

“Beautiful, Powerful, Dangerous, Cold”: Water and Womanhood in Disney’s *Frozen* and *Moana*

The heroines of the Walt Disney Company’s two most recent princess films have marked a shift in direction that has been noted and lauded by fans. While many have gone so far as to label *Frozen* and *Moana* as feminist offerings, others have at the very least celebrated the films’ stars as “strong women,” contrasting popular characters like Elsa, Anna, and Moana with the docile, lovesick princesses of prior years. This paper argues that any examination of gender in the films must take into consideration the implicit and explicit connections each film makes between water and femininity. While Elsa’s icy powers are threatening when left uncontrolled, she is essentially “tamed” by participation in a socially approved sister relationship which renders her magic useful to the community. Meanwhile, Moana, whose name literally translates to “ocean” is connected with the sea. That sea, which is personified in an arguably feminine way, is viewed as a threat by Moana’s father, the chief, and ultimately assists Moana in her effort to restore life and fertility to the surrounding islands. Significantly, the being who brings life and fertility is also represented as feminine, and the initial loss of her life-giving power at the hands of a masculine demi-god is framed with much of the same rhetoric used to discuss sexual violence.

This paper seeks to examine the close connection between ostensibly strong female characters and forces of nature which are viewed as threatening and in need of control. Is the overarching message of these celebrated films that femininity is a threat in need of neutralization or that it is an essential force deserving of more complex understanding? How can viewers understand the changing role of Disney heroines in these films that simultaneously fear and celebrate femininity? By discussing these popular films while drawing on feminist, ecocritical, and psychoanalytic theories, I uncover a way of conceptualizing *Frozen* and *Moana* which incorporates their significant and frequently exoticized settings as well as the recent shift in Disney princess film ideology that permits a princess to succeed without a prince.