable. Furthermore, Walt was a powerful

⁴⁷ Dargis, Manohla. 2011. "Conflicting Voices in Lars von Trier's Words and Works." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2011.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/movies/conflicting-voices-in-lars-von-triers-words-and-works.html?scp=1&sq=And%20Now%20a%20Word%20from&st=Search>.

⁴⁸ Dargis, Manohla. 2011. "Conflicting Voices in Lars von Trier's Words and Works." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2011.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/movies/conflicting-voices-in-lars-von-triers-words-and-works.html?scp=1&sq=And%20Now%20a%20Word%20from&st=Search>.

⁴⁹ Dakss, Brian. 2006. "Walt Disney: More Than 'Toons, Theme Parks." *CBS News*.

man and speaking against powerful figures is risky. It is therefore difficult to establish exactly how Walt behaved and what his record was.

To summarise this section, Disney has a complicated and varied history with regards to representation. Historically, there has been very little representation of queer individuals and heterosexuality was always portrayed as a desirable norm. The romances are always between a man and a woman, and these romances are often portrayed as solutions to problems, as in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Furthermore, the depictions race, religion, and gender in their films has been criticised throughout their history with Walt Disney, himself, having conflicting reports regarding his own racism and antisemitism. Like before the 1991 release of *Fantasia*, Disney has shown a capability of altering elements of films that are deemed to be offensive. They therefore understand the importance of ensuring fair representation of their audience's identities. This is reinforced with their 2019 statement highlighting the importance of queer representation. Because Disney hold themselves to this standard regarding queer representation in the workplace, it is important to ensure that their messaging is consistent and that their output of films matches their words.

Understanding Queer Coding

Koeun Kim defines queer coding as “be[ing] implicated as having or displaying stereotypes and behaviours that are associated (even if inaccurate) with homosexuality or queerness.”⁵⁰ She states that it is a technique that has been used since the early days of theatre. Discussions of homosexuality were taboo at this time, but it was believed that gay people could be identified through the observation of their personality traits and actions. Laurence Senelick states that “homosexuality [was] first introduced in disguise.”⁵¹ While the origins of

⁵⁰Kim, Koeun. 2017. “Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care).” *Dialogues@RU* 2017:156-155.

⁵¹Senelick, Laurence. 1993. “The Homosexual as Villain and Victim in Fin-de-Siècle Drama.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4 (2): 201-229.

queer coding were on stage, we can trace its use to films. As this project will state, Disney used these techniques during the Disney Renaissance on characters including Scar and Jafar.

It is important to emphasise that many of the traits historically used to imply homosexuality are stereotypes. Kim gives an example saying that if a character “sashays” and “talks with a slight lisp”, people are more likely to assume that they are homosexual.⁵² While this is true and speaks to societal attitudes, it illustrates the issue perfectly. Using stereotypes in this way risks generating caricatures of queer people and making a mockery of the queer community. Furthermore, as Adelia Brown comments, many queer coded characters, particularly in Disney films, are villains, for example Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953) and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). She states that creating links between queer coded and villainous traits “encourages a negative interpretation of homosexuality.”⁵³ Her suggestion is that the films have a responsibility to avoid creating these links. However, I would argue this assumes that characters are queer coded intentionally. Some of the responsibility for the links she discusses must lie with those creating the queer theories because without evidence of intentionality, this issue is with the interpretation as well as the creation of the art. Yet, I must also consider that if open representation of queer people was more readily available, queer coding would be unnecessary and the links Brown defines would not have been created.

More recently, in 2019, Emma Nordin discussed the phenomenon of queerbaiting in her chapter from the Book *Queerbaiting and Fandom* edited by Joseph Brennan.⁵⁴ She quotes

⁵²Kim, Koeun. 2017. “Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care).” *Dialogues@RU* 2017:156-155.

⁵³Brown, Adelia. 2021. “Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s.” *The Macksey Journal* 2.

⁵⁴ Nordin, Emma. 2019. “Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them.” In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan, 25-40. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

Judith Fathallah who defines queerbaiting as when writers and networks suggest that queerness is present “to gain the attention of queer viewers ... then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility.”⁵⁵ In chapter two of this dissertation, I will discuss the so-called “exclusively gay moment” in the 2017 version of *Beauty and the Beast*.⁵⁶ This is a brief moment at the end of the film in which Le Fou dances with another man and is an example of queerbaiting because Bill Condon, the director, built it up as open queerness and the reality was disappointing. Mark Andrejevic comments that queer reading mainly serves the creators of media because it enables them to keep fans watching their output.⁵⁷ This is because, if you take the *Beauty and the Beast* example, the audience is left so disappointed by the queer representation they have been promised, that it does not serve them at all, but the studio still benefits financially. However, the discourse around queerbaiting is controversial. Non-queer actors portraying queer roles have been accused of queerbaiting. A recent, prominent example of this is Kit Connor who, before he came out as bisexual, was criticised for playing the role of Nick Nelson in *Heartstopper* (2022) because it was assumed he was straight. He was effectively forced to come out on Twitter because of the toxic discourse around queerbaiting.⁵⁸ It is therefore important to take care when discussing this as it can cause real harm.

As mentioned previously, Disney has a history of queer coding. In her article “Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s,” Adelia Brown highlights

⁵⁵ Nordin, Emma. 2019. “Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them.” In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan, 25-40. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

⁵⁶ Condon, Bill, dir. 2017. *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

Barnes, Brooks. 2017. “‘Beauty and the Beast’ Director Talks of ‘Exclusively Gay’ Moment (Published 2017).” *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/movies/beauty-and-the-beast-director-talks-of-exclusively-gay-moment.html>.

⁵⁷ Nordin, Emma. 2019. “Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them.” In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan, 25-40. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

⁵⁸ Saunders, Emma. 2022. “Heartstopper’s Kit Connor says he was ‘forced’ to come out as bisexual.” *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-63469444>.

the queer coding of Captain Hook in Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953).⁵⁹ Brown states that Hook exaggerates the feminine aspects of George Darling, the father. This assertion is reinforced by the fundamental connection between these two characters as both are voiced by Hans Conried. As evidence for Hook's homosexuality Brown cites the attention that he pays to his appearance. For example, while George is only concerned with his cufflinks, Hook transcends this by consistently dressing perfectly.⁶⁰ Furthermore, as Hook's plans begin to go awry, his clothing mirrors the same trajectory. This suggests a link between Hook's identity as a villain, his appearance, and therefore his queer potential. The phenomenon of queer coding villains is not limited to Disney and spans multiple genres. In a chapter from *Dialogues@RU*, Koeun Kim identifies King Xerxes from *300* (2006) (a historical action film) as queer because of his makeup, jewellery, and "sexual aggression toward[s] the Spartans."⁶¹ Furthermore, Kim identifies the villains running the Capitol in the four *The Hunger Games* films as queer coded because they wear makeup and speak "flamboyant[ly]."⁶²

The origins of queer coding can be traced to the era of Hollywood wherein the Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC) was enforced, between 1934 and 1968.⁶³ Among other things, the MPPC dictated that the depiction of homosexuality in films was forbidden. Nordin comments that queer reading was therefore necessary for those who wanted queer content in mainstream media.⁶⁴ A notable example is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The queer coding

⁵⁹ Brown, Adelia. 2021. "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s." *The Macksey Journal* 2.

⁶⁰ Brown, Adelia. 2021. "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s." *The Macksey Journal* 2.

⁶¹ Kim, Koeun. 2017. "Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care)." *Dialogues@RU* 2017:156-155.

⁶² Kim, Koeun. 2017. "Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care)." *Dialogues@RU* 2017:156-155.

⁶³ Brown, Adelia. 2021. "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s." *The Macksey Journal* 2.

⁶⁴ Nordin, Emma. 2019. "Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them." In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan, 25-40. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

is predominantly focused on Dorothy's companions: The Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion. They are explicitly called "queer" in the book on which the film is based.⁶⁵ The word "queer" has multiple meanings and when the book was written it was most likely to mean "strange." However, there are still connotations of going against the status quo which is something that resonates with the queer community. The Lion in particular garners attention in this regard by being described as a "sissy" in the song "If I Only Had the Nerve."⁶⁶ The emasculation of the Lion during the film contributes to the queer coding because of the stereotypes of gay men being effeminate with the term "sissy" being used as a slur for gay men. The idea that the Lion is less masculine has been latched onto by the queer community as representation in a time of suppression.⁶⁷ Furthermore the term "Friend of Dorothy" was a way in which queer people identified themselves so they could find safe spaces with other queer people whilst keeping their identities discrete. This shows the impact that *The Wizard of Oz* had on the queer community when the film was released and the power of queer coding, especially in times of queer repression.

During this dissertation I shall refer to Stephanie Madon's 1997 study entitled "What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength."⁶⁸ I have chosen to use scholarship that coincides with the making of the original films because it gives a greater insight to the society that influenced the creation and reception of the films. This article was in the peer reviewed journal *Sex Roles*, and I will use it to investigate whether queer coding is based on the stereotypes Madon describes. The methodology of the study was to ask people what attributes they believed gay men would and would not

⁶⁵ Baum, L. F. 1900. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Chicago: George M. Hill Company.

⁶⁶ Harburg, Arlen. 1939. "If I Only Had the Nerve." In *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming.

⁶⁷ Robbins, Hannah. 2019. "'Friends Of Dorothy': Queerness In and Beyond the MGM Film." In *Adapting The Wizard of Oz: Musical Versions from Baum to MGM and Beyond*, edited by Dominic McHugh and Danielle Birkett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁸ Madon, Stephanie. 1997. "What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength." *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

have. These were collated into two lists. One of stereotypes, characteristics that people believed most gay men had; and one of counterstereotypes, characteristics that people believed gay men would not have. Stereotypical attributes identified by this study include: “Feminine, wear earrings, well groomed, fashionable, affectionate, talkative, and wear flashy clothes.”⁶⁹ Counterstereotypes include: “Act macho, sloppy looking, unemotional, masculine, shabby dressers, and conservative.”⁷⁰ This can give us an indication of characteristics that were considered indicative of someone being gay but I will also use this study to establish which queer theories rely on stereotypes.

In the next three chapters I shall explore the films in more detail. I will devote one chapter to each film and its respective live-action remake. Each will begin with an examination of the original film’s queer coding in comparison to the live-action remake. For example, I will use scholars’ theories to lay out how Scar and Jafar are queer coded using stereotypes whereas Le Fou, Pumbaa, and Timon’s coding arises primarily from details of the plot and the relationships they have with other characters. I will also comment on the removal of queer coded elements of the films in their remakes. I will follow this with a comparison of the responses to the different versions to get an idea of the perceptions of the films and if there are any characters who garnered particular reactions. I will show that the original films were more popular than the newer versions and generally, audiences did not understand why they were remade. The fifth, and final, chapter will be my conclusion. In this I will show the pattern of queer coding being lost in the live-action remakes. I will also highlight the patterns present around the use of stereotypes for queer coding and the opportunity this could present for progressing attitudes to queer people. Finally, I will establish that Disney has an opportunity to make their messaging around queer representation consistent to help

⁶⁹ Madon, Stephanie. 1997. “What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength.” *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

⁷⁰Madon, Stephanie. 1997. “What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength.” *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

foster progress because their words around the topic in 2019 suggest that this is something they wish to do.⁷¹

⁷¹ The Walt Disney Company. 2019. "Disney Earns Perfect Score for LGBTQ Workplace Equality." The Walt Disney Company. <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-earns-perfect-score-for-lgbtq-workplace-equality/>.

Chapter 2: *Beauty and the Beast* (1991 & 2017)

While it was the second film of the Disney Renaissance, in 2017 *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) became the first to have a live-action remake. The original film premiered in December 1991 and was directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise who would later direct *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) together.⁷² *Beauty and the Beast* became Disney's most successful animated film to date and was the first animated film to have an initial run earn more than \$100 million in the USA and Canada.⁷³ This indicates that Disney's success during this era was not only in relation to their own previous statistics but in comparison to other contemporary films of multiple different genres.

In this chapter, I will compare the versions of Gaston and Le Fou in both *Beauty and the Beast* films. I will focus on how the characters are perceived by the audience by drawing on both academic and non-academic sources. The use of non-academic sources will enable me to gain an understanding of where audiences see queerness in the films directly rather than through a different lens. A particular focus will be the song "Gaston" in which Le Fou, Gaston, and the villagers sing about how much they admire Gaston.⁷⁴ The nature of Le Fou's portrayal in the remake will be of particular interest because he was publicised as the first openly gay character in a Disney feature film. This stems from an "exclusively gay moment" (when Le Fou is seen waltzing with another male-presenting character) that Bill Condon, the director, spoke about in interviews.⁷⁵ In this chapter I shall explore the build-up

⁷² Some of the film was first shown two months earlier at the New York Film Festival but only 70% of the animation had been completed at this stage.

⁷³ The Washington Post. 2006. "\$100 Million Movies." The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/daily/movies/100million/article.htm>

⁷⁴ Ashman, Howard, and Howard Menken. 1991. "Gaston." In *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

⁷⁵ Barnes, Brooks. 2017. "'Beauty and the Beast' Director Talks of 'Exclusively Gay' Moment (Published 2017)." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/movies/beauty-and-the-beast-director-talks-of-exclusively-gay-moment.html>.

to this in the press and the subsequent reaction to it, ultimately establishing whether it brings any merit to the assertions made by journalists that Le Fou is openly gay. Finally, I will explore the critical response to each film. This will enable me to gauge their success and get a flavour of whether the changes to the queer coding are a factor in the differences between the responses to the films.

An Introduction to *Beauty and the Beast*

The original film stars Paige O'Hara as Belle, Robby Benson as the Beast, Richard White as Gaston, Jesse Corti as Le Fou, and Rex Everhart as Maurice (Belle's father). Alan Menken wrote the music with lyrics by Howard Ashman, the pair returning after their successful partnership in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). In addition to the commercial success mentioned above, *Beauty and the Beast* won two Academy Awards (Best Original Score and Best Song for the titular song, "Beauty and the Beast"). Additionally, it won three Golden Globes (Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy, Best Original Score - Motion Picture, and Best Song - "Beauty and the Beast) with more success at the Grammy Awards where they won a further five awards. This success is indicative of the change that Disney was undergoing and the upward trend in the reception of their output.

Based on the fairy tale *La Belle et la Bête* (1756) by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, *Beauty and the Beast* is about Belle, a young woman from a small town who gets imprisoned by the Beast. The Beast, once a handsome but arrogant prince, lives in a castle and has been put under a spell whereby he is turned into an unsightly beast and his servants into pieces of furniture. He must learn to love another person as much as they love him back to break the curse. Belle, throughout the film, is subjected to multiple advances by Gaston, an arrogant man in the village who believes Belle must marry him. He is the antagonist and is followed by his adoring friend, Le Fou, who unquestioningly obeys Gaston's often unreasonable orders. While in the Beast's castle, the Beast and Belle start to fall for each

other, but this is interrupted by her needing to return home to care for her father. Gaston riles up a group of villagers to storm the castle and kill the Beast. Gaston loses the fight, Belle kisses the Beast which lifts the curse, and the occupants of the castle all return to human form.⁷⁶

The film was remade in 2017 with only small changes to the arc of the story. This marked the beginning of Disney's live-action revival of their animated Renaissance. The film stars Emma Watson as Belle, Dan Stevens as The Beast, Luke Evans as Gaston, Kevin Kline as Maurice, and Josh Gad as Le Fou. The Beast's servants are played by acting royalty such as Sir Ian McKellen and Dame Emma Thompson. The film was directed by Bill Condon and the screenplay was by Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos. It earned \$1.264 billion at the box office and was the second highest grossing film of 2017.⁷⁷ However, it was less successful at awards ceremonies than its 1991 predecessor. It received only two Academy Award nominations and no Golden Globe or Grammy nominations. The critical response was mixed and, as I will say during this chapter, critics agreed that, when compared with the original, it was less enjoyable.

Gaston and Le Fou's Relationship

Le Fou and Gaston are the two characters with whom the queer theories are associated. Matthew Guiver lays out a fan's theory about why they think there is a sexual relationship between Gaston and Le Fou in a 2015 BuzzFeed article entitled "Gaston And Le Fou Were Probably Fucking".⁷⁸ The way in which Le Fou is queer coded is through his relationship with Gaston; critic and fan, Brandie Ashe lays out a theory stating Le Fou's adoration for

⁷⁶ A full synopsis of *Beauty and the Beast* is in Appendix 1.

⁷⁷ Box Office Mojo. 2022. "Beauty and the Beast." Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl222594561/>.

⁷⁸ Guiver, Mathew. 2015. "Gaston and Le Fou Were Probably Fucking." BuzzFeed. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mathewguiver/gaston-and-lefou-were-probably-fucking>.

Gaston can be read as queerness.⁷⁹ In the 1991 film, Le Fou follows Gaston around and obsesses over him as though he has a crush on him. He blindly follows Gaston's orders without thinking of the potential consequences. On the other hand, Gaston appears irritated by many of Le Fou's actions. For example, after Gaston's plan to ambush Belle into marriage fails, resulting in him being thrown into a pool of mud, Gaston becomes irritated by Le Fou asking how it went. Le Fou's main function for Gaston is to be someone to do undesirable tasks for him. He forces Le Fou to wait in the snow for Maurice and Belle's return in order to ambush them and take Maurice to the asylum. His admiration for Gaston transcends logic because as he waits outside their house, he gets covered in snow which turns him a light shade of blue.⁸⁰ Le Fou views his own health as secondary to pleasing his friend Gaston. This shows a distinct imbalance of power in their relationship with Gaston being the dominant partner and Le Fou being submissive whilst also suggesting that Le Fou's love and adoration is completely unrequited.

The song "Gaston" is a key location in which we see Le Fou's adoration of Gaston. Preceding this song, Belle has rejected Gaston and he is feeling "publicly humiliated."⁸¹ During the song, Le Fou reassures his friend by leading the village in describing how wonderful they think he is. The lyrics of the song essentially say that Gaston is the strongest and best at everything he does. For example, "No one's slick as Gaston, No one's quick as Gaston" and "No one's neck's as incredibly thick as Gaston."⁸² This particular line is sung by Le Fou and implies that he is physically attracted to Gaston. I regard this song as evidence for Le Fou being gay as it explicitly states the physical and emotional attraction he

⁷⁹ Ashe, Brandie. 2012. "Queering Disney." True Classics.

<https://trueclassics.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/queering-disney/>.

⁸⁰ Trousdale, Gary, and Kirk Wise, dirs. 1991. *Beauty and the Beast*.

⁸¹ Ashman, Howard, and Howard Menken. 1991. "Gaston." In *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

⁸² Ashman, Howard, and Howard Menken. 1991. "Gaston." In *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

has for Gaston. This detail is unchanged in the 2017 version of the film as the sentiment remains that Le Fou is listing everything he loves about Gaston.

However, the nature of this friendship has changed in the 2017 remake. You gain the impression of a more two-sided relationship in which Gaston is less irritated by his sidekick and is instead a close friend with whom he is able to have conversations and take advice from. Le Fou's role in the 2017 film has become being the voice of reason for Gaston. For example, he voices that he does not like Gaston's idea of leaving Maurice for dead in the woods. Le Fou has gained the ability to think for himself and attempts to prevent Gaston from marching to attack the Beast. Bill Condon stated to press that Le Fou "must" be in love with Gaston.⁸³ While this shows that Condon's intention was to depict a crush in their relationship, Le Fou's newfound ability to think rationally and objectively about Gaston's actions has added a further arc to the story and arguably makes it less likely that he has a crush on Gaston. Le Fou begins to realise that Gaston is a narcissistic person who only acts in his own interests. He begins to resist Gaston's behaviour and demands which is a large change from the original film in which Gaston's instructions were always followed by a loyal, obedient, and adoring Le Fou.

Le Fou as Comedic Relief

Bradley J. Bond writes that when homosexuality is depicted in films, it is often through "jokes related to sexuality."⁸⁴ The same is true with Le Fou in the original film. He is not particularly important to the plot and there would be a limited impact on the storyline if he were removed altogether. Le Fou contributes humour to offset the unpleasant narcissism that Gaston

⁸³ Deen, Sarah. 2017. "Is Le Fou in love with Gaston? Beauty And The Beast director gives us his answer." Metro. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/14/is-le-fou-in-love-with-gaston-beauty-and-the-beast-director-answers-the-age-old-question-6503693/>.

⁸⁴ Bond, Bradley J. 2014. "Sex and Sexuality in Entertainment Media Popular With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents." *Mass Communication and Society* 17 (1): 98-120.

brings. The first instance of this in *Beauty and the Beast* is at the beginning. Gaston shoots a bird from the sky and Le Fou stands below with an open sack to catch it. The bird falls directly to the side of the open sack. This slapstick moment counterbalances Gaston's objectionable behaviour with humour, which immediately provides comic relief. Later in the film, during the scene in which Gaston is bribing the warden of the asylum, Monsieur D'Arque (Tony Jay), to intern Maurice, Le Fou again creates comedy which offsets the tension that Gaston's plan ferments. Throughout the scene, Le Fou causes disruptions to the discussion which ultimately leads Gaston to force a tankard onto his head to stop him from talking. This is a clear example of the use of humour at the expense of Le Fou to break the tension in the film. While the jokes are not related to Le Fou's sexuality, Carson Cook finds in his 2018 study that queer characters are more likely to have jokes at their expense in films.⁸⁵ This indicates that this trope which, as Cook says, has been present in films for decades, is present in this version of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Le Fou's name encapsulates the role he has as the comic relief as it literally translates from French as "the fool." He is there to be laughed at and plays no vital role in the action of the film. Furthermore, even Le Fou's appearance is intended to be humorous. While Gaston is incredibly tall, Le Fou sits at the other extreme. His short stature is often compared directly to Gaston and other characters, as shown in Fig. 1. While the villagers are marching to the castle, Le Fou is placed directly next to taller people and Gaston on a horse which creates physical comedy therefore distracting from the drama that is building during this march. Moreover, Le Fou's size enables him to be in situations other characters could not. During the song "Gaston" the blatant narcissism on display is offset by Le Fou being thrown around the room and spending time underneath Gaston's chair. This evidence shows that Le Fou's primary role is to serve Gaston whilst providing tension breaking humour.

⁸⁵Cook, Carson. 2018. "A content analysis of LGBT representation on broadcast and streaming television." Honors Theses 2018 (5): 19.



Fig. 1 - Image of Le Fou and Gaston during “Gaston”⁸⁶

Le Fou has been altered in the 2017 version as he is no longer primarily a source of comedy. The film itself has become more serious with fewer opportunities for humour. Le Fou therefore no longer fits the trope of queer and queer coded characters being the primary target of jokes because of these changes. Furthermore, the humour tends to be more evenly spread between characters. The friendship between Lumière (Ewan McGregor) and Cogsworth (Ian McKellen) is a source of humour, particularly because of their frequent disagreements. Cogsworth tends to abide by the Beast’s rules whereas Lumière has a more rebellious personality. The way in which they disagree is often through sarcasm. For example, when talking about Belle and disobeying the Beast’s orders, Lumière says “A broken clock is right two times a day ... But this is not one of those times.”⁸⁷ This shows the fact that it is possible for films to remain humorous whilst simultaneously avoiding the use of tired tropes.

⁸⁶ Trousdale, Gary, and Kirk Wise, dirs. 1991. “Image of Le Fou and Gaston.” In *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

⁸⁷ Condon, Bill, dir. 2017. *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

“Exclusively Gay Moment”

During the advanced press before the release of the 2017 film, the director, Bill Condon frequently spoke about an “exclusively gay moment.”⁸⁸ This was known to be regarding Le Fou and led to speculation that he was going to be the first openly gay character in a Disney film. An article on Sky News even stated that Le Fou was going to “explore his sexuality.”⁸⁹ This caused controversy in some countries. For example, the Malaysian Government decided that they would not show the film if it included this moment and screenings in Kuwait were cancelled.⁹⁰ On the release of the film, there was mass disappointment from fans after they saw the reality of this moment. According to USA Today, fans described it as “much ado about nothing” with some commenting that “it did not go far enough.”⁹¹ The marketing suggested that it would be a landmark moment which changed representation in Disney’s future films.⁹² However, the moment consisted of Le Fou dancing with a man for approximately three seconds during the ball at the end of this film. This does not amount to a landmark moment. If this moment had no speculation, it would have been more successful because there would have been no articles about Le Fou “exploring his sexuality” and the reality of this short moment would have been less disappointing for fans. This moment follows Judith Fathallah’s principle of queerbaiting I mentioned in chapter one because it

⁸⁸ Barnes, Brooks. 2017. “Beauty and the Beast’ Director Talks of ‘Exclusively Gay’ Moment.” The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/movies/beauty-and-the-beast-director-talks-of-exclusively-gay-moment.html>.

⁸⁹ Arnold, Adam. 2017. “Beauty And The Beast: ‘Gay moment’ set to make Disney history.” Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-moment-set-to-make-disney-history-10786476>.

⁹⁰ “Beauty and the Beast pulled from cinemas in Kuwait.” 2017. BBC. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-39337844>.

⁹¹ Lawler, Kelly. 2017. “Beauty and the Beast’s ‘gay moment’ may have been much ado about nothing.” USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/03/20/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-moment-audience-reaction/99407168/>.

⁹² Deen, Sarah. 2017. “Is Le Fou in love with Gaston? Beauty And The Beast director gives us his answer.” Metro. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/14/is-le-fou-in-love-with-gaston-beauty-and-the-beast-director-answers-the-age-old-question-6503693/>.

“gain[s] the attention of queer viewers ... then emphatically den[ies] them the possibility.”⁹³

This is something that should be avoided because it exploits queer people for the purposes of publicity.

Gaston's Sexuality

Jerry Griswold wrote that Gaston's overstated masculinity “amounts to a resistance to his own homosexuality.”⁹⁴ Yet, I do not think that it is this simple. Griswold's assertion implies that homosexuality is in direct opposition to masculinity, a fundamentally problematic suggestion as there is no singular way in which sexuality is expressed. Stephanie Madon's study states that masculinity is a counterstereotype of gay men so Griswold's assertion is unhelpful as it perpetuates this idea that gay men cannot be masculine.⁹⁵ Furthermore, more convincing evidence of Gaston's possible homosexuality is his lack of awareness that he is being fawned over by three attractive women throughout the film. However, his entire purpose in the film is to marry Belle. He goes about this in increasingly problematic ways from the misogyny I will mention later to marching to kill the Beast. He is therefore most likely heterosexual.

Beauty and the Beast as an AIDS Allegory

Looking further than the characters, Peter Kunze frames the plot of *Beauty and the Beast* as an allegory for the experiences of gay and bisexual men during the AIDS epidemic.⁹⁶

The Beast was isolated and ostracised by the villagers because of his curse. During the

⁹³ Nordin, Emma. 2019. “Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them.” In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, edited by Joseph Brennan, 25-40. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

⁹⁴ Griswold, Jerome. 2004. *The meanings of "Beauty and the beast": a handbook*. Broadview Press.

⁹⁵ Madon, Stephanie. 1997. “What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength.” *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

⁹⁶ Kunze, Peter. 2021. “Revise and resubmit: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), live-action remakes, and the Disney Princess franchise.” *Feminist Media Studies*, (August).

height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the gay and bisexual community was stigmatised because the disease was disproportionately affecting them.⁹⁷ This led to widespread scaremongering and the ostracisation of gay and bisexual men from society. Kunze states that this mirrors what happened to the Beast before the events of the film take place. Gaston is the embodiment of the scaremongering that surrounded this situation in the 1980s when he is embellishing the truth in order to rile the villagers up and make them join him in storming the castle. One could speculate that this was an intentional aspect of the film because of Howard Ashman's illness, which he started to tell people about after *The Little Mermaid* was released in 1989. On the other hand, we cannot equate lived experience with intentionality. It is incorrect to assume that those with lived experience of a certain situation automatically make everything they do about this struggle. However, Kunze states that the director of the 2017 version, Bill Condon, claims this was intentional.⁹⁸ Yet, on howardashman.com, a website curated by Ashman's sister, it is categorically stated that "he didn't see this movie, or any of his other creations as a metaphor for an illness."⁹⁹ She does however, comment that the consumer of the film is entitled to put whatever spin on a film they like. So, while it is confirmed that it was not intended as an allegory, it is valid to read it as such if you wish.

Feminism and *Beauty and the Beast*

Looking further than queerness, as Allison Craven notes, the characterisation of Belle gained praise from fans and critics for being stronger and more independent than previous

⁹⁷Ruel, Erin, and Richard T. Campbell. 2006. "Homophobia and HIV/AIDS: Attitude change in the face of an epidemic." *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (June): 2167-2178.

⁹⁸Kunze, Peter. 2021. "Revise and resubmit: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), live-action remakes, and the Disney Princess franchise." *Feminist Media Studies*, (August).

⁹⁹Ashman Gillespie, Sarah. 2017. "Metaphorically watching *Beauty and the Beast* — Howard Ashman." *Howard Ashman*. <https://www.howardashman.com/blog/metaphorically-watching-beauty-and-the-beast>.

Disney Princesses.¹⁰⁰ At the start of the film we discover that she is an intelligent person who is constantly reading. During the film, she stands up for herself to Gaston when he incessantly makes advances on her, rejecting him each time; and is shown to be noble by pleading to be imprisoned instead of her father and by being willing to venture back into the forest to save her father. This agency is something that Disney Princesses had never been given until this point. It was a welcome change, praised by Anna Coogan, film critic for the *Evening Herald (Dublin)* among several other critics.¹⁰¹ However, alongside this, there are depictions of obnoxious misogyny from Gaston. He frequently asserts aggressively that he “will have [Belle].”¹⁰² This suggestion that women are the property of men could be offensive, however the intentions of this are to paint Gaston in a negative light. This is successful. Furthermore, Craven notes that Belle’s strength is empowering for women who have been in similar situations at the same time highlighting that misogyny is an issue that needs to be addressed in society. Ultimately, the portrayal of Belle as an independent woman is refreshing because it tells children that women can stand up for themselves and be the heroes of stories.

In the remake, they made some additions which gave further depth to Belle’s character. While in the original, Belle is different just because she likes reading and has ambition and independence, she teaches a young girl to read during the 2017 film. Furthermore, she is an inventor, more so than her father.¹⁰³ She invents a machine that makes it easier to do laundry whereas the purpose of Maurice’s trip on which he encounters the Beast is to go to the market rather than to show off an invention, as he is in the original. This has the effect

¹⁰⁰Craven, Allison. 2002. “Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland.” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (May): 123-142.

¹⁰¹Buchanan, Kirsty. 1992. “On Screen.” *Amersham Advertiser*, October 28, 1992.

Coogan, Anna. 1992. “Anna Coogan on the latest cinema releases.” *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, October 15, 1992.

Harmsworth, Madeline. 1992. “What a beauty!” *Sunday Mirror*, October 11, 1992.

¹⁰²Trousdale, Gary, and Kirk Wise, dirs. 1991. *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

¹⁰³Condon, Bill, dir. 2017. *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney.

of giving Belle more ambition whilst also being less isolated from her community. A further way Belle is given agency is through the way in which she replaces her father in prison at the Beast's castle. While in the original, Belle pleads with the Beast to allow her to swap places, in the remake, Belle goes into the cell and forcibly switches places with her father. This shows more bravery than the relatively passive pleading of the original version. The feminist elements of the original film have therefore been retained and built upon for a more modern audience in the 2017 version as where, in the original, she is isolated, in the 2017 film, she is depicted as a member of her community. Strong female characters are therefore not depicted as something to be avoided. This shows Disney's ability to read the appetite of the audience when it comes to gender representation and change with the attitudes of society.

Critical Reaction to the Films

Beauty and the Beast continued Disney's return to critical success started by *The Little Mermaid* two years previously. The reviews in the British Newspaper Archive are almost exclusively positive. In the *Sunday Mirror*, Madeleine Harmsworth comments that the film is entertaining for all ages because of the humour for the children and the "more sophisticated edge" for adults.¹⁰⁴ She comments on Disney's ability to change with the times by saying the omission of Disney's "sugary sweetness" gives the film an edge that "suit[s] modern tastes." Furthermore, like many others, Harmsworth comments on the refreshing nature of Belle being a Disney Princess who is not all about looks and has intelligence and agency of her own. Anna Coogan in the *Dublin Evening Herald* praises how "politically correct" it is and gives Linda Woolverton, writer of the screenplay, the credit for this.¹⁰⁵ This further shows a desire for Disney to begin moving forwards regarding women's rights. However, nobody alludes to the fact that the 1990s seems quite late to be making these steps because

¹⁰⁴ Harmsworth, Madeline. 1992. "What a beauty!" *Sunday Mirror*, October 11, 1992.

¹⁰⁵ Coogan, Anna. 1992. "Anna Coogan on the latest cinema releases." *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, October 15, 1992.

legally, women had been protected from workplace discrimination since 1964, showing progress had been made significantly earlier in other areas. Gender inequality was therefore known about in society so Disney could have been doing more earlier to promote representation of strong female characters in their films.

The critical response to the 2017 version was mixed. While Le Fou is not notable in the reviews of the original film, many of the 2017 reviews I found have echoed my frustration at Bill Condon's "exclusively gay moment." For example, Kelly Lawler calls it "much ado about nothing" in the title of her review which she opens by saying "so, that was it, huh?"¹⁰⁶ This encapsulates the disappointment the audience felt over how this "moment" was publicised. Owen Gleiberman adds to this by stating how while the film is "touching," it "never convinces you it's a movie the world was waiting for."¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, he echoes my comments earlier and states that it "loses its slapstick." Showing that the changes Bill Condon has undertaken to the film, including those to Le Fou, have negatively impacted its enjoyability.

Conclusions

In summary, in my interpretation of Le Fou I agree with the theories of journalists like Mathew Guiver. In the original, he is depicted as someone who has not come to terms with his sexuality but is in love with his straight friend, Gaston. This is achieved through Le Fou's apparent inability to see any of Gaston's actions as objectionable or wrong in any way and has therefore avoided the use of stereotypes. The nature of this character and his relationship with Gaston has transformed in the 2017 version. Le Fou gains the ability to think more objectively and question Gaston's actions. We therefore see him being more

¹⁰⁶ Lawler, Kelly. 2017. "Beauty and the Beast's 'gay moment' may have been much ado about nothing." USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/03/20/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-moment-audience-reaction/99407168/>.

¹⁰⁷ Gleiberman, Owen. 2017. "Beauty and the Beast' Review: Emma Watson in Disney Live-Action Redo." Variety. <https://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/beauty-and-the-beast-review-emma-watson-1202001341/>.

rational with his affection for Gaston. The director, Bill Condon claims that Le Fou is in love with Gaston.¹⁰⁸ This speaks more to the original than the remake because of the arc following Le Fou's realisation of the truth about Gaston and his consequential waning affection for him. This is a welcome addition for me because it shows a willingness to keep some queer potential in the film whilst also avoiding portraying queer attraction as irrational, as Le Fou's attraction is in the original film. However, Bill Condon's decision to publicise the "exclusively gay moment" heavily has tarnished the film for me because of the disappointment that the reality brought. While it is beneficial that problematic elements of queer coding have been avoided in the remake (stereotypes, queerness as villainy, and queerness as comedic relief), this publicity and moments leaves me wondering what could have been if Le Fou's sexuality had been "explored" more.

¹⁰⁸ Deen, Sarah. 2017. "Is Le Fou in love with Gaston? Beauty And The Beast director gives us his answer." Metro. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/14/is-le-fou-in-love-with-gaston-beauty-and-the-beast-director-answers-the-age-old-question-6503693/>.

Chapter 3: *Aladdin* (1992 & 2019)

Aladdin (1992) was released a year after the success of *Beauty and the Beast*. It was another enormously successful film and surpassed the box office takings of *Beauty and the Beast*. Not only was it Disney's most successful animated film in the USA box office, but it was also overall the most successful film of 1992 in the USA, beating *Batman Returns* (1992). Its success continued internationally. *Aladdin* beat *Jurassic Park* (1992) to become 1992's highest grossing film globally.¹⁰⁹ It remains one of the highest grossing traditionally animated films in the world: it is in third place behind Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) and *The Simpsons Movie* (2007).¹¹⁰ In addition to this, it had further success during awards season. It was nominated for five Academy Awards and won two. It received six further nominations at the Golden Globes and won three awards. At the Grammys, the music was also successful, receiving eight nominations and winning five awards.

In this chapter, after briefly introducing both versions of the film I will introduce Jafar, the villain and queer coded character in the original version of *Aladdin*. I will explain why there is a queer theory surrounding him and call on Will Letts' work to describe how this use of stereotypes could pose an opportunity rather than a problem. I will then highlight the places in which comedy is located in both versions and how, despite Jafar not being a comedic character, in places the film still falls into the trope of using queer people as a punchline. I will briefly discuss racist elements of the original film. This will highlight times when Disney has been able to alter their films because of backlash. Finally, before summarising my findings, I will compare the critical reactions to both films.

¹⁰⁹ Box Office Mojo. 2022. "1992 Worldwide Box Office." Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/1992/>.

¹¹⁰ Alfar, Paolo. 2020. "Top 10 Highest-Grossing Hand-Drawn Animated Films of All Time." Screen Rant. <https://screenrant.com/top-highest-grossing-hand-drawn-animated-films/>.

An Introduction to *Aladdin*

Aladdin (1992) was directed by John Musker and Rob Clements who had previous success together with *The Little Mermaid* and they would resume their alliance for *Hercules* (1997). Ted Elliot, Terry Rossio, Musker, and Clements were all responsible for the screenplay. Alan Menken wrote the music which had lyrics by both Howard Ashman and Tim Rice. The storyline is based on *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* from *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales, written in Arabic.¹¹¹ The story was not part of the original text but was added by Antoine Galland, a French orientalist and archaeologist, after he heard a Syrian Maronite storyteller called Hanna Diyab tell the story. The idea for an animated musical treatment of the story of *Aladdin* was first pitched by Howard Ashman, the film's lyricist, in 1988. While this idea was initially rejected by the studio, after some further development it was placed into production.¹¹² The film stars Scott Weinger as Aladdin, Robin Williams as the Genie, Linda Larkin as Jasmine, Jonathan Freeman as Jafar, Frank Welker as Abu, Gilbert Gottfriend as Iago, and Douglas Seale as the Sultan.

Aladdin is set in Agrabah, a fictional city in the Middle East. The protagonist, Aladdin is a street urchin who meets Princess Jasmine, the daughter of the Sultan, when she has briefly escaped the palace to get a taste of freedom. Jafar, the royal vizier (advisor) and villain, has Aladdin arrested for theft and lies to Jasmine that he has been executed. Jafar uses Aladdin to get the magic lamp from the Cave of Wonders so he can wish for more power. Aladdin becomes the master of the Genie within the lamp and gets three wishes. One of the wishes is to become "Prince Ali" so he is eligible to marry Jasmine. Eventually, Jafar breaks Aladdin's cover, gains control of the Genie, and wishes to become Sultan and later becomes a genie because of his desire to be the most powerful being. He becomes trapped in his

¹¹¹ Dawood, N. J. 1973. *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights)*. London: Penguin Classics.

¹¹² Hahn, Don, dir. 2018. *Howard*. Disney.

lamp with his parrot, Iago, and thrown into the Cave of Wonder. Finally, the Sultan changes the law so Jasmine can marry someone who is not a Prince.¹¹³ While Jafar is plotting to unmask Aladdin, he was initially going to sing “Humiliate the Boy.”¹¹⁴ This song was cut from the film, but I will discuss the lyrics later in the chapter.

While the general outline of the story in *Aladdin* (2019) has remained faithful to the original, the most obvious difference is that the newer version is live-action whereas the original is animated.¹¹⁵ In general, the changes to the film have created a more serious feeling and there is additional material to create extra steps to the plot and draw the film out. A key difference between the two films is the addition of Dalia, Jasmine’s confidante. Her romance with the genie is a completely new element. The film was directed by Guy Ritchie who also wrote the screenplay alongside John August. The film stars Will Smith as the Genie, Mena Massoud as Aladdin, Naomi Scott as Jasmine, Marwan Kenzari as Jafar, Navid Negahban as The Sultan, and Nasim Pedrad as Dalia. The film earned \$1.051 billion at the box office but won nothing at the Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, or the Grammy Awards.¹¹⁶

Jafar as Camp and Queer Coded

Will Letts discusses the idea of “camp” in relation to Jafar in his chapter in *Disney, Culture and Curriculum* (2016).¹¹⁷ He describes his “bitchy wit and fastidious appearance” as reasons for which he can be considered “camp” and he states that he is a “well-groomed

¹¹³ A full synopsis of *Aladdin* is in Appendix 2.

¹¹⁴ Hahn, Don, dir. 2018. *Howard*. Disney.

¹¹⁵ Ritchie, Guy, dir. 2019. *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹¹⁶ Box Office Mojo. 2022. “Aladdin.” Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13246360065/>.

¹¹⁷ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

villain,” but it is so exaggerated it is “reminiscent of a drag show.”¹¹⁸ In his chapter, Letts describes how “camp satirises mainstream culture.”¹¹⁹ His assertion that we can “read camp as critique” shows the potential to use juxtapositions between characters to draw attention to issues in society. Letts asserts that camp is linked to queer culture and while drawing attention to Jafar as a queer coded character through his appearance, highlights the possibility of using this to fight stereotyping and oppression in society.

One of the aforementioned juxtapositions is that Jafar is consistently impeccably dressed while the Sultan is frequently the opposite. In Fig. 2 you can see his well-groomed appearance alongside the angular neatness of his animation which contribute to the queer theory by suggesting Jafar’s deep interest in his fashion and his appearance. Moreover, Raghav Kingler states that his magic staff (the source of his powers) resembles a phallus which, again, reinforces the queer coding.¹²⁰ When directly compared to the Sultan (Fig. 3) the contrast between the angular nature of Jafar’s appearance and the more rounded and messier appearance of the Sultan is apparent. This places Jafar’s care about his appearance in direct conflict with the Sultan’s lack of care and emphasises how “fastidious” Jafar is with how he dresses and grooms himself.¹²¹ This point is further reinforced when Jafar becomes the Sultan towards the end of the film. While his costume changes colour to match the paler one of the original Sultan, his angular neatness is maintained, widening this gap between the two characters’ appearances.

¹¹⁸Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

¹¹⁹ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

¹²⁰ Kingler, Raghav. 2022. “Content Analysis of Disney’s Portrayal of Minority Groups and its Impact on Minority Adolescents and Children.” *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 3, no. 7 (July): 3065-3074.

¹²¹ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.



Fig. 2 - an illustration of Jafar's appearance¹²²



Fig. 3 - an illustration of the Sultan's appearance¹²³

¹²² Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. "Image of Jafar." In Aladdin. Disney.

¹²³ Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. "Image of the Sultan." In Aladdin. Disney.

Having queer coded villains is problematic because it equates queerness and queer people to negative traits. Unlike in *Beauty and the Beast* where Le Fou is the secondary antagonist and comic relief, Jafar is the primary antagonist. Jafar therefore creates stronger associations between queerness and villainy than Le Fou. However, I must note that Jafar is only queer coded and is not openly queer. Using Letts' work about camp, we can use Jafar to critique attitudes towards queer people in society. The use of stereotypically queer characteristics can open our eyes to prejudice and can help us to understand the disparities between the experiences of queer and non-queer people. It is, of course, important to strive for proper representation and to avoid likening queerness and villainy but if we can use pre-existing characters, like Jafar, as an educational tool in this way, it will be beneficial.

Because the 2019 film is live-action instead of the animation of the original, we cannot expect Jafar to dress as impeccably as that would be unrealistic. In addition, Kenzari's Jafar does not have as tidily groomed facial hair as the animated one, nor does he appear to be wearing eyeliner (Fig. 4). The removal of these attributes has stopped Jafar from playing into the aforementioned stereotypes for gay men whilst simultaneously removing anything considered camp. It is impossible to know whether this was done in order to remove the queer coded elements of the film or to create a more serious and sinister atmosphere. Regardless, the point remains that Jafar is less queer coded in the 2019 version of *Aladdin*.



Fig. 4 - Jafar in *Aladdin* (2019)¹²⁴

“Humiliate the Boy”

Jafar is unique among the villains I am discussing as he does not have his own significant and original song. Gaston has “Gaston” and Scar has “Be Prepared.” Jafar does sing the reprise of “Prince Ali,” but this is not original because it uses material from earlier in the film. However, this is not to say that there was never a song for Jafar to sing. Howard Ashman and Alan Menken wrote “Humiliate the Boy” which was going to be sung by Jafar, Iago, and the Genie (while Jafar is his master). The song was cut from the film, was never animated, and was at the point in the story where Jafar is exposing Aladdin’s “Prince Ali” disguise. The song shows the development of Jafar’s character and how his queerness was initially more obvious than in the finished film.¹²⁵

The first of the two versions is called a “rough dummy.” There are more notes around the edges of this version and many of these notes have been implemented in the second one. We therefore have a timeline from one to the other which can show how the characterisation

¹²⁴ Disney. 2019. “Image of Jafar.” In *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹²⁵ Many thanks to the Library of Congress and Sarah Ashman Gillespie for granting me access to these lyrics and Howard Ashman’s notes surrounding them.

of Jafar was developed in the early stages of production.¹²⁶ One of the more blatant indications of potential queerness is the part of the song about removing Aladdin's clothes. Jafar sings "So it's a treat ... to take his clothes, his shoes, his jewellery."¹²⁷ While in the text itself this is referring to exposing "Prince Ali" as Aladdin, subtextually, the implications are more sexual. Particularly, one line later, when Iago asks about removing Aladdin's "underclothes." Furthermore, the sexual connotations are reinforced with the lyrics calling the lamp a "toy [they] will use to humiliate the boy" which has a subtextual implication of using a sex toy.¹²⁸ In addition, earlier in the song Jafar sings "why be coy? C'mon let's do it!" This use of the word "coy" in this context implies a shyness that is intended to be alluring.¹²⁹ Jafar's intentions can therefore be questioned as perhaps he is trying to be attractive to Aladdin and seduce him. This song gives a new meaning to Jafar's fascination with Aladdin and suggests that he is attracted to Aladdin.

The second version is described as "rough" and has fewer notes surrounding it. This alongside the formatting changes for clearer indications of who sings which lines suggest it is a later version of the song.¹³⁰ The lyrics about taking his clothes have remained in some form but take the angle of "repossess[ing] the clothes" rather than removing them from his body. In addition, the line about removing "underclothes" has been removed which makes the connotations less sexual.¹³¹ The removal of so much of the sexual innuendo reduces the strength of the queerness present in this song. Of course, the line "humiliate the boy,"

¹²⁶ Ashman, Howard. 1992. Lyrics of "Humiliate the Boy." In *Cut material from Aladdin*. Library of Congress.

¹²⁷ Ashman, Howard. 1992. Lyrics of "Humiliate the Boy." In *Cut material from Aladdin*. Library of Congress.

¹²⁸ Ashman, Howard. 1992. Lyrics of "Humiliate the Boy." In *Cut material from Aladdin*. Library of Congress.

¹²⁹ Oxford English Dictionary. 2018. "Coy, adj." Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43551?rskey=DXvmTM&result=4&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

¹³⁰ Ashman, Howard. 1992. Lyrics of "Humiliate the Boy." In *Cut material from Aladdin*. Library of Congress.

¹³¹ Ashman, Howard. 1992. Lyrics of "Humiliate the Boy." In *Cut material from Aladdin*. Library of Congress.

does still imply a violent sexual fantasy of Jafar, but without the lyrics talking about removing Aladdin's clothes, and with no knowledge of the previous version, the sexual connotations are not present, and neither is the queerness.

We can infer the subtextual meaning of this song and the intentions of Ashman when writing the lyrics, but we cannot know either for sure. Both versions of the lyrics are labelled as "rough" and are therefore not final versions. This is reinforced by the extensive handwritten notes around the lyrics of the first version. However, it is possible to track the development of the film through the changes made between the first and second versions. The removal of much of the implied sexual content suggests a desire to limit the sexual innuendo to make the song more appropriate for children which had the consequence of removing examples of queerness. Ashman's initial desire when first pitching the film was to have a "camp villain."¹³² The changes throughout the drafts of "Humiliate the Boy" accompanied by the eventual decision to cut the song show the progression from Ashman's initial idea of a heavily queer coded or camp character to the more subtle coded queerness present in the version of *Aladdin* that was released.

Locations of Comedy

Iago, Jafar's parrot sidekick, is one of the locations of humour throughout the film. In the original, he acts as an irritant for his master and consistently chimes in with unwanted remarks. This humour is at the expense of Jafar which associates this film with the trope outlined by Carson Cook in his 2018 study.¹³³ However, the more serious atmosphere of the 2019 film makes it less plausible for him to be a source of humour so while he is still present as comic relief, this is less frequent. Iago functions as a part-time advisor to Jafar rather than purely an irritant. A notable example of this alteration is at the end. Jafar's desire

¹³²Hahn, Don, dir. 2018. *Howard*. Disney.

¹³³ Cook, Carson. 2018. "A content analysis of LGBT representation on broadcast and streaming television." *Honors Theses* 2018 (5): 19.

for power has made him ask the Genie to make him Sultan, the most powerful Sorcerer, and now a genie. Jafar wishes for this in both films after Aladdin's taunts and without considering the fact he will be required to spend his life in a lamp. Jafar is sucked into the lamp and snatches Iago to bring him in with him. In the animated version, this is followed by jokes about how little space they have and the consequences of that.¹³⁴ This is an element that is removed in the live-action version.¹³⁵ This alteration further removes Jafar from any humour and therefore the trope relating to queer people being used for humour at their own expense.

While Jafar has some comedy at his expense, Robin Williams' Genie provides the vast majority of the humour in the animated *Aladdin*. Quentin Falk in his review in the *Sunday Mirror* comments that the Genie is "the nearest animation has ever come to a spontaneous stand-up comedy routine."¹³⁶ From this, it is clear that part of the attraction to the Genie was the new style of film comedy that Williams provided. However, this comedy is not without its problematic moments. In the scene during which the Genie is transforming Aladdin into "Prince Ali," the Genie becomes a fashion designer.¹³⁷ While this is not fundamentally problematic, the artistic choice to portray this designer as a camp man is an obvious attempt to imply queerness for comic effect. The Genie's voice changes to a stereotypically higher pitched one with a lisp and his movements also become more flamboyant, therefore following some of the stereotypes of gay men that Madon describes in her study.¹³⁸

¹³⁴Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹³⁵Ritchie, Guy, dir. 2019. *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹³⁶Falk, Quentin. 1993. "Williams steals Aladdin's show." *Sunday Mirror*, November 21, 1993, 35.

¹³⁷Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹³⁸Madon, Stephanie. 1997. "What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength." *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

Furthermore, the Genie says "I'm getting kinda fond of you, Al ... not that I want to pick curtains with you or anything?"¹³⁹ The suggestion that men cannot express their fondness to one another without their sexuality being questioned not only speaks to toxic masculinity and men's suppression of their feelings but suggests that gayness is something that should be actively avoided.¹⁴⁰ Admittedly, this is merely a joke. However, even if you disregard the problems I have just outlined and take the joke at face value, this is still an example of using queerness as a punchline. This is therefore an example of the potential sexuality of a character being the punchline of a joke, conforming to the trope that Bradley J. Bond describes.¹⁴¹ I must say though, this is only one line in the film. The majority of what the Genie says is not problematic and you cannot judge the entire character from this one moment. It is true that the Genie is a character with his own problems, but these few short parts of the film cannot detract from the success that this single character brought to *Aladdin*.¹⁴²

Racism in *Aladdin*

Looking further than queer representation, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) criticised the depiction of Arabian culture in *Aladdin*. Arab-Americans commented that the original version of the opening song, "Arabian Nights" contained racist lyrics.¹⁴³ When talking about Arabia, they were initially "where they cut off your ear, if they don't like your face."¹⁴⁴ In an attempt to improve the song, Ashman altered the lyrics to

¹³⁹Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹⁴⁰Flynn, Jessica J., Tom Hollenstein, and Allison Mackey. 2010. "The effect of suppressing and not accepting emotions on depressive symptoms: Is suppression different for men and women?" *Personality and Individual Differences* 19:582-586.

¹⁴¹Bond, Bradley J. 2014. "Sex and Sexuality in Entertainment Media Popular With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents." *Mass Communication and Society* 17 (1): 98-120.

¹⁴²Whitstone, David. 1993. "Aladdin may have magic of success." *Newcastle Journal*, November 17, 1993.

Falk, Quentin. 1993. "Williams steals Aladdin's show." *Sunday Mirror*, November 21, 1993, 35.

¹⁴³*New York Times*. 1993. "Accused of Arab Slur, 'Aladdin' Is Edited." July 11, 1993.

¹⁴⁴*New York Times*. 1993. "Accused of Arab Slur, 'Aladdin' Is Edited." July 11, 1993.

“Where it’s flat and immense, And the heat is intense.”¹⁴⁵ This change marks only the third time Disney has changed a film that was offensive. They had also previously removed an offensive, heavy, Jewish accent from *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and carried out the changes to *Fantasia* to remove the black centaur in servitude to the white centaur.¹⁴⁶ *The Los Angeles Times* reported on 10th July 1993 that the president of the LA chapter of the committee, Don Bustany, stated that this change was not enough “considering the racism depicted in *Aladdin*.”¹⁴⁷ A particular issue they had was that the offensive word “barbaric” was not removed from the song. Disney stated that the word “barbaric” was not referring to the people but to the land.

However, according to the ADC and fans interviewed by *The Washington Post*, a further issue with *Aladdin* is that Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Sultan all speak with an American accent and “all the bad guys have heavy accents.”¹⁴⁸ This teaches the audience, particularly the children, that a foreign accent is a sign of evil which the ADC described as “horrendous racism.”¹⁴⁹ This speaks to the influence that films can have on children and shows the importance of accurate representation. But it also shows that there are practical limits to Disney’s ability to fix issues. Changing the lyrics of a song is a quick and simple solution, however, recasting or re-recording the dialogue for a group of characters is more complex and expensive. In cases such as this, it is important that Disney learns from their mistakes and their willingness to reflect and alter offensive elements of their films proves they

¹⁴⁵ Ashman, Howard. 1993. “Arabian Nights.” In *Aladdin*. Disney.

¹⁴⁶ Gillett, Burt, dir. 1933. *Three Little Pigs*. Disney.

Daly, Steve. 1991. “Changes in the restored version of “Fantasia.”” *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/article/1991/11/29/changes-restored-version-fantasia/>.

¹⁴⁷ Fox, David J. 1993. “Disney Will Alter Song in ‘Aladdin’ Movies: Changes were agreed upon after Arab-Americans complained that some lyrics were racist. Some Arab groups are not satisfied.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1993.

¹⁴⁸ Scheinin, Richard. 1993. “Angry Over ‘Aladdin’: Arabs Decry Film’s Stereotypes.” *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1993.

¹⁴⁹ Fox, David J. 1993. “Disney Will Alter Song in ‘Aladdin’ Movies: Changes were agreed upon after Arab-Americans complained that some lyrics were racist. Some Arab groups are not satisfied.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1993.

understand the importance of including fair, accurate, and inoffensive representation in their films.

Critical Reaction to the Films

As mentioned, *Aladdin* (1992) was hugely successful and remains one of the most commercially successful animated films of all time. This trend of success transfers to the critical response. The vast majority of the reviews in newspapers from the UK, Ireland, and USA are positive and show the popularity of the original film with wider audiences, not just critics. Cathy Kelly, a critic writing in *Sunday World (Dublin)* called it a “new Disney classic” which not only shows how loved it was at the time, but predicts the long lasting success that came after.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, Djinn Gallagher, in the *Sunday Tribune*, commented on the prevalence of merchandise in the shops in the period leading up to Christmas 1993.¹⁵¹ Gallagher quotes someone from Disney’s London office saying that the goal of this merchandise was “like *Jurassic Park*. Only we want to make more money.” Gallagher’s article indicates that Disney’s success extended further than the film itself. This highlights the popularity of the characters and the ability for these films and themes within them to have a cultural impact as their influence transcends the 90 minutes someone is watching the film.

However, a commonality between many of the reviews in the UK and USA is the popularity of the Genie. Merely from looking at headlines, you can begin to see that Robin Williams’ performance was a highlight of the film for the majority of reviewers and fans. For example, “In-genie-us” from the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, “Pure Genie-us” from the *Sandwell Evening Mail*, and “On Screen: Ingenie-ous ‘Aladdin’” from *The Washington Post*.¹⁵² This

¹⁵⁰ Kelly, Cathy. 1993. “Superb Hard Hitting Van Damme Film.” *Sunday World (Dublin)*, November 28, 1993.

¹⁵¹ Gallagher, Djinn. 1993. “A lad in the money.” *Sunday Tribune*, November 28, 1993.

¹⁵² *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*. 1993. “In-genie-us!” November 29, 1993.

Jones, Alison. 1993. “Pure Genie-us.” *Sandwell Evening Mail*, December 3, 1993.

shows that despite it occasionally being based on stereotypes of gay men, the humour the Genie brings to the film was crucial for its success. Furthermore, it makes it clear that Jafar, as the queer coded, or “camp” character, is barely notable in the critical response. As I will state in the next chapter, this is in direct contrast to Scar from *The Lion King* (1994).

The response to the live-action *Aladdin* was more mixed. Aja Romano called it “sluggish” in the title of an article on VOX.com while an article on MTV news stated that people were “pleasantly surprised” when watching the film.¹⁵³ Much of Romano’s criticism surrounded the fact that the possibilities in a live-action film are more limited than in animated films. Their implication here is that the new version of the film is less visually appealing. Romano specifically comments on the changes made to Jafar when they state that Marwan Kenzari (Jafar) assisted the slowing down of the film through his “refusal to turn his character into a campy, over-the-top villain.”¹⁵⁴ But, I also note that the general trend of each of the Disney remakes so far is that they are darker, more serious, with less comic relief so perhaps it was Disney’s goal to have a less camp villain. However, I agree with Romano when they say that this recharacterisation of Jafar appears to influence the other characters and make the film less enjoyable in general. They describe the relative apathy during the final scenes of the remake compared to the fighting at the end of the original film as “inexplicable behaviour” which indicates how the changes which resulted in Jafar being less camp were received unfavourably.

Howe, Desson. 1992. “On Screen: Ingenie-ous ‘Aladdin.’” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1992.

¹⁵³ Romano, Aja. 2019. “Review: Disney’s live-action Aladdin is half charming, half dreadful.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/22/18634316/disneys-aladdin-remake-review-rating>.

Vincent, Brittany. 2019. “First Reactions To ‘Aladdin’ Are Here, And People Are ‘Pleasantly Surprised.’” MTV. <https://www.mtv.com/news/3124642/aladdin-movie-reactions/>.

¹⁵⁴ Romano, Aja. 2019. “Review: Disney’s live-action Aladdin is half charming, half dreadful.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/22/18634316/disneys-aladdin-remake-review-rating>.

Conclusions

Will Letts describes Jafar as “reminiscent of a drag show” and highlights that his precisely groomed appearance in juxtaposition to the Sultan’s messier appearance are reasons he can be described as “camp.”¹⁵⁵ His assertion is that the over-the-top queer coding present in the characterisation of Jafar can be used to evaluate stereotypes of and attitudes towards queer people in society. Jafar absolutely has attributes that are stereotypes of gay men including his “bitchiness” and well-groomed appearance, but we can use this to educate people about the problems with stereotyping rather than plainly criticising the films for insufficient queer representation.¹⁵⁶

However, my analysis of “Humiliate the Boy” draws to attention that Jafar’s obsession with Aladdin present in the film, was, at an earlier stage in development, going to seem more sexual in nature. The presence of innuendo paints Jafar as a predator which associates homosexuality with paedophilia as Aladdin is a teenager in the film. This song was never included in the film which shows that Disney is willing to change details of films that are deemed to be unpopular or offensive, shown again when they changed the lyrics to “Arabian Nights.”¹⁵⁷ The drastic changes to Jafar in the 2019 version of the film proved to be unpopular with fans, despite reviews not indicating that Jafar was a standout feature of the original film, that was the Genie. These changes included removing the stereotypes that allowed Letts to describe Jafar as “camp,” which removes any association between villainy and queerness. This shows how important Jafar was to the pace and enjoyability of the

¹⁵⁵ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵⁶ Letts, Will. 2016. “Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative.” In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵⁷ Gallagher, Djinn. 1993. “A lad in the money.” *Sunday Tribune*, November 28, 1993.

original film and reinforces the power of using the camp in that film to draw attention to attitudes towards queer people in society.

Chapter 4: *The Lion King* (1994 & 2019)

The final films I will be examining are *The Lion King* (1994) and its live-action remake from 2019. The original film is the most financially successful film released during the Disney Renaissance and is their third most successful animated film of all time, behind *Frozen* (2013) and *Frozen II* (2019).¹⁵⁸ The film won Best Motion Picture (Musical or Comedy) at the Golden Globe Awards. The score and songs received considerable critical and industry praise. Hans Zimmer won Best Original Score at the Academy and Golden Globe Awards, Elton John won Best Original Song at the same ceremonies and the Grammy for Best Male Pop Vocal Performance for “Can You Feel the Love Tonight”, Lebo M won Best Instrumental Arrangement with Accompanying Vocals at the Grammy Awards, and finally, also at the Grammy Awards, *The Lion King* won Best Musical Album for Children and Best Spoken Word Album for Children. Elton John, a queer creative, wrote the songs and is partially responsible for much of the success of this film.

In this chapter, after introducing the films and their plots, I will introduce Scar and discuss the queer coding of the 1994 version of the character in comparison to the 2019 character. I will then locate this in the film through the song “Be Prepared.” Next, I will explore the theory laid out by Gael Sweeney about Puma and Timon, the warthog and meerkat, living in a queer utopia and being same-sex parents to Simba. I will then briefly outline the importance of Elton John, a queer creative, to the success of the film before touching on other issues regarding race representation and the depiction of disabled people and those with physical scars. I will write about the critical responses to both films before ending the chapter by drawing together the patterns present in the changes to the film for its 2019 remake.

¹⁵⁸ Sim, Bernardo. “15 Highest-Grossing Disney Animated Movies Ever.” 2020. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni62547717>.

An Introduction to *The Lion King*

The original film was directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff with a screenplay by Irene Mecchi, Jonathan Roberts, and Linda Woolverton. The lyrics were written by Tim Rice who selected Elton John as his partner to write the music. The film stars Matthew Broderick as Simba, Jeremy Irons as Scar, James Earl Jones as Mufasa, Moira Kelly as Nala, Nathan Lane as Timon, Ernie Sabella as Pumbaa, and Whoopie Goldberg, Chechen Marin, and Jim Cummings as the leaders of the hyenas. The original version was the first animated musical of the Disney Renaissance that did not involve the talents of Alan Menken and Howard Ashman writing the songs.¹⁵⁹ Despite this missing piece, the film proved to be almost unanimously liked.

Even though the press stated repeatedly that *The Lion King* was an original story, the plot is loosely based on the William Shakespeare play *Hamlet* (1603).¹⁶⁰ The protagonist is a lion cub called Simba who is the son of Mufasa, the king of the Pridelands. Simba's uncle and Mufasa's brother, Scar, desires his brother's power and therefore hatches a plan to take power by killing Mufasa. After Mufasa's death, Simba flees and is raised by Timon, a meerkat, and Pumbaa, a warthog. Once he is an adult, his love interest, Nala persuades him to return to the Pridelands and save them from the famine that Scar's leadership has caused. On his return, there is a fight between Simba and the lionesses, and Scar and the Hyenas. Ultimately, Scar dies, and Simba becomes king.¹⁶¹

The film was remade in 2019. The new version was directed by Jon Favreau with a screenplay by Jeff Nathanson. Donald Glover voices Simba, Seth Rogen is Pumbaa, Billy Eichner is Timon, Chiwetel Ejiofor is Scar, John Oliver is Zazu, and Beyoncé is Nala. In a

¹⁵⁹ IMDb. 2022. "The Lion King (1994)." IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110357/>.

¹⁶⁰ Hinson, Hal. 1994. "WashingtonPost.com: 'The Lion King.'" The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/review96/lionkinghin.htm>.

¹⁶¹ A full plot summary of *The Lion King* can be found in Appendix 3.

reference to the original, James Earl Jones has reprised his role of Mufasa. Journalists, like Stephanie Ciccarelli and Danielle Robles praised the better diversity in this casting in comparison to the original cast.¹⁶² The decision to have singers, Glover and Beyoncé in two of the lead roles shows an intent to keep the music as the focal point of the film. Hans Zimmer returned to compose the score and Elton John reworked some of his songs alongside Beyoncé. She also wrote the original song “Spirit” and while it did not win any awards, she was nominated for two Grammy Awards and one Golden Globe. The plot changes to the film are minimal and the largest part of the changes have taken place visually. The film has transformed from a traditional animation to a live-action style film.¹⁶³ Of course, it is not possible for the film to actually be live action, training lions to sing is impossible. Instead, the film is animated in a realistic style using video game technology.

The film was not nominated for any Academy Awards but received two unsuccessful nominations for Golden Globes and four unsuccessful nominations for Grammy Awards. Despite this, the new version of *The Lion King* holds the Guinness World Record for the Highest-grossing remake at the global box office.¹⁶⁴ Its \$1.6 billion revenue at the box office makes it one of the highest-grossing films of all time. This proves that there is definitely an audience for this type of film. These remakes enable people who were children when the film was originally released in 1994 to introduce the story to their own children. A cynic would say that it enables Disney to bring a new generation to their audience to spend money, but otherwise, you could say that they want to give a new generation the opportunity to enjoy the films as their parents did. The truth is probably somewhere in between. They

¹⁶² Ciccarelli, Stephanie. 2019. “The Lion King Live Action Cast - Diversity in Voice Over.” Voices. <https://www.voices.com/blog/the-lion-king-diversity-in-voice-over/>.

¹⁶³ Favreau, Jon, dir. 2019. *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁶⁴ Guinness World Records. 2019. “Highest-grossing remake at the global box office.” Guinness World Records. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/84485-highest-grossing-film-remake>.

want families to enjoy these films with all generations together, whilst making more profit with the expanded audience.

Scar: A Queer Coded Villain

As I mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, the villain, Scar, is one of the three queer coded characters in *The Lion King* (1994). Sriya Veera states that characteristics including his sometimes limp wrist (Fig. 5) and the way in which he talks led queer people to identify Scar as having queer potential.¹⁶⁵ A limp wrist or gesticulating when talking is a trope frequently used in visual media when depicting gay men. For example Cameron Tucker in the sitcom *Modern Family* (2009-2020) and Barry Glickman in *The Prom* (2020).¹⁶⁶ The sassy sarcasm Scar often utilises appears on fan websites and rankings as evidence for him being gay showing how widespread the belief that he is gay is.¹⁶⁷ Veera states that in the case of Scar, much of his queer coding relies on stereotypes.¹⁶⁸ This is reinforced because many of Scar's characteristics listed above appear in the results of Stephanie Madon's study identifying gay stereotypes.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Veera, Sriya. 2023. "The Big, the Bad and the Queer: Analysing the Queer-Coded Villain in Selected Disney Films." *Emerging Scholars* 2:62-74.

¹⁶⁶ Levitan, Steven, and Christopher Lloyd, executive producers. 2009-2020. *Modern Family*. 20th Century Fox Television.
Murphy, Ryan, dir. 2020. *The Prom*. Netflix.

¹⁶⁷ Collin, Robbie. 2017. "Scar - (The Lion King) | The secret - & not so secret - gay Disney characters - Film." *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/secret-not-secret-gay-disney-characters/scar-lion-king/>.

¹⁶⁸ Veera, Sriya. 2023. "The Big, the Bad and the Queer: Analysing the Queer-Coded Villain in Selected Disney Films." *Emerging Scholars* 2:62-74.

¹⁶⁹ Madon, Stephanie. 1997. "What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength." *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.



Fig. 5 - Image of Scar's limp wrist and smile¹⁷⁰

As I have stated in previous chapters, basing queer theories on stereotypes, and identifying these characteristics as inherently queer gives a worrying level of validity to these stereotypes. By doing this we are essentially saying that these stereotypes are true, and this risks the safety of queer people when they are in public. Stonewall recommends that a key way of avoiding hate crimes is to “challenge stereotypes about LGBT people.”¹⁷¹ It is therefore crucial to avoid using stereotypes to accomplish queer coding to protect queer people. Veera also states that these stereotypes are often used to equate homosexuality with otherness. This is furthered when these queer coded characters are the villains. Doing this, portrays queer people as being different and evil and can negatively influence public attitudes towards them.

However, Veera states that queer people are actively seeking queer coding.¹⁷² This implies that they desire more open representation. Therefore, I cannot and will not criticise queer people for theorising about queerness in films. Doing so would effectively be placing the blame on audiences when it is the responsibility of the studio to ensure that there is

¹⁷⁰ Minkoff, Rob, and Roger Allers, dirs. 1994. “Image of Scar.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁷¹ Bachmann, Chaka L., and Becca Gooch. 2017. *LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination*. London: Stonewall/YouGov.

¹⁷² Veera, Sriya. 2023. “The Big, the Bad and the Queer: Analysing the Queer-Coded Villain in Selected Disney Films.” *Emerging Scholars* 2:62-74.

adequate representation, and this is lacking currently. Disney seems to use queer coding to tread the line between queer representation and appeasing the conservative portion of their audience who would not appreciate open queerness in a film. They do this when their press releases about workplace equality, mentioned in chapter one, state that they understand the importance of queer representation in the workplace and media. However, their tentative reaction to the “Don’t Say Gay” bill represents this precise issue. Disney, as a company, finds it difficult to be consistent with their messaging but their clear understanding that queer representation is important proves they know they have a responsibility to provide more accurate queer representation in their future films.

In the remake, Chiwetel Ejiofor brings a darker feeling to Scar than Jeremy Irons. This is coupled with darker lighting covering Scar on screen (Fig. 6). Part of the reason for this different feeling is the lack of smile so important to the original portrayal of this villain and conveying his intentions. In the original, Scar often speaks through a smile, for example when encouraging Simba to go to the dangerous elephant graveyard (Fig. 5).¹⁷³ The choice for the 2019 film to be live-action means it would be unrealistic for Scar to smile. Therefore, the deadpan delivery of his lines creates a more serious feeling. Furthermore, when Scar talks, he typically remains on all four legs and has no human-like mannerisms to ensure realism is maintained. Consequently, Scar can no longer gesticulate when he talks. The limp wrist (Fig. 5) is therefore not present in the 2019 film which decreases the visibility of Scar as a queer coded character.

¹⁷³Favreau, Jon, dir. 2019. *The Lion King*. Disney.



Fig. 6 - image showing Scar on the darker left side of the screen¹⁷⁴

“Be Prepared”

During Scar’s song, “Be Prepared” he tells the hyenas his plan and gets them onboard to help him. Jeremy Irons, as Scar, sings “Be Prepared” in the 1994 version of the film. In his analysis of the song and the accompanying visuals, columnist George Ligon, writes that “Scar pranc[es] about ... like a supermodel on a catwalk.”¹⁷⁵ This statement itself highlights the queer potential of the character because the word “prance” is a word that is sometimes used to describe a stereotypically camp way of moving. This is often in a derogatory way, as can be seen in the entry in *Urban Dictionary* (a website which documents uses of words on social media or in popular culture).¹⁷⁶ This is therefore a further place in which queerness can be located in the subtext of the film. However, I must emphasise that femininity, or other superficial characteristics alone cannot be considered enough to confirm a character’s sexuality. Furthermore, the use of a sometimes derogatory term to describe this feature is obviously problematic. Yet, because this is a place in which queerness is found by fans, it is important to analyse how and why they locate it here.

¹⁷⁴ Favreau, Jon, dir. 2019. “Image of Scar and Simba.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁷⁵ Ligon, George. 2015. “Scene Analysis: The Lion King: “Be Prepared.” It Ain’t Necessarily So. <https://itaint-necessarilyso.squarespace.com/articles/2015/1/22/e3nr83p80zuza6skh83tsvgbscawfz>.

¹⁷⁶ Urban Dictionary. “Prance.” 2022. Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=prance>.

The way Irons performs some of the lyrics adds further evidence to the queer theory of Scar. He sings “Be prepared for senSAYYYtional news” (the capital letters showing emphasis).¹⁷⁷ This adds flamboyance and campness, adding to the queer potential of Scar. Furthermore, he insults the Hyenas’ intelligence with the line “as wet as a warthog’s backside” comparing them to Pumbaa, one of the other queer coded characters I outline in this chapter.¹⁷⁸ While it is subtle, this inserts queerness into the lyrics of the song. However, this is only obvious to those who are aware of the theory about Pumbaa and Timon’s sexualities. A more visible example of camp flamboyance in this song is some of the hip-centric dancing done by the hyenas. This appears seemingly without Scar’s knowledge and has the effect of trivialising and mocking his plan.

The queer coding is set alongside a goose step marching sequence featuring the hyenas. They march in lines past Scar who is watching over them from a balcony. Goose step marching is a type of formal march done by militaries across the world but is mainly associated with authoritarian regimes like Nazi Germany and North Korea. One could criticise the positioning of queerness alongside references to authoritarianism. However, I consider this a critique of far-right politics. Scar’s arrogance while he looks down on his army paints a picture of an exaggerated dictator seeking nothing but power. The lyrics have an abundance of elitism in which he is describing how he is better than his own army. When singing about the hyenas he says that “the lights are not all on upstairs.” He is trying to utilise what he deems to be the inferior intellect of the hyenas to cement his power whilst knocking them down to reinforce it. Furthermore, throughout the song, the accompanying music is upbeat and would be more suited to a light-hearted song. This makes light of the plans and mocks the far right, authoritarian tactics of discrimination and division that Scar is attempting to employ to cement his power.

¹⁷⁷John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Be Prepared.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁷⁸John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Be Prepared.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

In the 2019 version, “Be Prepared” has changed from an upbeat number to a speech set over music, ending with a brief sung climax.¹⁷⁹ This major alteration is perplexing considering critics like Glen Weldon called the original version the “perfect villain song.”¹⁸⁰ Not only has the style of the song completely changed, but they also cut five of the original nine verses, reducing the length of the song by two minutes. The hyenas’ only contribution to the new version is watching Scar talk and chanting “Be Prepared” repeatedly in the background when previously they danced and marched.¹⁸¹ It is disappointing that they decided to edit this song so drastically. The animation and upbeat style of this song are a highlight of the original film for me. However, on the other hand, I recognise the fact that the deadpan, political delivery of Ejiófor’s version helps to change the nature of the portrayal of Scar, a by-product of this, like with *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*, is that the queer coding has been removed.

Pumbaa and Timon’s Queer Utopia

Gael Sweeney states that Scar is not the only queer coded character in *The Lion King*. She establishes Pumbaa and Timon, a warthog and meerkat as same-sex parents to Simba.¹⁸² This makes them unique among the characters I am exploring. While Le Fou is queer coded as a response to his relationship with Gaston, Pumbaa and Timon are queer coded as a pair and not separately. Sweeney says, “these two characters are obviously a same-sex

¹⁷⁹ John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 2019. “Be Prepared.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁸⁰ Weldon, Glen. 2019. “The Lion King’ Had The Perfect Villain Song. This Time, ‘Be Prepared’ For Less.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/17/742204352/lion-king-2019-be-prepared-villain-anthem-jeremy-irons-chiwetel-ejiófor>.

¹⁸¹ John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 2019. “Be Prepared.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁸² Sweeney, Gael. 2013. “‘What Do You Want Me to Do? Dress in Drag and Do the Hula?’ Timon and Pumbaa’s Alternative Lifestyle Dilemma in The Lion King.” In *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, edited by Johnson Cheu. McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers.

couple.”¹⁸³ The reasoning behind this is that they live together, work together, and eventually raise a child together. While there is nothing confirming a romantic relationship between the pair, it is unusual for two individuals living together and raising a child to not be in a romantic relationship. They come into the story once Simba has fled the Pridelands after being blamed by Scar for his father’s death. They take him in and care for him using their “problem-free philosophy” to make Simba feel loved.¹⁸⁴

Something that makes Pumbaa and Timon’s queer coding pleasant is the fact that it is not based on their inherent characteristics. It is their wholesomely close relationship and storyline which has this effect. Consequently, the problematic impacts of queer coding being based on stereotypical characteristics are avoided. Sweeney makes comparisons between Pumbaa and Timon’s relationship and those of other couples in films. She writes “like many traditional film couples ... opposites certainly attract.”¹⁸⁵ She goes on to say that Timon is sceptical of Simba, worrying that they will become his prey when he grows up and that Pumbaa is more emotional and romantic. Pumbaa wants to adopt Simba because he is cute and never thinks of any drawbacks of doing so. Further than this theory about them being a same-sex couple, Pumbaa and Timon being outcasts from their respective societies is something that resonates with the queer community because they do not conform to the heteronormative expectations of society. Particularly when the film was released, there was a significant amount of queerphobia and queer people were often ostracised.¹⁸⁶ Therefore,

¹⁸³Sweeney, Gael. 2013. “What Do You Want Me to Do? Dress in Drag and Do the Hula? Timon and Pumbaa’s Alternative Lifestyle Dilemma in The Lion King.” In *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, edited by Johnson Cheu. McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers.

¹⁸⁴ John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Hakuna Matata.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁸⁵Sweeney, Gael. 2013. “What Do You Want Me to Do? Dress in Drag and Do the Hula? Timon and Pumbaa’s Alternative Lifestyle Dilemma in The Lion King.” In *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, edited by Johnson Cheu. McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers.

¹⁸⁶ Neisen, Joseph H. 1990. “Heterosexism: Redefining Homophobia for the 1990’s.” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy* 1 (3): 21-35.

the oasis in which Pumbaa and Timon live is a safe space in which they and the audience can be themselves with no judgement.

The song “Hakuna Matata” sung by Pumbaa and Timon tells us of their carefree attitude to life and informs us of why Pumbaa was cast out of his society.¹⁸⁷ The phrase “Hakuna matata” is Swahili and means “no trouble” or “no worries.” The song informs us that Pumbaa’s “aroma... after every meal” was the reason he was ostracised from his Society and moved to the oasis with Timon.¹⁸⁸ However, while the talk of overcoming ostracisation and prejudice in this song is something that queer people can relate to and is an example of where *The Lion King* falls into the trap of queer coded characters being a primary source of humour. Aside from the undeniable comic undertones of breaking wind, the way in which Pumbaa sings “When I was a young wart-hoooog” is comically overstated.¹⁸⁹ This line is sung in an operatic style and is humorously out of place in this upbeat and light-hearted song. This is followed by Timon’s spoken interjection of “Very nice!”¹⁹⁰ This moment establishes Pumbaa and Timon as a comedy double act who, as their mantra suggests, take neither life nor themselves seriously. While this is technically an example of the previously mentioned trope of queer coded characters providing comic relief, it provides a welcome break from the tension created during the previous scene, where Mufasa is killed. Furthermore, because Pumbaa and Timon’s queer theories are less widespread than Scar’s, the implications of this trope are minimal on this occasion.

Pumbaa and Timon’s ability to accept themselves as they are and have a mutually supportive relationship despite the difficulties they have had in their earlier lives is an empowering message for queer people. The light-hearted nature of it offsets the dramatic

¹⁸⁷John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Hakuna Matata.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁸⁸John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Hakuna Matata.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁸⁹John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Hakuna Matata.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

¹⁹⁰John, Elton, and Tim Rice. 1994. “Hakuna Matata.” In *The Lion King*. Disney.

feeling of the rest of the film. Pumbaa and Timon's oasis is like a queer utopia in which they can be themselves and raise Simba. Their love for each other and their love for Simba is clear and, while there is no open queerness present, it is refreshing that, during the scene in the oasis, there is a rejection of heterosexual parenting, and these same-sex parents are able to raise a child who eventually saves the Pridelands. This is a message that had not been conveyed in Disney films released before 1994. Therefore, I can personally find solace in these scenes. Queer people can relate to the feelings of ostracisation but also in finding people with whom they feel they belong.

As with the original film, Pumbaa and Timon take Simba in after he flees the Pridelands in the 2019 version.¹⁹¹ This aspect of the plot remaining the same as before leaves the justification for reading Pumbaa and Timon as Simba's same-sex parents intact. However, I cannot help but be distracted by the peculiarity of a realistic-looking warthog and meerkat looking after a realistic lion cub. This, coupled with the impossibility of showing emotion, somewhat changes the nature of their family's relationships. Where Pumbaa's facial expressions indicate loving Simba and finding him cute in the original, they show indifference in the live-action version. While this does not actually describe the nature of their relationship, this shows how the choice to make the animation in the style of a live-action film has altered the portrayals of the characters. Yes, the plot has stayed the same and Pumbaa and Timon still raise Simba as his adopted parents but much of the warmth has gone from this relationship.

Furthermore, in "Hakuna Matata," the live-action animation displays further drawbacks. As with every other song in *The Lion King* (2019), the notion of realistic-looking animals singing is simply bizarre. While this has no direct impact on the queer coding, it speaks to the changed nature of the familial relationships here. The already unconventional combination

¹⁹¹Favreau, Jon, dir. 2019. *The Lion King*. Disney.

of animals in a family from the original film is made more unconventional by the prospect of it being realistic. While I do concede that Seth Rogen's vocal performance is almost comically poor, it seems immaterial when you consider the positive message this contributes to. The lesson this teaches those watching is that it is not necessary for children to have heterosexual parents and that children from non-traditional families can thrive in the same way Simba does. Pumbaa and Timon are therefore a rare example of queer coding remaining intact in a live-action remake and contributing a positive message.

Elton John's Influence

Like Howard Ashman was earlier in the Disney Renaissance, Elton John was instrumental to the success of *The Lion King*. The music was responsible for the majority of the awards nominations and wins, proving the indisputable popularity of it. John shows the importance of queer people to Disney's films. He is a world-famous singer and a gay icon. While I cannot say whether his sexuality impacted the way in which characters are portrayed in the film, he proves Disney's continued reliance on queer people and therefore why they should improve their queer representation in order to make their messaging regarding queer representation consistent. Furthermore, at the 1994 premiere of *The Lion King*, the Elton John AIDS Foundation raised £150,000.¹⁹² This shows how Disney is, on the surface, willing to raise money and awareness for issues affecting the gay community, reinforcing the disparity between their words as a company and their film output.

Other Representation Issues

In his chapter in *The Encyclopaedia of Racism in American Films*, Evan Marmol states that two of the three leading hyenas are voiced by People of Colour. Shenzi is voiced by Whoopi

¹⁹² *Aberdeen Evening Express*. 1994. "Lion King a roaring success." October 7, 1994.

Goldberg who is Black and Banzai is voiced by Chechen Marin who is Mexican-American.¹⁹³ These two characters being the leaders of the Hyenas equates villainy with racial diversity. Furthermore, Ed, voiced by Jim Cummings, is essentially non-verbal and communicates primarily through laughter. This implies that he has a learning disability. This creates a further association between villainy with disability. Scar, by his name alone, builds on this through the association between villainy and disfigurement. Scar also has a facial scar which creates a visual embodiment of this. As someone with a large scar myself, I strongly reject the notion that disfigurement and villainy are linked and would rather this trope not be present at all.

The cast of *The Lion King* (2019) is more diverse than the original cast. It includes Black actors across the cast including Donald Glover and Beyoncé. This has the effect of not aligning racial diversity with the villains which solves the issues caused by casting White actors as the “good guys” in the original film. Furthermore, Ed, the hyena, is no longer a part of the film. This removes the association between disability and villainy and creates another example of Disney responding to criticism and solving issues highlighted in the response to their films. However, the issue of the association between disfigurement and villainy is still present. While it would be unreasonable for me to expect them to change the name of such a famous character, the presence of a scar over his eye reinforces this association. Disney clearly understands the importance of these issues because of their willingness to change some problematic details but we can transfer Will Letts’ principles to here and utilise this film and its depiction of those with scars to shine a spotlight on attitudes to these people in society.

¹⁹³ Marmol, Evan. 2018. “The Lion King.” In *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films*, edited by Salvador J. Murguía. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Critical Reaction to the Films

The response to the original 1994 version of the film was largely positive. Hal Hinson, of *The Washington Post* called it “spectacular” and credits Pumbaa and Timon’s sequences with making the film better.¹⁹⁴ However, like Carroll Lachnit in *The Los Angeles Times*, Hinson raises concerns about the suitability of the film for children, claiming that the violence would be too much for them.¹⁹⁵ However, in an article in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, a sample of children gave exclusively positive reviews of the film.¹⁹⁶ One commented that the “baddies” were a particular favourite of his. While the queer coding is never mentioned in reviews, this proves that this formula for constructing a villain was popular. However, in *The LA Times* Lachnit states that children under five years old found the violence too scary while the majority of other children thoroughly enjoyed the film with one commenting that the hyenas were her favourite part. This shows not only that the queer coded characters are among the most popular in the original film, but that the film was loved across generations while being too frightening for some.

The general response to the live-action version of *The Lion King* was that it was a good film, but some felt the film was unnecessary. In his review in *The Guardian* Mark Kermode calls the film “resplendent but pointless.”¹⁹⁷ This speaks to the fact that the reasoning behind the remakes is “questionable” but also comments on the wonderful animation. Peter Bradshaw, also in *The Guardian*, echoes this sentiment by commenting on the loss of character the live-action style brings with it.¹⁹⁸ Of particular note to Bradshaw is Scar who being less

¹⁹⁴ Hinson, Hal. 1994. “The Lion King.” *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1994.

¹⁹⁵ Lachnit, Carroll. 1994. “‘Lion King’ Too Violent for Little Viewers?” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1994.

¹⁹⁶ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*. 1994. “The Lion King rules - OK?” October 15, 1994.

¹⁹⁷ Kermode, Mark. 2019. “The Lion King review – resplendent but pointless | Animation in film.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/21/the-lion-king-review-remake-jon-favreau-beyonce>.

¹⁹⁸ Bradshaw, Peter. 2019. “The Lion King review – deepfake copycat ain't so grrreat | Peter Bradshaw's film of the week.” *The Guardian*.

“outrageous” has had a negative impact on the overall enjoyability of the film. The general feeling of reviews from both the USA and UK is that, in comparison to the original film, the live-action-style animation has somewhat ruined the film. Personally, I get the impression, given the focus on the “resplendent” animation, that this film was an exercise in proving what was possible with animation technology rather than providing a meaningful addition to Disney’s back catalogue.

Conclusions

To summarise, the success of the original film is abundantly clear. The long-lasting popularity of Scar as a character and place of “Be Prepared” among the favourite songs of Disney musicals shows that queer coded characters are often key to the success of these films. Pumbaa and Timon also being noted to provide necessary comic relief in the original film reinforces this conclusion. However, the queer coding of the original is not without its problems. The association between Scar’s queer coding and villainy characterises queerness as villainous and is inherently problematic. However, a redeeming feature of the 1994 film is the relationship between Pumbaa and Timon. As stated above, they are portrayed as same-sex parents to Simba, and they are immensely successful in raising him to eventually save the Pridelands from Scar. This shows that queer parents can parent children and directly counters the problematic elements of Scar’s character.

The drastic changes to the film for 2019, with the use of computer game technology to create realistic-looking animation, completely changed the visual atmosphere of the film.¹⁹⁹ The animals are no longer able to give human-like facial expressions or mannerisms. Therefore, queer coding through these techniques is more challenging. Scar, in 2019, is consequently a more serious, dramatic, and less queer version of himself. The changes to

¹⁹⁹ Faughnder, Ryan. 2019. “Lion King’ a technology game changer.” The Detroit News. <https://eu.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/2019/07/29/lion-king-game-changer/39822499/>.

“Be Prepared” display this perfectly. The decision to make it a spoken, political speech rather than an upbeat sung number removes any possibility of extravagance and queer coding from this moment in the film. Pumbaa and Timon’s relationship has remained the same, or at least similar. They are still together in their queer utopia and take in Simba to nurture him to his eventual heroic actions at the end of the film. However, the love they feel for him is more difficult to convey which gives the impression of a colder relationship between the parents and Simba. It is not possible to say that there is any intentionality behind removing queer coded elements of this film. However, the reduction of queer coding in the 2019 film appears to be a by-product of the desire to create a darker and more serious film.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I will explore the patterns that are present in the queer coding from these two periods of Disney's history. I will also briefly look at the recent live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*, released in 2023. The recent release of this film means that there is limited scholarship relating to it. I have therefore not included a detailed discussion of it in this dissertation. I have, however, briefly discussed details of the film that were made available prior to its release and some of the response to the film after its release. For example, I will explore how the casting of Melissa McCarthy as Ursula interacts with the queer coding of the original version.²⁰⁰

The first question I wanted to answer was about which characters are queer coded in the original films and how this queer coding is achieved. I wanted to use existing scholarship to understand how much these theories are based on stereotypes and whether there are other ways in which characters are coded, for example the relationship between Pumbaa and Timon in *The Lion King*. I then wanted to compare the original films with the new versions created in the 21st century. The question I was asking here was: "Are the same characters queer coded to the same degree?" I then wanted to compare the responses to all of the films. My focus was discovering if the positive responses to the original films were replicated by their remakes and if queer coded characters are notable in this response. Before my final words about the future, I will discuss how the extensive contributions of queer people to Disney's films highlight the inconsistency of the studio's messaging around queer representation in their films.

²⁰⁰ IMDb. 2022. "The Little Mermaid (2023)." IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5971474/>.

Where is Queerness Located and How is this Achieved?

The evidence I have outlined in chapters two to four shows that, in the original films, the queer coding is sometimes achieved through the use of stereotypes. Sriya Veera outlines a queer theory that is based principally on Scar's appearance and mannerisms in the original *The Lion King*.²⁰¹ His limp wrist and gesticulation when talking as well as his slimmer, less muscular appearance are examples of stereotypes present in this film. In *Aladdin*, Will Letts and Raghav Kinger state that Jafar's appearance and dress sense, particularly when juxtaposed with the messier appearance of the Sultan, is an example of how he is queer coded.²⁰² These are highlighted in Stephanie Madon's study where she identifies stereotypes of gay men as "Feminine, wear earrings, well groomed, fashionable, affectionate, talkative, and wear flashy clothes."²⁰³ Ashley S. Brooks et al. state that gay stereotypes "are used to justify harm against gay men."²⁰⁴ There is therefore the potential for the use of these characteristics to contribute to the demonisation of gay men, particularly because these characters are villains. However, Pumbaa, Timon, and Le Fou are examples of characters whose queer coding is based on relationships rather than characteristics which is less problematic because it is based on details of the plot and does not involve using queer stereotypes.

²⁰¹ Veera, Sriya. 2023. "The Big, the Bad and the Queer: Analysing the Queer-Coded Villain in Selected Disney Films." *Emerging Scholars* 2:62-74.

²⁰² Letts, Will. 2016. "Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative." In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

Kinger, Raghav. 2022. "Content Analysis of Disney's Portrayal of Minority Groups and its Impact on Minority Adolescents and Children." *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 3, no. 7 (July): 3065-3074.

²⁰³ Madon, Stephanie. 1997. "What do people believe about gay males? A study of stereotype content and strength." *Sex Roles* 37:663-685.

²⁰⁴ Brooks, Ashley S, Russell Luyt, Magdalena Zawisza, and Daragh T. McDermott. 2020. "Ambivalent Homoprejudice towards Gay Men: Theory Development and Validation." *Journal of Homosexuality* 69 (9): 1261-1289.

There are some patterns present in the changes between the original versions and the remakes. The first, and most obvious change to the films, is the fact that they are each live-action. The consequential realism this brings limits the amount of imagination that the filmmakers can use. Filmmakers are unable to, for example, give human-like mannerisms to animals to queer code them, they are unable to make Jafar's appearance so impeccably neat, Gaston's size is limited to the size of the actor, Luke Evans, and they are unable to have Le Fou turning blue with cold standing out in the snow helping his master, Gaston. Many of these animated details are used as evidence of queer coding in the original films thus, the removal of these elements eliminates queerness from these locations.

Throughout these remakes, the trend is that the films have become more serious. The removal of light-hearted details, such as the banter between Jafar and Iago at the end of the film where Jafar tells the parrot to "get [his] beak out of [his] face" with Iago replying, "Oh shut up you moron," and Le Fou's idiocy and short stature removes comic relief that once changed the atmosphere of the original films.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, the original "Be Prepared," is upbeat and involves hyenas swinging their hips. This brings an element of comedic relief and camp during Scar's planning scene. This is not present in the new version. "Be Prepared" is transformed into a political speech in 2019. This therefore avoids the trope that Carson Cook outlines in his study by ensuring queer and queer coded characters do not have as many jokes at their expense in comparison to others. However, this appears to have made the films less popular. In addition to this, lighting changes in *The Lion King* darken the character of the film. "Be Prepared" in the original film is colourful with red rocks and green smoke compared to the dark grey colours and dark lighting in the live-action version. This mirrors the darker atmosphere of the film in general and the sinister feeling of the political-style speech "Be Prepared" has turned into.

²⁰⁵ Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. *Aladdin*. Disney.

Reaction to the Films

There are striking similarities in the comparisons between the reviews of the original films and the remade versions. Each original version received nearly universal praise. Critics lauded the high quality of the animation and the perfect balance between the drama and the comedy. Almost every review commented on the appeal of each film for both children and their parents. Each film contains jokes that are mainly targeted at adults, often innuendos (for example the Genie says, “I thought the Earth wasn’t supposed to move until the honeymoon”²⁰⁶) whilst also having slapstick comedy, like Le Fou being thrown around the room during “Gaston,” to appeal to children. The violence and drama of *The Lion King* caused concern about children being scared or badly influenced.²⁰⁷ But these fears were proven to be needless because the responses of children in both the UK and USA proved that the film was enjoyed by the vast majority of children above five years old.²⁰⁸ Interestingly, none of the reviews I found explicitly mentions queer coding in any of the films. Yet they do indicate that the villains, or “baddies” are among the most popular characters, something that particularly applies to Scar. This indicates that even if the queer coding is not noticed by many members of the audience, these attributes contribute to successful characters.

Like with the original films, reviews of the 21st century live-action remakes of these Disney Renaissance films rarely explicitly mention queer coding, except in the case of *Beauty and the Beast* where it was actively publicised by the director. The comments are mainly concerning the coldness of the live-action versions. The realism that is necessary for these versions to be possible limits the amount of emotion that can be shown by the furniture in

²⁰⁶Musker, John, and Ron Clements, dirs. 1992. *Aladdin*. Disney.

²⁰⁷Lachnit, Carroll. 1994. “Lion King' Too Violent for Little Viewers?” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1994.

²⁰⁸Lachnit, Carroll. 1994. “Lion King' Too Violent for Little Viewers?” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1994.

Beauty and the Beast (2017) and by the animals in *The Lion King* (2019). This creates further distance between the audience and the characters and therefore makes them less relatable.

Moreover, fans like Aja Romano questioned the rationale for releasing these films.²⁰⁹ A few possibilities come to mind: a lack of original ideas, the desire to profit from their past success again, and wanting to introduce a new generation of children to these loved stories. Remaking the films from such a popular decade carries the possibility of disappointing fans. For example, the director of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) gave fans hope of open queer representation and confirmed the theories of Le Fou being gay with the “exclusively gay moment” at the end of the film.²¹⁰ The fact that the film was banned in countries including Malaysia because of this, while giving horrifying indications of the state of queer rights internationally, suggested that this film would be ground-breaking. However, the reality of this moment led to disappointment. Furthermore, Aja Romano called the new version of *Aladdin* “sluggish,” and Mark Kermode called the 2019 version of *The Lion King* “resplendent but pointless.”²¹¹ Each film was enormously popular when first released in the 1990s and contributed to the renaissance of Disney’s popularity but when a new version is released it is disappointing and seen as “pointless.” Le Fou and Jafar, both formerly queer coded characters, have been central to the criticism of the live-action remakes because of the changes to their character. While the complaints regarding Le Fou have been centred

²⁰⁹ Romano, Aja. 2019. “Review: Disney’s live-action Aladdin is half charming, half dreadful.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/22/18634316/disneys-aladdin-remake-review-rating>.

²¹⁰ Arnold, Adam. 2017. “Beauty and The Beast: ‘Gay moment’ set to make Disney history.” Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-moment-set-to-make-disney-history-10786476>.

²¹¹ Kermode, Mark. 2019. “The Lion King review – resplendent but pointless | Animation in film.” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/21/the-lion-king-review-remake-jon-favreau-beyonce>.

Romano, Aja. 2019. “Review: Disney’s live-action Aladdin is half charming, half dreadful.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/22/18634316/disneys-aladdin-remake-review-rating>.

on the actions of Bill Condon when publicising the film, the criticism of Jafar suggests a relationship between the queer coding in the original film and its success.

Contributions of Queer People: Inconsistent Messaging

There are some prominent queer creatives who contributed to the success of the films I have discussed. Howard Ashman was a key figure in the Disney Renaissance. *Aladdin* was initially proposed by him, and he is partially responsible for the songs in *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*. From the specific triumph of the music at awards ceremonies, it is clear that it was an important part of the initial success during this era and is still crucial to their continued popularity. For example, “Under the Sea” from *The Little Mermaid* is frequently near the top of fan lists and rankings for favourite Disney songs.²¹² Howard Ashman, as a gay man, is one of several queer people who have contributed to Disney’s success through the years. Andreas Deja, another gay man, was the lead animator for Le Fou, Gaston, and Jafar. Elton John is a further example of a queer creative involved in Disney’s successful films. His work on *The Lion King* helped to provide what was then their most successful film ever.

It is clear that queer people were instrumental to the resurgence of success Disney had at the end of the 20th century. In fact, without them, some of the most popular characters would not be the same and many of the popular songs would not have been written. This is why it is bizarre that Disney’s actions do not necessarily reflect the debt they have to these queer creators. Conor Clark’s report in *Gay Times* stating that “Disney censors “overtly gay” affection” shows that Disney’s priority is not queer representation.²¹³ The clear importance

²¹² Levine, Nick. 2022. “31 Best Disney Songs to Play on Repeat.” Time Out. <https://www.timeout.com/music/best-disney-songs>.

²¹³ Clark, Conor. 2022. “Disney censors “overtly gay affection” in Pixar films, letter from staff claims.” *Gay Times*. https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/disney-censors-overtly-gay-affection-in-pixar-films-letter-from-staff-claims/?utm_campaign=later-linkinbio-gaytimes&utm_content=later-25230063&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkin.bio.

of queer people to Disney does not match up with their resistance to open queer representation. Disney, in 2019, wrote on their own website about an award they received for their workplace equality for LGBTQ+ people, yet their film output does not match this.²¹⁴ Disney knows and promotes the importance of queer representation so they should hold their own output to the standard they set themselves. This is why I can therefore state they are not providing enough queer representation. Ethan Clade in the film *Strange World* (2022) is their only queer main character to date.²¹⁵ If Disney truly understands the importance of queer representation, as their 2019 award would suggest, they should continue to release films which include queer characters.

The Little Mermaid (2023)

In 2023, Disney released the live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. While this film was released too recently to be included in this project, it is notable because Ursula, the villain, was based on the drag queen Divine in the original film.²¹⁶ The striking similarity Ursula bears to Divine is perhaps the most obvious queer coding present in the Disney Renaissance. The 2023 version of Ursula is played by Melissa McCarthy. The studio was criticised because they did not hire a member of the LGBTQ+ community to do the makeup for this character.²¹⁷ However, McCarthy and Peter Smith King, the makeup artist, have both stated that they were aware of the roots of the character and were keen to pay tribute to these origins rather than mock them. Despite the respect paid to the original character, this

²¹⁴The Walt Disney Company. 2019. "Disney Earns Perfect Score for LGBTQ Workplace Equality." The Walt Disney Company. <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-earns-perfect-score-for-lgbtq-workplace-equality/>.

²¹⁵Zee, Michaela. 2022. "'Strange World' Cast on Disney Film's Biracial, LGBTQ Character." Variety. <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/strange-world-gay-biracial-character-jaboukie-young-white-1235432785/>.

²¹⁶Musker, John, Ron Clements, and Alan Menken, dirs. 2006. *The Little Mermaid: Platinum Edition - Audio Commentary*. Disney.

²¹⁷Carras, Christi. 2023. "'Little Mermaid' makeup artist rejects Ursula criticism." Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2023-05-28/little-mermaid-ursula-makeup-drag-queen-divine>.

presents a missed opportunity. They had the chance to cast a drag queen in this role and have queer representation, but they did not take it. However, Divine died in 1988 and casting someone else in a role based on her would have ended up as an impression rather than a new take. This may have been seen as disrespectful by the audience and an unattractive opportunity for a performer wanting to create their own identity.

Final Words

On the completion of my research, I have discovered that while there are some characters whose queer theories rely on stereotypes, there are others which rely on the story. Nonetheless, Jafar and Scar are both villains whose queer coding relies on stereotypes. While on one hand, as Brooks et al. state, stereotypes can harm the queer community, Will Letts highlights the opportunity to use these characters to critique attitudes towards queer people in society.²¹⁸ Furthermore, there is no contemporary evidence to state that there was widespread acknowledgement of the queer coding. Therefore, it is impossible to state that Disney's use of these queer stereotypes caused harm. I acknowledge here that this research has limitations. The next step would be to carry out a qualitative study in order to ascertain the reactions of the participants to the relevant characters. This would allow me to draw solid conclusions into whether the queer coding has an impact on the enjoyment of the film and the attitudes to the characters. Moreover, it would allow me to establish how widespread the queer theories are because this project has identified them but has not been able to quantify how much of the audience experiences the films in this way.

²¹⁸ Brooks, Ashley S, Russell Luyt, Magdalena Zawisza, and Daragh T. McDermott. 2020. "Ambivalent Homoprejudice towards Gay Men: Theory Development and Validation." *Journal of Homosexuality* 69 (9): 1261-1289.
Letts, Will. 2016. "Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative." In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

The changes made to the films for their live-action remakes have made it more difficult to locate queerness in the films, even in *Beauty and the Beast* when the director actively identified it in the film. This brings to the forefront the lack of queer representation in Disney films which directly contradicts their messaging surrounding workplace equality. They understand the importance of queer representation but do not apply this knowledge to their films. Thus, the majority of the queer representation available in Disney films remains to be the theories I have described in this project. Howard Ashman's sister, Sarah, said that we are free to interpret characters in any way but only "with full knowledge that the metaphors you might see belong to you and no one else."²¹⁹ When locating our own interpretations of queerness, we are alone. Disney knows the importance of queer inclusion and providing queer representation yet does not do so. By including queer characters, they can ensure queerness is seen by everyone which, as The Proud Trust states, normalises queerness in society and proves to queer people that their identity "is not a barrier to reaching [their] aspirations."²²⁰ However, now, we should, as Will Letts states, use the "camp" and stereotypes present in the films we already have to critique societal attitudes towards queer people while we continue to press Disney for more open representation.²²¹

²¹⁹Ashman Gillespie, Sarah. 2017. "Metaphorically watching Beauty and the Beast — Howard Ashman." Howard Ashman. <https://www.howardashman.com/blog/metaphorically-watching-beauty-and-the-beast>.

²²⁰ The Proud Trust. 2023. "Why Representation Matters." The Proud Trust. <https://www.theproudstust.org/trusted-adults/lgbt-icons/why-representation-matters/>.

²²¹ Letts, Will. 2016. "Consuming Queer Sensibilities, Commodifying the Normative." In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 148-160. New York: Routledge.

Appendix 1: Plot summary of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)

Beauty and the Beast is based on the story *La Belle et la Bête* by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont from 1756, which itself is the most commonly told version of Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's 1740 fairy tale of the same name. The beginning of the film depicts an enchantress disguised as an old woman puts a spell on a Prince for his selfish attitude and refusal to allow her to shelter from a storm. The spell turns him into a Beast and his servants into pieces of furniture. It could only be lifted if he learns to love another who loves him in return. From here, the film follows the protagonist, Belle, who lives in an unnamed French village. She is different from others in the village owing to her intellectual inquisitiveness and the song "Belle" is about how her love for reading and desire to learn is not the expectation for women and girls. As her name would suggest, she is beautiful. Gaston, who at the beginning is merely an unpleasant narcissist rather than a villain, repeatedly makes advances at Belle. She rejects each one, at one point throwing him into a pool of mud when he attempts to ambush her with a wedding. This has the effect of both angering Gaston and causing him to have a drop in self-esteem, which he blames on Belle. This ultimately leads to Le Fou beginning the song "Gaston" to make him feel better about himself again.

The main arc of the story concerns Belle and the Beast. Belle's inventor father, Maurice, encounters the Beast first. During a journey to a fair to show off his latest invention, he becomes lost and enters the Beast's castle to shelter from the weather. The Beast imprisons Maurice for trespassing and his horse returns to Belle alone, alerting her to the trouble her father finds himself in. When at the castle, Belle offers to replace her father as prisoner, leading to Maurice's release. Belle becomes friends with the Beast's servants; however, when he finds her in the forbidden West Wing, he is enraged, and Belle flees in fear. She is

attacked by wolves, before the Beast rescues her and is injured in the process. Belle cares for him while he is injured which brings them closer together.

Maurice's return to the village to ask for help prompts Gaston to develop a plan to have Maurice removed and taken to an asylum. This would remove Belle's key support, leaving her with no option but to marry Gaston. Maurice embarks on the journey to rescue Belle alone which ultimately leads to Belle being released by the Beast so she can return to the village to rescue him, giving her a magical mirror with which she can look at the Beast through. On their return to the village, Gaston leads a mob of villagers to detain Maurice. In order to convince the villagers that her father is not insane, she uses the mirror to show them the Beast. Gaston realises that Belle is in love with the Beast and therefore riles up the villagers to march to the castle to kill him. After Belle and Maurice escape from their cellar with the help of Chip, the son of Mrs Potts, one of the Beast's servants, we see the servants defending the castle. The Beast refuses to fight but eventually becomes more willing upon seeing Belle return. Ultimately, the fight ends with the Beast being stabbed after initially winning the fight and sparing Gaston's life. Gaston falls to his death while the Beast dies in Belle's arms. She kisses him which lifts the spell, reviving the Beast and turning him and his servants back to humans. Belle and the Prince host a dance where the people of their kingdom come and celebrate.

Appendix 2: Plot summary of *Aladdin* (1992)

The film is set in a fictional Middle Eastern city called Agrabah. The original film starts by breaking the fourth wall. A merchant shows us a lamp he is selling and then tells us a story. The Royal Vizier (an advisor), Jafar, desires a magic lamp from the Cave of Wonders. The lamp, when rubbed, releases a Genie who grants three wishes to their new master. However, the only person who may enter the cave is “the diamond in the rough,” later discovered to be Aladdin. Aladdin is a street urchin who survives by stealing. Princess Jasmine escapes the palace out of anger about the law requiring her to marry a prince and is saved from an angry merchant by Aladdin and his pet monkey, Abu. Aladdin is captured by the palace guards on Jafar’s orders and when she is demanding his release, Jafar tells Jasmine he has had Aladdin executed. When in prison, Aladdin is in a cell with an old man (later revealed to be Jafar in disguise) who takes him to the cave to retrieve the lamp. In the cave, Aladdin gets the lamp, but Abu, forgetting they had been told to touch nothing else, tries to grab a jewel. They must rush to escape before the cave collapses. Jafar throws Aladdin and Abu back into the cave in order to grab the lamp; they fall, but Abu has grabbed the lamp before they can. Down in the cave, Aladdin rubs the lamp and meets the Genie. By playing a trick on the Genie, Aladdin manages to wish to leave the cave without using one of his three wishes. His first wish is to become a prince to enable him to woo Jasmine. He makes a promise to free the Genie with his third wish.

After his parrot, Iago’s suggestion, Jafar decides that he should become the Sultan by marrying Jasmine himself. This plan is interrupted by Aladdin who is now “Prince Ali Ababwa.” Whilst discussing his potential marriage to Jasmine with the Sultan and Jafar, Jasmine becomes angered at the fact she is not being included in this conversation. As an apology, Aladdin takes her on a magic carpet ride. On their return, Aladdin is taken by the guards to throw him into the sea, on Jafar’s orders. Aladdin uses his second wish to being

saved by the Genie. Aladdin reveals Jafar's plot, the latter flees on seeing the lamp with Aladdin, revealing his identity to him.

Iago steals the lamp which Jafar then uses to become Sultan, then the most powerful sorcerer in the world. Aladdin, Abu, and the magic carpet are exiled to a frozen wasteland by Jafar when he reveals Aladdin's true identity. Once they have escaped, Jasmine attempts to help steal back the lamp but Jafar overpowers them with his magic. Aladdin taunts Jafar about the fact that because the Genie gave him his powers, he is technically more powerful than him. Jafar therefore uses his final wish to become a genie. This traps him and Iago in a lamp which the Genie throws towards the Cave of Wonders to trap them there. Agrabah is now back to normal; the Genie recommends that Aladdin use his final wish to become a prince again so he can marry Jasmine. He refuses and decides to free the Genie instead. Before the Genie leaves to explore the world and in recognition of Aladdin's nobility, the Sultan changes the law to enable Jasmine to choose who she marries.

Appendix 3: Plot Summary of *The Lion King* (1994)

The Lion King is loosely based on the Shakespeare play, *Hamlet* (1601). The film starts with a new-born lion cub, Simba, being presented to a gathering of animals by Rafiki, the shaman. Simba's father, Mufasa is the king of the Pridelands and when Simba has grown into a cub, he explains to his son about the responsibilities of being the King and how a "circle of life" connects all living things. Scar, Mufasa's brother and Simba's uncle tempts Simba to go to the dangerous elephant graveyard. He takes his best friend, and later love interest. They are chased by hyenas and rescued by Mufasa who is disappointed with Simba for putting him and Nala in danger. Scar is angry at the hyenas for not being successful with this attack and convinces them to assist him to kill Simba and Mufasa.

The plan is to lure Simba to a gorge. The hyenas then start a stampede of wildebeest which leads to Mufasa coming to rescue him. Ultimately, Scar knocks Mufasa into the gorge where he is killed by the stampede. Scar manipulates Simba into thinking it was all his fault. Simba therefore runs away while the hyenas pursue to kill him. Simba escapes but Scar is not informed of his survival. Scar informs the pride of Simba's death, becomes king, and the hyenas are allowed to live in the Pridelands.

Simba is rescued by Timon, a meerkat, and Pumbaa, a warthog. They take him to their home, an oasis, and raise him according to their saying "hakuna matata" which means "no worries." Nala finds Simba in the oasis when she chases Pumbaa and Timon. Simba rescues them from her, and she tries to persuade him to return to the Pridelands to save them from the drought caused by Scar's reign. He initially refuses but is persuaded by Mufasa's spirit who visits him in the sky telling him to go and take his place as king.

Simba returns to the Pridelands. Scar tells the pride that Simba was responsible for Mufasa's death. Later, when Simba is dangled over the edge of a cliff by Scar, Scar reveals that Simba was not responsible and tells him the truth. The truth is revealed to the pride and a fight breaks out with the lionesses, Simba, Timon, and Pumbaa fighting and beating the hyenas. Simba initially spares Scar's life when he pleads with him. However, Scar attacks again leading to a battle which results in Scar being thrown over a ledge to the ground below. The fall does not kill him, but the hyenas maul him to death after hearing him blame them for his actions. The film ends with Simba being the king, Nala being the queen, and Rafiki presenting their cub to the animals as Simba was at the beginning.

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