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Moana

by Ron Clements and John Musker (review)

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Moana (Ron Clements and John Musker US 2016). Walt Disney Studios 2017. Region 1. 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen. US\$29.95.

Like its predecessor *Frozen* (Buck and Lee US 2013), *Moana* seeks to update the gender politics of the 'Disney Princess' genre while at the same time going further in its transposition of the princess fantasy to the South Pacific, with all-Polynesian characters and a predominantly Hawaiian and South Pacific voice cast (the only actor lacking nonwhite ancestry is Alan Tudyk, voicing the wordless chicken Heihei). In the syncretic mythic past of the film, Moana (voiced by Auli'i Cravalho in her debut film) is treated not only as the coequal of the men around her but as their superior in nearly every respect: she is smarter, braver, kinder, more resilient, and more athletic than anyone else in the film, including her chieftain father. The immortal demigod Maui (Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson), while undoubtedly stronger and a better sailor (at least until he teaches her), is egomaniacal and selfish, a coward, and emotionally devastated by parental abandonment, needing constant reaffirmation to even approach basic functionality. Moana's eventual ascension to chief and her suitability to the position are beyond

question, and the issue of marriage and reproduction is (for once) bracketed nearly entirely by the film; there is barely even the hint of a romance plot. Like *Frozen's* Elsa (Idina Menzel), Moana sings of her inability to be 'perfect', but unlike Elsa this is not couched in an inferiority complex or a disability metaphor; Moana is simply called to adventure on the high seas, a better destiny her loving but overprotective father (Temuera Morrison, who played Jango Fett in the *Star Wars* prequels) denies because of his own bad experiences trying to leave the island as a youth. But when the time comes, Moana inevitably goes anyway, notably aided and abetted by two other key female characters: her mother (Pussycat Doll Nicole Scherzinger) and grandmother (New Zealand actress Rachel House).

Moana's call to heroism coincides with another point of overlap with *Frozen*: the redeployment of the Disney Princess for an era of climate change. Indeed, where *Frozen* was an inverted and somewhat disavowed climate change fantasy – everything gets cold instead of hot (which, incidentally, might be what actually happens to Northern Europe if the Atlantic gets so warm the Gulf Stream shuts down), and it happens because of a vague magical curse that can be attributed only very loosely to bad parenting – *Moana* plays the allegory much more straight. One thousand years ago the mythic shapeshifting hero Maui stole a magic gem from the nature goddess Te Fiti, who takes the form of the island from which all life in the world seems to have descended. Maui's motives here, despite his hunger for glory, were mostly pure; he intended to give the gem and its power to create life to humanity as a gift, the same way he had previously lassoed the sun to extend their days and stole fire from hell to warm their nights. But Maui is attacked by a lava monster as he leaves Te Fiti and in the battle loses both the gem and the magic fishhook that gives him his powers. In the millennium since, the world has grown increasingly sick; humanity has abandoned its natural drive to explore and has retreated to its last enclave, the primitive communist paradise Motunui, and is no longer able to leave the safety of its barrier reef. As the story opens, the world-sickness is now coming even to Motunui; its fish are dying, its coconuts are rotting from the inside.

The ocean chooses Moana as its instrument to restore the balance of nature, magically endowing her with Te Fiti's long-lost magical gem. Her grandmother instructs her to take the tribe's long-hidden boats, which can cross the reef, and take the gem to Maui – who has been trapped on the tiny island he crashed on after the battle for the last thousand years, because, as his wonderfully infectious introductory song announces, 'Maui can do anything but float' – and compel him to return the gem to Te Fiti. Maui, a classic trickster, initially refuses entirely, attempting to steal Moana's boat and abandon her on the island instead. But Moana's unflinching determination wears him down and he ultimately signs on to the mission. They recover Maui's fishhook from the Smaug-esque giant crab Tamatoa (voiced by *Flight of the Conchords'* Jemaine Clement, performing yet another show-stopping song) and from there sail on to Te Fiti to let Maui restore the gem and save the world

Here the film's gender politics go even beyond *Frozen's*, perhaps even beyond any Disney Princess movie to date: the first attempt to return the gem fails. Maui is unable to get past the lava monster who defeated him the first time, and in the process his fishhook is damaged (sparking now with electric energy that suggests it might be technological rather than magical in origin, and thereby making this an entirely appropriate review for *Science Fiction Film and Television*). Maui then quits the mission entirely, unwilling to risk his now-damaged fishhook in another attempt; Moana tries to give up as well, concluding that the ocean must have chosen the wrong person, but is visited by the spirit of her now-dead grandmother who reassures her she is the hero of this story after all. Moana resolves to return the gem on her own, realising that she can outwit the lava monster by exploiting its vulnerability to water and its slow speed; with a feint, she is able to move the lava monster out of position and quickly double back to take a different route to Te Fiti. Even here, she is not fast enough to quite reach Te Fiti on her own – but Maui returns at the very last moment (in an obvious homage to Han Solo at the end of *Star Wars*(Lucas US 1977)), keeps the lava monster busy, and tells Moana to go save the world.

And (of course) she does: realising at last that the lava monster is not an antagonist of the nature goddess but rather the aspect of the nature goddess as she manifests without her gem, she returns the gem to the lava monster, who resumes her nature goddess form, smiles beneficently, and returns to sleep. Maui is given a new fishhook to replace the one the lava monster had destroyed, and Moana returns to her people, whom she will now lead once again as explorers and adventurers in a restored and restabilised global climate.

As an ecological allegory not unlike the ones I discuss in my recent SFFTV article 'Unless Someone Like You Cares a Whole Awful Lot: Apocalypse as Children's Entertainment' (10.1, 2017), *Moana* thus represents the newest entry in a long tradition of children's texts speaking about ecological crisis. Like many of the stories I discussed, *Moana* seeks to produce structures of feeling that show the majesty of nature and the embeddedness of our place within it, as well as empower children with the sense that they can make a positive difference for the planet (even if the solutions to avert their disaster are still purely magical in nature, with no concrete real-world analogue that might help us avert ours). Where *Moana* stands out from the genre, however, is in its deviation from the negative tendency I identify in that piece, which is the way the production of that necessary sense of empowerment often displaces responsibility for fixing the disaster away from adults (who caused it, and who have the power to fix it) onto the children who are its powerless victims.

Moana is an exemplary work of eco-apocalyptic children's literature precisely because it is able to thread this difficult needle: Moana is still the hero and the agent of the story, but a huge portion of her quest is to force Maui to recognise how his well-intentioned act of stealing the gem from Te Fiti has had catastrophic consequences that are now his responsibility to fix, even if it costs him something (his fishhook) he holds dear. Indeed, Maui's status as a Prometheus/Frankenstein extends beyond the gem adventure; a close reading of his song 'You're Welcome', in which he lists his many heroic deeds, indicates he also created the crab (while 'messing around') – who becomes a powerful enemy – and the coconut – who also becomes a powerful enemy in a delightful sequence inspired by *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller Australia/US 2015), in which Moana and Maui must flee from pirates who appear to be sentient coconuts, the Kakamora. The interior logic of the song – moving from a jaunty show-tune celebration of Maui's originary creative acts to an increasingly frantic, scatted breakdown that announces Maui's impressiveness regardless of context or consequence, before twisting in the end to Maui's villainous attempt to steal Moana's boat – likewise suggests the cruel-optimistic arc of technological modernity, especially when one adds back in the key deed 'You're Welcome' omits: the theft of the gem and the consequent total destabilisation of the planetary ecology, not to mention the collapse of the human civilisation the theft was ostensibly meant to benefit. That Maui is essentially innocent in all this, and did not know the consequences of stealing the gem, becomes weirdly crucial to the allegory for global capitalism; humanity did not know what would happen when we stole oil from the gods, either, and yet here we all are.

In this respect it cannot go without mentioning that some of the songs in *Moana* were co-written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who has risen to international fame in the last few years for his hip-hop Broadway musical *Hamilton* (Miranda himself appears briefly in *Moana*, as the voice of one of Moana's voyaging ancestors.) *Hamilton's* attempt to revitalise the ideal of America – perhaps one should say *rehabilitate* – through the reconfiguration and literal recasting of its Founding Fathers exists in a strange sort of dialectical relationship to *Moana*, where we discover that the lost mythic hero really was a rascal after all, whose legacy is utterly tainted by his many failures and whose ongoing heroism in the present can only proceed when reoriented towards the service of the children whose future he has unwittingly destroyed. Perhaps not incidentally, *Hamilton* and *Moana* end up with opposite orientations towards the future: *Hamilton's* attempt to re-mythologise the founding of America falls apart in the second act of the musical with the emergence of intractable crises the Founders are unable to solve ('Winning was easy, young man / governing is harder'); Moana, on the other hand, is able to inspire Maui to be a

genuinely admirable hero, freed from the egoism and pathetic neediness that previously tainted his deeds. At its conclusion, which sees the frontier re-opened and Moana's race of voyagers restored to its former greatness – weirdly, and despite the de-centring of whiteness and the surface-level focus on Polynesian myth – *Moana* is thus unexpectedly able to sustain a vision of renewed American greatness that *Hamilton* could not.