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Deformed, Demented, and Deranged:

Limited Categorizations of Old Women in Fairy Tale Adaptations

In Hollywood, the age gap is no secret. In the world of Hollywood, “men can grow old and still get the girl in her twenties, while women disappear after 40” (Butler). In recent years, the Hollywood Age Gap has become public knowledge. In 2015, Maggie Gyllenhaal, age 37, created controversy when she was deemed “too old” to play a 55-year-old’s love interest (Buchanan). While many were horrified with this blatant exclusion, Gyllenhaal’s experience is not isolated: Emma Stone, 27, has recently played in *Birdman*, *Aloha*, and *Irrational Man* alongside male counterparts aged 53, 45, and 40; Scarlett Johansson, 30, has “never been paired romantically with a man younger than her,” and has, in the past two years, played opposite two 47-year olds. In fact, when Johansson was 18 years old, she played opposite Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation*. At the time, Bill Murray was 52 years old (Butler).

As demonstrated, old women virtually never play the romantic counterpart of similarly aged men. In fact, Kate Kinnimont, Chief Executive of Women in Film and TV, says that if old women are cast in a movie, they are generally cast “as the elderly lady or the witch” (Butler). Older women seem to be placed into two categories. First, they are classified as “elderly.” Second, they are polarized into either a villainous witch or the demented, but well intentioned, granny.

By categorizing old women into certain types of roles, new media has effectively limited the agency of old women. Old women, it seems, can play only the roles that media

has offered: villains or goodhearted oddballs. I propose that these limited categorizations of old women have negatively affected current cultural thinking about feminine age; likewise, current cultural thinking has restricted women to these two options. These limitations exist and are mutually reinforced by cultural thinking and current media. A change in the current media portrayal of old women could contribute to a change in perception about old women in today's society.

Limited Agency: Categorizations of Old Women in Traditional Fairy Tales

Certainly media has affected the negative perception of old women; however, it seems that traditional fairy tales have similarly bound old women into specific stereotypes. Jeana Jorgenson's computational analysis of canonical folk tales helps explicate the restricted role that old women play within fairy tales: "old" is mentioned 689 times, and "young" is only mentioned 544 times (94). Additionally, there are 2,767 instances of old bodies described, and 7,765 instances of young bodies described (Jorgenson 94). From this study, we understand that age is an important differentiation within fairy tales. The adjective "old" is statistically significant because it appears so frequently in relationship to the relative infrequency of older bodies described. Additionally, oldness is more often associated with women than with men (Jorgenson 96). The description "old" is noteworthy in fairy tale canon.

While there are many adjectives applied to youthful female characters, including "beautiful," "virtuous," "poor" and "honest," the descriptions of old bodies seem to fall into two categories: "evil" or "good" (Jorgenson 95, 97). The schism of old women is telling: they fit within specific categories and must stay within these categories. Rather than being differentiated by their hair color, their social class, or their honesty, old women are

categorized by their age and by their respective goodness. This is evident in the Brothers Grimm version of “The Robber Bridegroom.” After the beautiful bride enters the home of her betrothed, she finds a woman who is “as old as the hills” (152). The woman’s age is determined from the first interaction. After her age is established, her goodness is established with her escape plot, for she does not want the bride to be chopped into pieces, cooked, and eaten. The old woman is the savior of the poor, innocent bride. In this traditional tale, and arguably the majority of canonized fairy tales, old women are categorized by their oldness and their respective evilness or goodness.

Villains or Oddballs: Old Women in *Tangled* and *Hoodwinked*

Certainly Disney’s version of Mother Gothel in *Tangled* fits Jorgenson’s categorizations: old and evil. In the audience’s first encounter with her, Mother Gothel is an old, hunchbacked, shaky-voiced hag. Flynn Ryder, who is narrating the scene, invites the audience to look at “that old woman over there.” “Old” is the first adjective that Ryder uses to describe Mother Gothel; accordingly, Gothel’s oldness is established from the opening scene of the movie. Within the next two minutes, the audience witnesses Mother Gothel kidnapping Rapunzel from the beloved queen and king. Establishing Mother Gothel as the villain in the movie is paramount and is accomplished in this initial scene.

Mother Gothel’s sole motivation throughout the movie is to feign youthfulness. She is driven by her craving to look young. From the beginning, the audience understands that although Mother Gothel appears young, she is really an old crone. As demonstrated earlier, media and culture have primarily only offered older women negative roles. In *Tangled*, it does not matter that Gothel looks young or desires to be youthful. Rather than being defined by her beauty or her virtue, as youthful characters are, Gothel remains limited to

typified aged characters: oldness and evilness. Ageism exists in modern-day adaptations, whether the characters appear aged or youthful.

Gothel is cunning in her desire to avoid death, and her character points us to another cultural concern with aging—it is associated with dying. In an interview, Donna Murphy (the voice of Mother Gothel) describes the production team's description of Mother Gothel: "She doesn't have any powers of her own. . . . All she has is her smarts and her commitment to this desire to not only stay young and beautiful but stay alive because she's old. . . . She's 387 and wants to look like she's 35!" (Eisenberg). Gothel is not only preoccupied with looking young, she also wants to avoid death. Naturally, she cannot avoid death, and Mother Gothel's death is one of the most horrific scenes in the movie. After Flynn Ryder cuts Rapunzel's magical hair, Mother Gothel repeatedly screams, "What have you done?" as her body quickly ages. Her hair turns gray as she angrily stares into a cracked mirror, watching herself crumble into the old woman she has tried to avoid. She pulls her hood over her head, effectively becoming a ghost, and is forced out of the window, eventually vaporizing into a giant pile of ash. Certainly, any susceptible viewer would see this death scene and be terrified by the aging process and, by association, aged women themselves.

Apart from being defined by her age, Mother Gothel is defined as an evil character throughout *Tangled*. Driven by selfishness, she uses Rapunzel's magical hair and locks Rapunzel in a tower in an effort to keep this magical youth-inducing elixir for herself. Mother Gothel is "presented as a callous predator, rather than protector" (Short 151). Throughout the movie, Mother Gothel is clearly evil with no redeeming qualities. As a predator and kidnapper of the princess, she alienates herself from the audience and loses

their sympathy. Being defined by her evilness and her oldness, Mother Gothel is effectively diminished.

Hoodwinked's Granny likewise plays into one of the typical classifications given to old women: she is the demented granny. Granny's physical appearance fits many stereotypes given to old women: her cotton-ball-like hair is stacked overly high, she has large glasses with colorful rims, she has saggy breasts and a large stomach, and she consistently wears her pink cardigan and carpet slippers. Granny's character is split between two of her personalities. In her typified Granny personality, she is very conventional. When Red calls her and asks a question, Granny responds, "I don't know what to do. I'm just a tired, old lady." Later, she tells Red that she isn't ready to see her because she hasn't put out "fresh doilies" quite yet. In these cases, she seems like the stereotyped old woman. Throughout the movie, though, we learn more of Granny's eccentricities: Granny participates in extreme sports. Her odd behavior proves to be dangerous, on occasions. Granny is quite obviously eccentric in this movie and, while perhaps subverting some of the typified granny tendencies, she does so in a ridiculous and frankly unbelievable way. While the screenwriters of *Hoodwinked* do allow Granny some very un-old-lady-like traits, they do so in a taunting manner; in fact, these traits make Granny seem even more demented and ridiculous.

The first time the audience encounters Granny is when she is, in actuality, the wolf. The wolf, disguised as the granny, is spouting off stereotypical views of aging. The classic "All the better to see you with, my dear," scene between Red and the wolf disguised as granny has definite ageist stereotypes. "Your face looks really weird, Grandma," says Red. The wolf replies, "Plastic surgery. Grandma's had a little work done." The wolf's implication

in this scene is that old women have physical deformities that can only be alleviated through plastic surgery. The stereotype associated with this line is that old women need medical help to become beautiful. In other words, aging is not beautiful. Later, when Red says, “What big ears you have,” the wolf responds, “All the better to hear your many criticisms. Old people just have big ears, dear.” This moment is ironic, for Wolf is both censuring those who criticize old people and then responding with a criticism of his own. Viewers understand that old people are to be criticized and questioned—the Granny’s ears are big so that she can hear criticism. Old people are criticized by society, according to the wolf, but the wolf cannot help but deliver his own critique—all old people have big ears. This physical deformity is exaggerated by the wolf; however, these criticisms are common and believed by even the criminal of the story.

Fairy Tale Adaptations and Culture: A Mutually Contributing Relationship

Children today are generally most familiar with new media adaptations of fairy tales. Most children are familiar with Flynn Ryder, Mother Gothel, and Rapunzel herself—but they generally see these characters as the movie has portrayed them. New media adaptations of fairy tales change children’s perception of fairy tale characters, and, ultimately, their perception of the world around them.

Fairy tales do shape current cultural perception. As Warner states, “Real life is understood in the light of the stories” (91). This certainly gives fairy tales a substantial responsibility, for they effectively change the course of readers’ everyday lives. A study done by Langer and associates suggests “that stereotypes of old age start to develop in childhood and are shaped by images of aging present in mass media and everyday conversations” (Pasupathi 219). Current cultural preferences can be dictated by media’s

portrayal of fairy tales. Film producer Stephen Follows agrees with this precedent, saying, “Films are a major part of our culture and inform how we think about the world. Movies are so pervasive” (qtd. in Butler). Because films are widely accessible, film adaptations of fairy tales can certainly shape current cultural attitudes about age; or, at the very least, mainstream fairy tale films are not challenging ageist attitudes.

While fairy tales do affect cultural attitudes, they can also be understood in the context of current cultural norms. Sue Short states, films that are deemed significant reveal “a great deal about what we desire (whether it be in the sphere of relationships, family or material success) as well as attendant dangers and difficulties” (3). Fairy tales can certainly prescribe cultural stereotypes, and they can also reflect these same stereotypes: “The characteristics of mass media images of aging are a result of decisions made by editors, program directors, and advertisers, based on their expectations about audience preferences. Thus, media images reflect general societal opinions” (Nelson 219). The relationship between media and culture is mutually contributory: media changes readers’ perceptions and reader preferences shape the choices portrayed in media.

Increased Agency in Fairy Tale Adaptation

Female elders are not the only group that is harmed by simplistic categorizations found in media adaptations. However, many groups that have received critical attention have effectively changed film adaptations to present more established characters. A feminist response to traditionally marginalized women has presented more active, more able female protagonists. For example, in the Grimms’ version of Rapunzel, Rapunzel’s hair functions as a mere ladder: “she unfastened her braided tresses, wound them round one of the hooks of the window above, and then the hair fell twenty ells down” (Grimm 36).

Tangled gives Rapunzel's hair much more ability: "it lights up, heals and is used to empower the heroine" (Short 151). While there is hegemonic influence within *Tangled*, this change suggests at least "some response to feminist criticism" (Short 28). As Sue Short argues, "The corporation has provided heroines with greater ambition and interest than earlier incarnations" (28). If young female protagonists have become more agential within modern film adaptations, why has the same courtesy not been extended to old women?

Perhaps so much is changing within current fairy tale adaptations that audiences cannot cope with any more change. Because young women are changing roles in adaptations from weak and simple into strong and able, perhaps society cannot additionally handle interesting older women who subvert their traditional roles. It is time for the aging stigmatism in fairy tales to be abolished: all women in fairy tales deserve respectful characterizations. Because fairy tales shape current cultural thought, we need these stories to portray strong, able women as a way of promoting the same.

Donna Jo Napoli, author of *The Magic Circle*, is one writer who has tried to subvert some of the typical expectations of the older woman. In this retelling of "Hansel and Gretel," Napoli makes the old witch her protagonist. The "Ugly One," as she is called in the book, sacrifices herself for the good of her daughter and becomes a witch, forced to remain outside of the public eye to refrain from using her evil powers. Eventually, she meets Hansel and Gretel. She loves them as her children but has difficulty abstaining from her witchy ways when she is with them. In the concluding chapter of the book, the Ugly One plots to sacrifice herself and essentially asks Gretel to push her into the oven. Thus, the old witch's story is much more complex than we are generally led to believe in classic tellings

of Hansel and Gretel. The audience sympathizes with, rather than denounces, the witch's intentions.

The Magic Circle was certainly a different fairy tale than the original "Hansel and Gretel," for Napoli has removed the old witch from her traditional villainy and portrayed her as the sacrificial savior of two children. Where the traditional witch in "Hansel and Gretel" is one-dimensionally evil, *The Ugly One* is a complex character who is fundamentally good but also has evil devils tempting her toward witchcraft. In this bold narrative centering on age, gender, and villainy, Napoli has relocated the old witch from her devalued stage and, instead, placed her at the center of the narrative. We would hope that this text would "open up target audiences and readers more generally to imagining alternative histories and futures" (Bacchilega 38).

One would hope that this sort of adaptation would be met with favorable reception, as the adaptations with stronger young female protagonists have been. While some readers appreciated this different approach, other readers were less impressed. One reviewer describes it as "odd," where another uses the words "dark and slightly demented" (Christie, Alicia). Alicia has described the tale, and thus the protagonist, as "demented," for that is one of the traditional roles that older women generally play within fairy tales. *The Ugly One*, in this tale, is far from demented; thus, it seems that Alicia is craving a traditional female elder rather than a nuanced protagonist. Evidently, younger women can be beautiful, relatable protagonists, but older women (even as the protagonist) remain odd, dark, and demented. Perhaps our culture isn't ready for the female elder to take the spotlight away from the younger, more physically capable, protagonist.

Cultural Views of Aging: Physically Deformed and Mentally Incompetent

Society today, generally, has a very ageist view of older women. In a survey collected by Fiske and colleagues, participants systematically rated rosters of American social groups on warmth, competence, status, and competition. In this survey, “Elderly people reliably fell into the warm-incompetent cluster, alongside disabled and retarded people” (Cuddy 10). It would seem that the common American perception of aged people is that they are physically or mentally disabled.

Little wonder, then, that one of BuzzFeed’s tags deals specifically with age. Many of the common jokes within this tag portray aged people as physically or mentally disabled, validating Fiske’s study. Luke Bailey’s article, “27 Reasons Old People On Facebook Are The Funniest,” which is riddled with both sarcasm and blatant ageism, presents 27 moments where old people seem inept at using social media. One woman wrote, “8 dead in tornado yesterday!!!!” accompanied with a “laugh until you cry” emoji. Based on this post, an old woman’s attempt at using social media shows that she is mentally incapable of understanding the conventions of social media. Another post channels the image of a demented granny. One Facebook user, Tara, posted “I hate Rihanna” as her status update. An older woman named Geraldine commented, “She might be mean to you Tara, but that doesn’t mean you have to be mean to her” (qtd. in Bailey). Because Geraldine did not know of Rihanna’s celebrity, she is depicted as a mentally incompetent old woman. These kinds of posts, while intended to be comical, have clear implications: old people do not hold the same mental capacity as do the social-media adept youthful generation.

One episode of popular TV sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, “Galentine’s Day,” deals specifically with age. While the premise of this show is intended to be comical, showing the reality of hurtful generalizations, this episode is explicitly ageist without any apology or

attempt to subvert these ageist stereotypes. The setting of the episode is a senior center's Valentine Dance. In one scene, band member Andy says that he can't tell how well they are playing in this setting. "If you play good at a rock show," Andy says, "it's really easy to know if you're doing great because chicks will flash their boobs at you while you're on stage and you're like, 'Oh, that must have sounded pretty good.' If that happens here, my eyes will fall out of my head and I will die." The physicality of aged women, for Andy, is not only unpleasant—it is repulsive. Essentially, this episode argues that aged members of society are utterly helpless and cannot contribute to society. "Galentine's Day," according to Nielson Media Research, was seen by 4.98 million household viewers and held the season's highest rating among viewers aged between 18 and 49 (Gorman.) This episode gained cultural approval because it reinforced rather than subverted traditional aging stereotypes. According to these examples, the general perception of older people is that they are undesirable and incompetent. That, unfortunately, seems to be the fate of aged people in the current culture created by media.

Changing Cultural Constructs in Media Adaptations

As demonstrated, media's categorization of old women has effectively limited the agency of old women characters in fairy tales. These limited divisions have affected current cultural thinking about aged women. The negative portrayals of old women in the media—whether overt or camouflaged—play a significant role in the current negative perception of old women in culture today. The average life expectancy in 2015 was 71.4 years; we certainly have more older members of society today than the Brothers Grimm did. We should tailor our fairy tales to fit current needs, for "what we discover in books or media when we are young imprints us—stories communicate values, like myth, and shape our

understanding of the world” (Warner 172). If our goal has been to eliminate positive role models of aged women, we have certainly done our job.

In the concluding words of *Ever After*, the modern day re-telling of Cinderella: “While Cinderella and her prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that she lived.” The old women in fairy tales are continually living through literature: “Literature is always a resurrected body, or a body that is continuously being resurrected. Its continual survival depends on its transformations” (Warner 23). The oppression of old women in fairy tales has remained continual throughout literature and media. A change in media could contribute to a change in general perception about old women in society today.

Were media to change its negative categorizations of old women, viewers would experience different perceptions of old women. Wonder is caused by surprise at the extraordinary, and is the “ideal way to regard others because it is prior to judgment and thus free of hierarchical relations” (La Caze 2). Wonder, however, does not occur when things seem commonplace. If audience members view old women in typical characterizations, they will not experience wonder; however, if media begins portraying old women in a different, less recognizable, way, audience members will feel that old women “seem worthy of consideration and attention” (La Caze 6). When audience members feel this respect toward older women, they will more likely investigate old women, finding aged women who are much more than merely laughable, demented, or villainous. This exploration could eventually lead to a society where every age is allowed, and perceived, to be contributory.

A revolution has already occurred in feminist retellings of classic fairy tales. Today, we see able heroines who possess brains, strength, and sensitivity. Let us extend this revolution into the aged women in fairy tales. Let us see old women holding realistic roles of passion, of brilliance, and of helpfulness, rather than typified old women who are deformed, deranged, and demented.

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