Fat Fairies: Stereotype, Body Type, and Personality of TV Godmothers

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Before getting to her magical work, Cinderella’s 1950 Disney godmother rolls up her sleeves and realizes that she seems to have misplaced her wand. She bumbles about, looks under the garden bench, shakes out her dress before announcing, “Oh! I forgot: I put it away!” Busy godmothers can forget things, but this fairy’s absent mindedness doesn’t end there. Moments later this pudgy Disney godmother nods her head approvingly to send Cinderella off to the ball still dressed in her rags before realizing, “Good heavens, child! You can’t go to the ball in that!” Thus our round friend is a little absent-minded at times, but she leaves us with an iconic image of fairy godmothers: that they are chubby and therefore cheery.

Fast forward now to 2015 and let’s watch this same scene. For actress Helena Bonham Carter Disney got rid of the rounded body type (though, not necessarily the round dress). But Carter’s godmother takes her pumpkin into the greenhouse to turn it into a coach—and nearly misses getting squashed by the pumpkin’s enlargement. Yes, Disney got rid of the round body from 1950, but what did that leave them with? The ditzy godmother who cannot think through her own magical spells. I wondered if these large and airheaded, chubby and cheery godmothers were just a Disney-sponsored formula. But they weren’t.

From 1950-2016, animation to live-action, Disney to non-Disney, my research finds that most fairy godmothers across the film industry and on TV are either fat or foolish—and they are usually a combination of both. There are a few exceptions to this.
The godmothers from the *Slipper and the Rose* and all 3 Rodgers and Hammerstein versions fall into this category of “FIT Fairies.” Not only are they smart but they also share the ideal princess body type. And not surprisingly the fit fairies get more screen time than their fat fairy counterparts. This increased screen time is problematic because it reinforces our fat-hating culture. It pits the princess-esque body types against the fat fairies, the smart against the air-headed. Most destructively these images of fat versus fit convey to us as the viewers that there is something wrong with being fat.

In keeping with the growing field of fat studies, I term these godmothers “fat” as a description of their body type. Marilyn Wann, the leading fat studies specialist, prefers the term “fat” as a “neutral adjective” like “short/tall, young/old” so that people will use the “word fat as a descriptor (not a discriminator)” (“Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution,” xii. See also *FAT!SO?*, 21). Wann, Fraser, and other fat studies researchers are trying to change the negative connotations that the word “fat” has. Fat intolerance, or “fat hatred” as Wann says, causes us “categorize fat people as social untouchables,” who are too big to sit at desks and take up unreasonable space on airplane seats (“An Invitation,” xiv). My research on televised fairy godmothers supports Wann’s theory that fat characters are portrayed with discrimination. I find there is a connection between the weight of the fairy godmothers and their competence levels. Fat fairies are air-headed and bungling; fit fairies are intelligent and capable.

Here is another example of a non-Disney, live-action, fat—and therefore incompetent—godmother. Jim Henson’s 1969 TV movie *Hey Cinderella!* depicts the plump Joyce Gordon struggling to perform her best trick at a magic show: turning a
pumpkin into a coach. The movie opens with her nervously surveying a pumpkin on a stool at an obviously cheap magic show. This godmother’s attempts are a frame story to the typical Cinderella plotline, providing what are meant to be hilarious intervals to contrast with Cinderella’s desperate situation. On the first try Gordon accomplishes little more than exploding the pumpkin all over the stage. On other attempts she only succeeds in transforming the pumpkin into a trashcan or a telephone booth, but never the elusive coach. The fifth attempt for Jim Henson’s godmother lands her and the pumpkin unexpectedly in Cinderella’s kitchen. Excited and openly unsure of her capabilities, at last the godmother has success on her sixth try. And, like Disney’s 2015 fairy, this godmother also forgot to take her pumpkin outside to transform it, forcing Cinderella to push the coach out the kitchen door herself.

The two traits that Disney’s and Henson’s godmothers share are their air-headedness and fleshy body types. Certainly Helena Bonham Carter isn’t flabby, but she also doesn’t share the ideal body type that got Lily James the lead role as Cinderella (Disney, Cinderella, 2015). So while Carter is not overweight, her large dress emphasizes the iconic, round figure that apparently identifies godmothers—and the roundness still communicates that she is witless and stupid. This curved and corpulent body (oftentimes signified by the dress or robe) once implied beauty, affluence, and an enhanced ability to fight off disease (Fraser 11).

In her article “The Inner Corset” Laura Fraser writes, “a hundred years ago, a beautiful woman had plump cheeks and arms” because “Once upon a time … [this] was the very picture of American prosperity” (11). Fraser remarks that “Women were sexy if
they were heavy” and the ideal woman “wore a corset and even a bustle”—and may I suggest a large dress?—“to emphasize her full, substantial hips” (11). This changed during the Industrial Revolutions as “food became more accessible and convenient to all but the poorest families … When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat no longer was a sign of prestige” (Fraser 12). Ultimately “it became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be overweight” (Fraser 12)—and the fat discrimination began.

While godmothers may have once been the picture of good health, today they are merely well-meaning but bumbling fairies. Even in Charles Perrault’s original Cinderella tale he did not describe his fairy as fat and silly. Yet consistently on the screen fairy godmothers are visually identified by their large, round body shape and typified by their air-headed personalities. This obvious discrimination against characters like fairy godmothers should concern fat studies analysts. Godmothers have become a popular, well-accepted example of a body type that has no place for brains. On TV there is hardly any place for smart and fat fairy godmothers.

I am not the only scholar to notice this unfair characterization of fairy godmothers. Jeana Jorgensen in her discussion of “Fairy Godmothers in Contemporary Media” also notices that “fairy godmothers are far more fleshed out than” other fairy tale figures, and “They are portrayed respectively as burlesque…” (220). What is unique about my studies is that I found it unusual to see a fairy godmother that is both fat and intelligent. But I did find an example of smart, fat fairy.
In 1960 Rocky and Bullwinkle’s *Fractured Fairytales* series gave us a tiny but fat fairy godmother. This entrepreneurial character contracts to transform Cinderella for the ball—provided that Cinderella sells her pots and pans collection by midnight for $39.95. She tells Cinderella, “We fairy godmothers have to make a living you know” (1961). Little does the godmother know that the prince is in colossal debt and seeks Cinderella’s hand only to pay off his palace creditors. Whoops. Well, neither the godmother nor Cinderella succeed in getting the prince to purchase the cookware. The show was meant to be funny, and the godmother sort of gets her way in the end by pressing the prince into her business when he goes bankrupt. In the next episode “Cinderella Returns” the godmother again convinces Cinderella to sign a contract with her company “Good Fairy Rentals” to help Cinderella live her one dream of going into the palace as a commoner. Unfortunately the money-making, scheming godmother goofs because she unintentionally forgets to provide Cinderella with two shoes of the same size—which gets Cinderella thrown out of the castle. However, the godmother is somewhat successful in her investments, and pulls the wool over Cinderella’s eyes by marrying the prince herself in the end.

In both Fractured Fairytale episodes the enterprising godmother is clever enough to make her fortune. But I expected more than that from a TV show that is supposed to invert fairy tale tropes. This tiny fairy godmother still makes too many blunders. Perhaps the godmother mistakes are part of the cartoon slapstick, but as we have seen from the live-action examples, these bloopers are somehow an inseparable part of the godmother’s identity.
Shelley Duvall’s 1980 *Faerie Tale Theatre* “Cinderella” episode gives us a sassy godmother who teases the tears out of Cinderella. With her Southern drawl godmother Jean Stapleton exhibits common sense in preparing Cinderella’s makeover. But even Cinderella can spot the errors in her godmother’s magic, reproaching Stapleton for the expiration date on magical aid and for not using her godmother powers to save Cinderella from her stepsisters when they “tied [Cinderella] to the banister.” Cinderella, not the godmother, sees that there are more necessary times for magical assistance than just for sensational appearances at a ball. Maybe the godmother’s unintentional mistakes are humanizing, and Stapleton’s genuine concern for Cinderella makes up for the times she has neglected her godchild. However, as a body type, Stapleton’s chubbiness suggests that while she may have a good heart and the best of intentions to help Cinderella, she is ultimately incapable of harnessing the potential of her magical abilities. Shelley Duvall’s fairy godmother is a little too much like the Disney ones.

The problem is, images of godmothers I see on TV make me expect fat friends to be funny. The excess weight makes them silly, and turn pumpkins into coaches in the wrong time and place. The fat body type gets associated with negative behaviors. The typical, ditzy “fat fairy” portrayal is dangerous because, as Wann bluntly puts it, “Every person who lives in a fat-hating culture inevitably absorbs anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes…” (“An Invitation,” xi). TV and film stereotyping gives the idea that you, as the viewer, aren’t supposed to be like the ditzy godmothers.

Not all fairy godmothers are fat. These I categorize as “fit fairies.” All the Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella* godmothers fit in this category: Edith Adams
Peterson

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(1957), Celeste Holm (1965), and Whitney Houston (1997). But usually the fit fairies are wittier. Somehow skinny equals smart. These actresses were chosen for their musical abilities to sing “Impossible” with Cinderella—and it is not unlikely they were also chosen to play these part because of their fit bodies. Overall these fairies get more screen time in their shows, reappearing at other times to help Cinderella try on the shoe (Edith Adams), offer the prince a glass of water (Celeste Holm), or encourage Cinderella to keep going (Whitney Houston). This unbalanced screen time gives the impression that it is better to be like these smart, singing, fit fairies than the fat, dopey ones.

Why does it matter whether godmothers are fit or fat? Marilyn Wann argues that the fat-hating culture affects all of us—whether anorexic, obese, or even normal—because we all “live in fear of getting fat” (“An Invitation,” xv). By getting more screen time the ideal body type of the fit fairies communicates loud and clear that their body types are not only ideal, but are also as the norm.

The fat-hating culture is hazardous because it also affects the extremely skinny. Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella’s wicked stepmother, the Lady Tremaine, are both very skinny...and scheming. Wann warns that “weight-based attitudes needlessly constrain you, whatever you weigh” (“An Invitation,” xviii). If the villainesses are too skinny, then they’re just that: too skinny. These villainesses followed the cookie-cutter Disney pattern for villainesses at the time, but Disney has since changed that stereotype with characters like Ursula in the Little Mermaid (Disney, 1989). Other TV shows and movies have followed in their wake, trending into sensualized, prima donna villainesses like Mother Gothel (Disney, 2010). However, while these tropes are changing for the
villainesses, they are not changing for the fairy godmothers. As recently as January 2016 godmothers are still fat, stupid fairies (see Disney Junior’s *Goldie and Bear*). And I have yet to see a godmother who can be categorized as “too skinny.”

These negative weight-based attitudes against the extremes of obese and anorexic even constrain the fit fairies. ABC’s *Once Upon a Time* introduced guest star Catherine Lough Haggquist as Fairy Godmother in Season One (2011). The beautiful Haggquist godmother gives her message to Cinderella—and then is gone. ABC killed her off quickly. She was another fit fairy we could have added to our list of intelligent characters, but ABC didn’t give us time to get accustomed to their inversion of the stereotypical godmother. Killing off the godmother early on eliminated the reminder that even fairy godmothers could have ideal, normal bodies.

The biggest drawback to the Haggquist godmother is that this fairy has the same fit body type as everyone else in the *Once Upon A Time* series. While this could be an equalizing factor, it highlights the fat-hating culture that will not allow fat—or even usually portrayed as fat—characters to have a leading or even semi-important role on screen. The “normal” princess-body type assigned to everyone in shows like *Once Upon A Time* perpetuate the fat fairy problem because they only give us the ideal body type as the norm characters, and do not even depict the extremes. Watching shows like this do not give us any alternative options for how to interpret body types. Wann is disgusted with this, writing “If you believe that thin is inherently beautiful and fat is obviously ugly, then you are … in the realm of advertising, popular media…in other words, propaganda” (“An Invitation,” ix). Apparently fit fairies are a kind of body type
propaganda that our fat culture is perpetuating. This propaganda directly affects fairy godmothers because some of our current fairy tale shows like Once Upon a Time reject fairy godmothers altogether. Godmothers are declining in importance and maybe this stems from their previously portrayed “heavy” incompetence.

The good news is, all godmothers—fat or skinny—still appear somehow motherly. Their job is to take care of Cinderella and most of them do. Perhaps this answers why the godmother’s plump body is accentuated, to stress the motherly qualities. If that’s the case, though, then what does this say about fat discrimination towards mothers? Are only chubby women fertile enough for motherhood? This view of fat fairy mothering types is especially problematic when taking into account Fraser’s point that cultural attitudes “consider[] slenderness a sign of...finer sensibilities” (12). Apparently the motherly personality does not give obese mothers sophistication that apparently only slender mothers have. It becomes an issue not only of fat discrimination but also of mother discrimination.

Because fairy tales have easily recognizable plotlines, they serve as an excellent instrument to enforce or expel stereotypes. They cause us to ask questions, such as, “Is it fair to judge the chubby as cheery or the skinny as scheming? Is it accurate to assume that all protagonists must be literally fit to play their roles?” Fat fairies give us the key for how to interpret body types and see through the film industry and TV screen’s propaganda. They underline how the princess and fit fairy body type are presented as both the ideal and the norm. Marilyn Wann calls for a revolution against the bar graph statistics that pit fat people against the fit. She suggests that a bell curve would advocate
for medium body sizes as normal, not ideal, and the “extremes” would not be viewed as outliers but as part of a natural weight progression (“An Invitation,” xii-xiii).

This spectrum highlights the natural fluctuations of body types and tells us that it is necessary for us to have a variety. If we consider body types together as a spectrum of godmothers, princesses, and villainesses, and place them side-by-side, we find the obese and air-headed extreme on one end of the spectrum, the skinny and scheming extreme on the other, with ideal—and near-impossible—in the middle. This spectrum emphasizes how body types are equated with personality: heavy friends are expected to be funny (as well as need a little guidance), skinny friends probably hide their plotting, and ideal friends lie somewhere in the middle where they behave…normally. With the large variety of media we have, we should have a variety of body types for every possible personality, and not just give the fit fairies/princess figure more screen time. But fairy godmothers on TV show us that we don’t have this variety, that for the most part we are only watching—and subconsciously only believing in—the negative character traits of fat fairies.
Works Cited

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