

Witches, Crones and Evil Queens

A study of age, beauty and female autonomy in fairy tale narratives

LILY MAY ROGERS

1701669

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TUTOR: Delyth Lloyd-Evans

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SUMMARY

This Independent Inquiry observes and analyses the themes of age, beauty and female autonomy in fairy tale narratives. Applying feminist theory, the Inquiry examines the development of female autonomy in traditional and reimagined fairy tales with a focus on the portrayal of two chosen characters. These characters are Baba Yaga, a renowned figure originating from Slavic folklore, and the figure of the stepmother from the popular tale of *Snow White*. With reference to both traditional and reimagined texts, the Inquiry explores the status of these characters as villains, and aims to present an alternative perspective on their characterisation from a feminist viewpoint.

INTRODUCTION

This Independent Inquiry will explore the portrayals of selected female figures in fairy tales, specifically witch-like figures who are villainised and feared. Attention will be paid to age, physical beauty, and motherhood concerning the chosen figures, with reference to feminist stances and selected psychoanalytic theory. By observing and analysing different interpretations of the characters, in both traditional and reimagined tales, the Inquiry will explore the factors that establish these female figures as villains, and question how far their villain status is rooted in misogyny and misunderstanding. The writing will examine whether the influences of age and physical beauty (or lack of this) are linked to the portrayal of evilness in women. Patriarchal values that colour many traditional tales will be scrutinised, with consideration of how evolving views on femininity and female autonomy influence modern retellings.

The first chapter will focus on the Slavic folk character Baba Yaga, with study into the topic of witches. The findings from this wider exploration of witches will be applied and compared to the character of Baba Yaga, in order to understand the links frequently made between her and the classic witch archetype. Both traditional and reimagined stories will be examined, with commentary on Baba Yaga's nature in the original content in comparison to newer adaptations. In the second chapter, I will explore the figure of the stepmother from the tale of *Snow White*. To provide context for the analysis of the character, this chapter will also outline wider

discussion of stepmother figures in the fairy tale genre. As in the first chapter, comparisons will be drawn between the original content and newer retellings, in an attempt to answer the question of whether the developing views on female autonomy are reflected in reimagined versions of fairy tales.

This Inquiry will relate to my artistic practice in its exploration of folklore and female archetypes. Examining alternative perspectives on femininity by studying figures who are feared, I will broaden my insight into characters who have intriguing and complex attributes. The findings gained from this could inform thought-provoking illustration concepts, exploring the multifaceted nature of characters as well as expanding my research on fairy tales and their ever-evolving manifestations.

CHAPTER ONE

Witches in the Woods: Embracing Baba Yaga

Perhaps one of the most mysterious and enigmatic, yet iconic figures in European folklore is the ancient, forest-dwelling crone Baba Yaga. Andreas Johns (2010) presents an extensive study of the figure, surveying a number of tales with reference to wider theories including structuralist, mythological and Marxist approaches. Although Johns does not include a specific section on feminist approach, much of the content can inherently be considered from a feminist viewpoint due to its exploration of Baba Yaga as a mother figure, a hideous witch, and an elderly woman.

Most often, Baba Yaga is portrayed as a villain or fearsome character who is used as the threat of punishment in cautionary tales. Johns (2010, pp. 39-40) examines the studies carried out by Nikolai V. Novikov on the “positive” and “negative” roles played by Baba Yaga throughout a number of tales, with the positive aspects including giving an object or offering advice to the protagonist, a function which lines up with the “donor” role outlined by Vladimir Propp *et al.* (2009, pp. 39-45). However, Novikov’s studies show that these positive aspects only appear in about one third of the texts, leaving the remaining tales to portray her as an evil figure capable of malicious advice, child abduction, dark sorcery and cannibalism.

Interestingly, Novikov points out that Baba Yaga's benevolent aspects originate from a matriarchal period, whereas her "malevolent counterpart arose during a period of struggle between the matriarchy and the patriarchy, which ended with the establishment of the latter" (Johns, 2010, p. 40). This insinuates that patriarchal values may be responsible for the process of villainising Baba Yaga, perhaps as a means of creating an evil female figure as a scapegoat during times of social conflict. From this notion, links can be drawn to the figure of the witch, who has historically been the subject of abundant demonisation, persecution and punishment. Although, as pointed out by Sollée (2017, p. 9), there are also multiple examples of men historically being accused of witchcraft, witches are widely regarded to be female figures, especially in fairy tales, often spurned and even put to death for possessing ostensibly socially deviant qualities. In a piece exploring the figure of the witch, Schimmelpfennig (2013) examines the vilification of alleged witches from the perspective of Christian influences:

From a sociological perspective, the witch was the opposite of the woman's image as propagandized by the church. [. . .] She was used to point out difference, namely between the good, virtuous woman and the foul one.

This perspective is also true of fairy tale narratives that include witches, whose villainous and deviant attributes are presented in contrast to the female protagonists' appropriate, respectable qualities. Maria Tatar (2003, p. 30) points out how the Grimm brothers constantly revised their collections of fairy tales, and that with each new edition came additional attributes assigned to the characters to fortify their apparent virtue. She discusses how

characteristics such as diligence and piety are emphasised more and more in heroines, and are increasingly correlated with beauty and desirability. She notes examples of female protagonists becoming “progressively more God-fearing from one edition to the next”, which further supports the above statement by Schimmelpfennig regarding the figure of the witch as means of exemplifying socially deviant women.

Baba Yaga is identified as a witch in many accounts, a title which, despite Baba Yaga’s ambiguous and largely undefinable nature, does serve a purpose in outlining connections between her function in stories and those of witch-like figures. Jack Zipes (2012, p. 62) points out that Baba Yaga has many characteristics that line up with those of western witches who were demonised by the Christian church, though these figures often tend to be beautiful and seductive. Zipes goes on to point out that “in time, however, the beauty of witches was downplayed in most European countries so that the witch was likened to an ugly hag.” This move away from depicting witches as beautiful may raise questions about female beauty and its connection to implicit goodness, and subsequently physical ugliness to evilness. While on a surface level this may not seem an unreasonable correlation to make in tales widely told to children, this downplaying of witches’ beauty may point more to a fear of women stepping outside of social boundaries or possessing any personal agency. Thus, this fear calls for the subsequent need to demonise women through physical ugliness, a notion which in itself warrants scrutiny in regards to the question of why a lack of physical beauty should determine the audience’s opinion on a female character.

Zipes (2012, p. 80) addresses the topic of female agency in fairy tales, asserting that for female characters “to be good, they must be obedient and industrious”, a notion similarly supported Epstein (2018) who points out that fairy tales are “littered with misogyny – women are only considered perfect if they’re passive”. This again is a reflection of the widespread attitudes towards women in traditional tales, reflected not only within the narratives themselves but also externally in the attitudes of their writers. This separation of fairy tale women into two categories: either beautiful, obedient and fragile; or ugly, old and evil, results in the erasure of authentic, multifaceted women. The question of why these seem to be the only categories of women that exist in traditional fairy tales is addressed by Black (2017) in a comment about the figure of the old or ugly hag in stories:

Interesting to mention that the hags in question are usually powerful. A combination of a powerful woman with the advantage of age and wisdom, and a woman who has no 'value' to men, not being young and fertile, is taught as something monstrous and terrifying.

This sentiment is also asserted by Kuykendal and Sturm (2007, p. 39) in a piece examining how fairy tales perpetuate harmful assumptions of gender roles. They discuss K. S. Evans’s statement that “powerful women in fairy tales are generally ugly if not also evil”, a point which can be clearly applied to the figure of the old or ugly hag. This archetype fits the description of Baba Yaga, who is frequently alluded to as ancient and grotesque. She does not conform to the category of seductive and beautiful witches, nor indeed to any standard of delicate female beauty, rather, she “sprawls herself out in her hut and has ghastly features – drooping breasts,

a hideous long nose, and sharp iron teeth” (Forrester *et al.*, 2013, p. 8). This action of “sprawling” evokes a lack of regard for her appearance or for any behavioural expectations demanded of women, firmly placing her outside the category of “valuable”.



Fig. 1: *Baba Yaga*

Although Baba Yaga is frequently described as exceedingly hideous, with exaggerated features and a frightening demeanour, images of her that accompany traditional collections of tales are rarely particularly shocking or repulsive to the extent implied in the textual descriptions. Figure 1 shows an illustration of Baba Yaga in which, aside from the environment, she appears as little more than an elderly woman. Her hair is wild and thinning, her face and hands are dirty, and she has hair on her arms, but none of these aspects are especially outrageous in comparison to the written accounts. What this may suggest is that her apparent ugliness in the written tales is a device used to further alienate her from the reader, but the notion of a physically repulsive and hideous woman is still too outrageous to explicitly depict in an image. Alternatively, it could imply that the artist's idea of a hideous and grotesque woman is merely an elderly woman. This idea draws attention to feminist discussion on the misunderstanding and shaming of women's bodies, which only increase as women age:

Women and monsters have a lot in common [. . .]. They are both outcasts; alienated, derided and feared by society. They are biological freaks with bodies that transgress and fluctuate, and they are both threats to male power.

(Wriglesworth, 2018)

This observation brings an intriguing focus to the correlation between women and monsters, alluding to the ignorance, judgement and criticism surrounding the female body. In *Leaks, Lumps and Lines*, psychologist Joan C. Chrisler (2011) examines the stigma surrounding female bodies, covering the topics of menstruation, menopause, weight gain and ageing. She explores the stigmatisation of these natural processes, beginning by outlining why female bodies are

perceived as “threats to culture and society” (Chrisler, 2011, p. 202). She identifies one origin of this as the man’s paternal uncertainty regarding whether a child is biologically his, resulting in the patriarchal urge to try and control women’s bodies. She then delves into various psychological and societal explanations for the stigma attached to the aforementioned bodily processes, which result in revulsion and fear of the female body and a culturally ingrained branding of it as monstrous and disgusting. She asserts that it is “women, not men, who typically lose status with the first signs of aging because the female beauty ideal requires youth” (Chrisler, 2011, p. 204), a point which aligns seamlessly with the ideals of femininity perpetuated in countless fairy tales.

As well as the witch and the old hag, a role Baba Yaga famously encompasses is the mother. This is exemplified by psychoanalyst Marie-Louise von Franz’s Jungian approach which identifies her as an “archaic manifestation of the Great Mother Archetype who contains both good and bad” (Johns, 2010, p. 35), an assessment which in itself acknowledges a certain depth and diversity of character. This point is further evidenced by Sheldon Cashdan’s exploration of the popular Russian fairy tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. Cashdan (1999, pp. 119-120) observes the significance of the three horsemen who represent the “bright day”, “red sun” and “dark night”, and are servants of Baba Yaga who follow her wishes. He comments that this example of Baba Yaga’s power over the coming of night and day point to the representation of her as a “great earth mother who holds dominion over the universe” (Cashdan, 1999, p. 120). This interpretation frames her in a way that does not condemn her for her age, but rather

celebrates her power and wisdom as a figure reminiscent of a deity, representing an emblem of ultimate motherhood.



Fig. 2: *Baba Yaga: Death and Rebirth*

The idea of Baba Yaga as a possible deity-like figure can be seen in figure 2. This illustration depicts her encompassing a number of elements relating to nature: the tree trunks on her skirt, the flowers on her shawl, and the mushrooms growing at her feet which are those of a chicken. These details are interwoven with and around her body in a way that implies a cohesion with the forest she inhabits, while the skull she holds and the flowers growing from it represent the emerging of new life that comes from ageing. These may allude to a dominion over natural forces, including death, a point supported by research on Slavic paganism that argues Baba Yaga is a goddess of the earth, sun, moon, and death (Ivanova, 2013, p. 1863).

Other psychoanalytical approaches have seen Baba Yaga to represent the “phallic mother” (Johns, 2010, p. 34), suggesting that although Baba Yaga is associated with maternal archetypes and the ageing feminine, she also takes on characteristics of masculinity. This notion is exemplified by Kathleen Murphey (2018) in *Baba Yaga, the Intersex Witch*, wherein the narrative is told from the viewpoint of Baba Yaga herself. This is an example of a modern reimagining of the character which is sympathetic to her, depicting the ostensibly socially deviant traits as displays of personal strength and independence instead. Murphey (2018, p. 210) begins her narrative with the compelling opening statement “I am Baba Yaga, and no one knows what to do with me”, and outlines the character’s numerable contradictory attributes that render her incomprehensible to society. She portrays these, however, in a way that renders society the villain, not Baba Yaga herself. She notes how the character encompasses associations with both human and animal, life and death, the wild and domestic, and indeed,

both male and female. Her mode of travel, the flying mortar and pestle present in many traditional Baba Yaga tales, may be interpreted as a representation of this duality:

Doesn't it make sense now – that I fly through the air with both a womb and a phallus? Theoretically, I have both with my mortar and pestle. It is why I am associated with contradictory things – I am not one, but all.

(Murphey, 2018, pp. 211-212)

This presence of multiple gendered aspects is a further example of Baba Yaga's rejection of defined roles. The mingling of male characteristics into an archetypally female figure taints the idea of perfect femininity and, combined with Baba Yaga's age, chafes with the function of fairy tale women as beautiful objects and child bearers. Furthermore, in some tales she possesses a broomstick in addition to her mortar and pestle, a symbol famously associated with witches, and the subject of psychoanalytic discussion in regards to it being a phallic symbol. In Murphey's narrative this addition of a broomstick is addressed, with comments further holding patriarchal values responsible for Baba Yaga's association with the witch:

The pestle left a trailing mark behind – as the phallus always leaves a trail or contamination and wreckage in its wake, at least in the patriarchal order. So, in addition, to the mortar and pestle, they associated me with a broom – for the Christians, the witches' means of transport, and with this broom, I swept away the marks of the pestle's passage.

(Murphey, 2018, p. 212)

Although this extract only expressly identifies the pestle's phallic symbolism, the acknowledgment of the broomstick's association with witches can be linked to themes outlined by Duffy (2019) in *Freud's Early Psychoanalysis, Witch Trials and the Inquisitorial Method*, as well as by Thuras (2014) in an examination of the origins of iconic witch imagery. Thuras points out that a broom in its basic form could be seen as a "symbol of female domesticity" due to its function as a cleaning implement. However, due to its phallic connotations, riding on a broomstick brings a sexual implication, thus subverting a symbol of domesticity and female obedience into an emblem of female sexuality and freedom. Thuras phrases this as "femininity and domesticity gone wild", and outlines this in itself as a threat to the patriarchal order.

It may be noted that common measures of value for fairy tale women are usually surface level attributes that obscure deeper implications. Youth and beauty are often allusions to a woman's fertility and sexual availability to men, supporting the stance that valuable women are those who are physically desirable and able to bear children. However, despite the emphasis on sexual availability, the notion of a woman being in control of her own sexuality would be outrageous. In *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, Sollée (2017, p. 87) explores the links made between female sexual freedom and witches in *The Malleus Maleficarum*, a 15th century Catholic paper on witchcraft. Sollée discusses how this paper "decreed witchcraft was afoot when a woman was exceedingly amorous [. . .] or when a man couldn't perform sexually", a sentiment which not only condemns any trace of female autonomy, but yet again employs scapegoating. The paper purportedly identifies "female fornicators" as likely candidates for the practice of sorcery, a view which supports Sollée's assertion that "there was no room for female sexual

pleasure in church doctrine, only procreation” (2017, p. 87). This notion is further addressed in *Baba Yaga, the Intersex Witch* when the emergence of Christianity, replacing the existing polytheistic faith, is discussed by Baba Yaga. She points out how Christianity decrees that “Jesus’ own mother must be a virgin – because sex has firmly been associated with sin and shame” (Murphey, 2018, p. 211), again demonstrating a deep-rooted example of female sexual oppression.

Baba Yaga’s existence itself is portrayed as an opposition to the emerging Christian principles addressed in Murphey’s narrative, which Baba Yaga regards as synonymous with male-orientated values. She expresses concern at the lack of feminine elements in the Christian Holy Trinity, which she sees as a male remodelling of the Triple Goddess: the Maiden, Mother and Crone. This is a deity which appears in many pagan and ancient polytheistic faiths, and is an embodiment of the importance of each stage of a woman’s life. The Crone is explored by Krohn *et al.* (2017, p. 9) in the feminist witchcraft publication *Sabat*, identifying her as “embodying a life lived”. The views in *Sabat* put emphasis on celebrating the wisdom, audacity and experience that come with ageing, and exemplify Baba Yaga as a prime manifestation of the Crone. This exploration of Baba Yaga asserts that “her rejection of beauty and fearsome independence have made her a modern feminist icon” (Krohn *et al.*, 2017, p. 107), a view which effectively relates with the question of whether reimagined tales reflect developing views on female autonomy.

Baba Yaga's residence, a hut with chicken legs, is an iconic emblem of her character, identified by Murphey (2018, p. 212) to be "as contradictory as [Baba Yaga's] self". The concept of a house that can spontaneously move around on its own provides an ironic dichotomy of domesticity and restlessness, with the symbol of the house typically representing stability paired with legs which provide autonomy and freedom of movement. Baba Yaga's house performing as a representation of domesticity and "settled existence" (Murphey, 2018, p. 212), and yet also a defiance of this with its functional legs, may be seen as a reflection of her own autonomy as a self-governed ageing woman, and a rejection of the values prominent in fairy tales that demand women to be passive and compliant. This sense of rebellion is apparent throughout Murphey's narrative, equipping Baba Yaga with a tone that mocks those who underestimate her:

They plot my destruction. Silly fools. They do not know what I am. They do not know that they cannot kill me. They see a strange old woman with too long arms [. . .], but they do not know my power. [. . .] They cannot contain me. But they will try.

(Murphey, 2018, p. 213)

This first person perspective seems to be a popular format used in many modern reimaginings of Baba Yaga. An example is demonstrated by Gill (2018, p. 87) in a poem where Baba Yaga counsels: "When they tell you a woman becomes more erased [. . .], easier to ignore the older she gets, smile and remind them of me". The verses go on to celebrate the physical signs of her age: "I turned my wrinkles into badges of honour [. . .]. My mane of silver hair is as good as a thousand soldiers' swords", unashamedly defying the bias and stigma surrounding ageing

bodies. The first person technique is also employed by Kitaiskaia (2017) in *Ask Baba Yaga*, where the character shares her wisdom in response to modern day problems in the format of an advice column. What these examples have in common is placing value in Baba Yaga's own voice and insights, allowing the authors to actually become Baba Yaga and celebrate the knowledge and experience that come with her age. This reclaiming and transforming of a character who for centuries was branded as a figure of punishment, depravity and female shame, has a sentiment that is profoundly feminist.

CHAPTER TWO

The Wicked Stepmother: Understanding the Monster

Alongside the witch, a character who is frequently portrayed as wicked, immoral and malevolent is that of the stepmother. Tatar (2003, p. 141) points out that “stepmothers stand as an abiding source of evil in countless fairy tales”, a fact which can be explored and analysed from a number of different angles. Cashdan (1999, p. 42) points out that the origin of stepmothers replacing birth mothers is in historical fact, as practicality demanded that men quickly replace their deceased wives to provide a carer for the children in times inundated with the struggles of agricultural life. The fairy tale accounts of the stepmother being wicked and cruel, however, can be deconstructed with reference to psychological analysis. Bettelheim (1991, p. 67) asserts that the stepmother is a device used to keep the birth mother “uncontaminated” by negative imagery and associations, offering children a solution to deal with difficult emotions surrounding familial relationships.

Even considering this psychological explanation, it is interesting to note that fairy tale stepmothers often “actively persecute not their stepsons, but their stepdaughters” (Tatar, 2003, p. 141), a point which outlines the tendency in fairy tales to pit women against each other. This is discussed by Joosen (2011, p. 65) who outlines the notion of the “beauty contest”,

a recurrent pattern in fairy tales. A prominent example of this narrative device can be seen in the tale of *Snow White*, a famous instance of rivalry between the protagonist and her stepmother. This story effectively exemplifies the value placed on youth and beauty in fairy tales, but, when viewed objectively, also exposes the hypocrisy of villainising the stepmother for being obsessed with beauty. Krohn *et al.* (2017, p. 22) illustrates this fact, pointing out that women are “double bound: punished by society for aging, then villainized for going to extremes to maintain their beauty and youth”. The stepmother also holds a position of power as queen, supporting the assertion by Furssedonn-Howard (2018, p. 72) that “women who pose a perceived threat to the natural order of things get turned into a snarling and bitter beast before the very eyes of the public”.

This perspective is explored in the film *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), wherein the stepmother, Ravenna, is presented in a way that invokes a certain sympathy for her character. While her actions and behaviour are undoubtedly cruel and violent, perfectly fulfilling the wicked stepmother role, her motives are explained through the narrative as being the product of the recurrent misogyny and ageism she has experienced and observed. In the original tale collected by the Grimm brothers, the new queen’s jealousy of Snow White is explained away as mere vanity. Cashdan (1999, p. 46) writes that upon the queen’s discovery that Snow White has become the fairest, “envy and pride grew like ill weeds in her heart”, which reduces her feelings and the actions that follow to the products of shallow, undesirable character traits. Conversely, Ravenna’s obsession with beauty in *Snow White and the Huntsman* comes from a more complex source. This adaptation places more emphasis on her obvious intelligence,

resourcefulness, and power in the face of repeated sexism and ageism, rather than reducing her rivalry with Snow White to superficial jealousy.

In the film, Ravenna orchestrates her own marriage to Snow White's father, the king, with a plan already in place to kill him. She has experienced before how men measure women by their youth and beauty, and so she utilises this knowledge to sway the predictable behaviour of the king, seeing a beautiful woman and immediately wanting to claim her as his wife, to advance her own quest for power. In bed on their wedding night, moments before killing him, she speaks to him of a previous marriage:

I was ruined by a king like you once. I replaced his queen, an old woman. And in time I too would have been replaced. Men use women. They ruin us, and when they are finished with us, they toss us to the dogs like scraps.

(Snow White and the Huntsman, 2012)

This speech's exposure of the evident sexism present in the world invokes an undeniable urge to almost support this character's objective in the story, despite her being the obvious villain of the narrative. What invokes further sympathy for Ravenna and anger on her behalf is the fact that the king is taking no interest in what she is telling him, but continues to kiss her throat, on obvious indicator of his intent to attain his own sexual fulfilment, while she recounts mistreatment in her past. A flashback scene later in the film implies that her "ruin" by another king is a reference to forced marriage and rape, highlighting the dispensability of women once

they are no longer virginal, as well as the issue of culturally ingrained sexual violence. Her proclamation that “when a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers” demonstrates that she has succeeded in figuring out the system of a sexist and ageist world, and has chosen to brutally harness this as her own form of power, rather than be a victim to it.



Fig. 3: *Charlize Theron as Ravenna*

In keeping with the central theme of beauty, the film’s visuals explore this in a way that also incorporate Ravenna’s ruthlessness and her status as a villain. Her wedding dress, shown in figure 3, includes adornments across her shoulders which look like skeletal ribcages. This may

be seen as a defiance of age and death, as she is literally wearing yellowing bones, a reminder of death and ageing, as a piece of adornment for her body on her wedding day. She is flaunting her mastery over death and the inevitable dwindling of beauty by wearing a symbol of mortality, subverting death itself into something she can wear to further embellish her physical beauty. This is one of many macabre attributes that merge with Ravenna's striking beauty to form a duality of terror and awe. Tatar (2003, p. 139) identifies Snow White's stepmother in the Grimms' version of the tale as belonging to a category of "ogres", many of whom possess cannibalistic tendencies. This tendency is true of Ravenna, as her practice of eating the hearts of young animals to maintain her own youth and beauty transforms into a need to consume Snow White's heart once she is told by her magic mirror that her stepdaughter is fairest.

When Snow White escapes to the forest and cannot be found, Ravenna becomes enraged and on the brink of livid tears. This exposing of intense and wrathful anger that Snow White is outside of her control inadvertently offers a window into Ravenna's vulnerability and genuine fear. Snow White being fairer than her is a problem for the queen not because of intrinsic vanity or superficial jealousy, but because she perceives it as a very real threat to her power and position. Her desperation to find and destroy Snow White is a manifestation of her self-preservation, as she knows that beauty was her route to gaining power, and believes that this, sustained through brutality, is the only thing that will allow her to uphold any credibility as a woman in power. This show of vulnerability elicits a level of sympathy from the audience, despite her cruelty and her frightening demands, as it exposes her knowledge that her power is still dependent on the opinions of men. Regardless of her advanced magic abilities, her intellect

in determining how to gain a position of authority as the queen, and her resourcefulness in manipulating the patriarchal order that previously confined and abused her, a certain sadness is evoked by the recognition that her power and position are only upheld by the sexist notion that physical beauty equals fundamental worth.

This underlying dependency on male-orientated values is present not only in Ravenna's character arc, but throughout the entire narrative of the film. The shot of Snow White reflected in the magic mirror after she kills Ravenna completes the proclamation of her status as the "fairest of them all", but also draws attention to the unreasonable importance placed on beauty in this story, and indeed in numerous fairy tales. The conclusion of Ravenna's death at the hands of her stepdaughter, and Snow White's subsequent claiming of the throne become somewhat less evocative when considering the shallowness of this triumph. This is an issue brought up by Bitel (2012, p. 77):

'You see, we're not that different, are we?' Ravenna tells Snow – and if this clichéd line at first seems out of place, and Snow's response to it ('I'm everything you're not') entirely appropriate, in fact the natural youth and beauty that separate Snow from Ravenna will be just as subject to the ravages of time.

This comment outlines the fact that Snow White's victory, while not entirely unsatisfactory considering Ravenna's vicious conducts and harsh rule, is only a testament to the unending principles set by a male-orientated society. The focus of beauty brought back to Snow White

when she sees her own reflection in the mirror somewhat diminishes her success of defeating an evil ruler, as it only supports the notion that her purer, greater beauty was somehow a significant factor in this victory and her following claiming of the throne. What this seems to declare is that Ravenna's false youth and beauty were linked to her status as evil, and that only a truer form of beauty could defeat her. All that is achieved by this conclusion is that one woman, the purportedly "truer", more superiorly beautiful of the two, has killed another, who is "falsely" beautiful as an eventual product of her mistreatment by men. While this is a disappointing culmination of the narrative when considered from a feminist perspective, it does not, however, totally negate the alternative viewpoints expressed on the significance of beauty and the figure of the stepmother in this version of the tale, rather, it may be the unavoidable result of attempting to preserve the original tale as closely as possible in a retelling. What can be learned from this is that in order to wholly subvert the misogyny in fairy tale narratives, or at the very least in the narrative of *Snow White*, the story must perhaps be reimagined to an even further degree than that which is presented in *Snow White and the Huntsman*.

An example of such a tale in a reimagined form is demonstrated by Emma Donoghue (1997) in her short story collection *Kissing the Witch*. In this collection of reimagined fairy tales, labelled by the subtitle as *Old Tales in New Skins*, Donoghue transforms popular fairy tales into feminist retellings. What makes the collection particularly intriguing and complex is that each tale, narrated by an older, more experienced version of the tale's protagonist, is connected to the next by a small passage following each reimagined story. For example, *The Tale of the Apple*,

Donoghue's reimagining of *Snow White*, is followed by a separate page of dialogue between Snow White and her stepmother:

In the orchard, I asked, who were you before you married my father?
And she said, will I tell you my own story?
It is a tale of a handkerchief.

(Donoghue, 1997, p. 57)

This same dialogue format appears through the whole book, with the details altered to fit the corresponding story's characters. This provides a direct opening into the next story, with the last line serving as the following tale's title. This form of storytelling not only creates a flowing, interconnected narrative that links each separate tale, it also presents a running dialogue between a collection of female narrators who communicate and interact with each other. This is a refreshing stance that differs from the subject previously outlined of female characters in fairy tales being pitted against each other, as well as inherently providing sympathetic or at least contextual explanations in the form of each character's respective backstory in the successive tales, even when this character is the perceived villain.

Vanessa Joosen (2011, p. 99) explores these storytelling methods, drawing attention to Donoghue's move away from the inherent condemnation and criticism frequently applied to certain female character roles in fairy tales. She terms this a "feminist dissociation from women and evil nature", and identifies that Donoghue does this in a way that is subtle and natural as

opposed to corrective or forced. That is to say, the distancing of women from corrupt, evil or otherwise undesirable characteristics, or the eventual redemption of these women despite possessing fragments of these characteristics, is achieved by Donoghue in a way that does not appear as a reversal or amendment of traditional narratives that perpetuate these stereotypes. Rather, the story collection as a whole presents positive female traits as an innate aspect of the interwoven narrative, so that each female character's progressive qualities and the positive female interactions are ingrained into the setting:

Donoghue presents nearly all relationships between female characters in *Kissing the Witch* as kind and supportive, which makes goodness and bonding appear as universal female features in her fictional world.

(Joosen, 2011, p. 99)

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to observe that many of Donoghue's retellings involve or end with implications of romantic relationships between women. Due to the interwoven storytelling technique employed, the presence of lesbian love in certain tales creates the possibility for its existence in the surrounding tales too. As the story preceding *The Tale of the Apple* concludes with establishing a lesbian relationship, the audience reads with an awareness of this when one of the characters in question becomes the narrator of the next tale, Snow White herself. As *The Tale of the Apple* places emphasis on Snow White and her stepmother being almost the same age, interacting as playmates rather than mother and daughter, the narrative holds an underlying possibility of love between the two characters. Bobby (2009, p. 27) reflects that Donoghue "subverts both the ideology of heterosexual romance and the focus on female

rivalry, [. . .] foregrounding instead the positive aspect of female relationships". In bypassing the significance of the male figure in the tale, Donoghue's retelling eradicates the rivalry of the iconic villainous stepmother, presenting instead the opportunity for female interaction free of the weight of the patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the portrayal of female villains in fairy tales is a complex area that encompasses numerous attributing factors. It can be deduced that a prominent contributing factor to female villainy is the character's placement outside the categories of value or social acceptance, a point illustrated by the exploration of witches and their demonisation. Baba Yaga and Snow White's stepmother can both be identified with the archetype of the witch in regards to their socially deviant qualities: taking form as either a rejection of the demands of youth and beauty placed on women, a refusal to submit to becoming an object or device to assist the narratives of men, or the possession of a power that threatens the reign of a male-orientated society.

These issues are addressed in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, though it is questionable whether the film as a whole can be viewed as exceptionally progressive, as the conclusion still seems to place importance on the role of physical beauty in Snow White's victory. This is not to say that the film does not have feminist elements, especially in regards to the depth of character demonstrated in Ravenna. The adaptation provides layers of sympathy and justified anger that enhance the portrayal of the stepmother, allowing the audience to understand her motives and even be tempted to support her. From an alternative viewpoint, Snow White's victory and the framing of her as the "fairest of them all" once Ravenna is dead may be an ironic device used to outline the shallowness of the source tale's narrative, posing the question

of whether this victory is worth the conflict induced between two women over the trivial factor of beauty.

It can be assumed that Baba Yaga's status as a villain is a product of her rejection of defined female roles. She is neither youthful nor conventionally beautiful, and her multifaceted nature encompasses an array of contradictory characteristics. While much of the source material seems to employ these facets to regard Baba Yaga with fear and contempt, modern angles on the figure, such as that presented by Murphey, embrace this as an example of a well-rounded female character. The ambiguity surrounding her is likely another factor leading to her reputation as a fearsome monstrosity, as the fear of the unknown and a lack of control over women poses a threat to the patriarchal order.

In response to the question of whether evolving views regarding female autonomy are reflected in reimagined fairy tales, the findings certainly demonstrate evidence of this. It is clear that the narratives which most effectively show a positive evolution of the attitudes to female roles are those which promote dialogue and interaction between women, and move away from the importance placed on compliance, youth and beauty, evidenced in the empowering poems of Gill, the embracing of wisdom that comes with age by Kitaiskaia, and the sharing of interwoven voices and female solidarity presented by Donoghue. These examples celebrate the voices of women without the need for approval from a male authority, embodying the very

threat to the patriarchal order that arises from the male fear that women can function without them.

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