



Snow White: Evil Witches
Professor Joanna Bourke

19 November 2020

Each generation invents evil. And evil women have incited our imaginations since Eve first plucked that apple.

One of my favourites evil women is the Evil Queen in the story of Snow White. She is the archetypal ageing woman: post-menopausal and demonised as the ugly hag, malicious crone, and depraved witch. She is evil, obscene, and threatening because of her familiarity with the black arts, her skills in mixing poisonous potions, and her possession of a magic mirror. She is also sexual and aware: like Eve, she has tasted of the Tree of Knowledge.

Her story first roused the imaginations of the Brothers Grimm in 1812 and 1819: the second version stripped the story of its ribald connotations while retaining (and even augmenting) its sadism. Famously, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” was set to song by Disney in 1937, a film that is often hailed as the “seminal” version. Interestingly, the word “seminal” itself comes from semen, so is encoded male. Its exploitation by Disney has helped the company generate over \$48 billion dollars a year through its movies, theme parks, and memorabilia such as collectible cards, colouring-in books, “princess” gowns and tiaras, dolls, peaked hats, and mirrors. Snow White and the Evil Queen appears in literature, music, dance, theatre, fine arts, television, comics, and the internet. It remains a powerful way to castigate powerful women – as during Hillary Clinton’s bid for the White House, when she was regularly dubbed the Witch.

This link between powerful women and evil witchery has made the story popular amongst feminist storytellers, keen to show how the story shapes the way children and adults think about gender and sexuality, race and class. It has even inspired a way of dying. Snow White’s story was loved by Alan Turing, the progenitor of modern computing as well as the mathematician who broke the German enigma code during the Second World War. He was fond of reciting two lines from the 1937 film:

*Dip the apple in the brew
Let the sleeping death seep through.*

When prosecuted for homosexuality and forced to agree to chemical castration, Turing did just that: he committed suicide by biting into an apple laced with cyanide, thus allowing “sleeping death [to] seep through”.

We are all familiar with the Snow White, dwarfs, and Evil Queen created by the Grimm brothers and Disney, so let’s listen instead to the way poet Anne Sexton evoked the Evil Queen in her 1971 poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”.

*Once there was a lovely virgin
called Snow White.
Say she was thirteen.
Her stepmother,
a beauty in her own right,*

*though eaten, of course, by age,
 would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.
 Beauty is a simple passion,
 but, oh my friends, in the end
 you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.
 The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred—
 something like the weather forecast—
 a mirror that proclaimed
 the one beauty of the land.
 She would ask,
 Looking glass upon the wall,
 who is fairest of us all?
 And the mirror would reply,
 You are fairest of us all.
 Pride pumped in her like poison.*

*Suddenly one day the mirror replied,
 Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,
 but Snow White is fairer than you....
 now the queen saw brown spots on her hand
 and four whiskers over her lip
 so she condemned Snow White
 to be hacked to death.*

So, this is evil. Is there anything more evil than filicide? Four times, the stepmother attempts to kill Snow White. The first time, she orders the Huntsman to take Snow White to the woods and kill her. When the Huntsman, stunned by Snow White's beauty, takes pity and lets her escape, the Evil Queen decides to do the dirty deed herself. She suffocates her with a staylace "made of silk lace woven of many colors", brushes her hair with an enchanted comb, and gives her a poisoned apple to eat. She nearly succeeds with the apple – the same one that Eve bit into and which led to the banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden. These are unmistakably feminine modes of committing evil: murder in the guise of false acts of nurturance and mother-care.

The Evil Queen also wants to devour Snow White's tender flesh. Is there anything more evil than cannibalism? She orders the Huntsman not only to murder Snow White, but to remove her lungs and liver and deliver them to her. After his act of disobedience in freeing Snow White (surely the Queen's powers are waning when even a servant flouts her will), he presents the Queen with the lungs and liver of a wild boar instead. Believing them to be the organs of the virgin princess, the Queen has them boiled in brine before gobbling them up. It is a particularly dark form of witchcraft. As I argue in *What it Means To Be Human*, ingesting the body-parts of a human or non-human animal is a form of magic: a kind of "sympathetic sorcery" that transfers the characteristics of the devoured body to the living one. In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud made this observation with regards to the "primal father" who was "feared and envied" by other men. In "the act of devouring him", the brothers "accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength". In this way, cannibalism is a means of ingesting the desirable characteristics of the Other – in the case of the Evil Queen, Snow White's youth and beauty. "You are what you eat" – literally.

But should we accept the demonization of the Evil Queen? Or do the different versions of "Snow White" tell us more *other people's* fears about the witching power of aging women? Do they warn us about the valorisation of youth, beauty, and domesticity? It is of central importance that, although the Evil Queen is one of the two central characters in the story, she is not named in its title. What does her erasure signify?

But first: how has the violence in “Snow White” been interpreted? The most popular version draws on psychoanalytical insights. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud suggested that fairy tales typically involve psychological processes whereby the child falls “in love with one parent while hating the other”. Bruno Bettelheim developed this interpretation in *The Uses of Enchantment*. For Bettelheim, fairy tales such as “Snow White” enable children/readers to come to terms with forbidden fantasies and desires that cannot be openly acknowledged. For him, the key character is not the Evil Queen but Snow White herself who is insanely jealous of the beauty and power of her stepmother. The “oedipal conflict between mother and daughter”, cannot be brought to consciousness without threatening the child so she projects her own feelings onto this parent. The reality – which is “I am jealous of all the advantages and prerogatives of Mother” – is therefore projected into a “wishful thought”: “Mother is jealous of me”. The feeling of inferiority is defensively turned into a feeling of superiority. As Bettelheim explains in another passage,

The typical fairy tale splitting of the mother into good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but it also permits anger at this bad “stepmother” without endangering the goodwill of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person.

Bettelheim harnesses this reading of “Snow White” to his therapeutic agenda. The magic of “Snow White” is that it enables the child to work through her feelings of rage and impotence. This can be accomplished without the distress that conscious anxiety would have caused.

Bettelheim argument has been deservedly influential. But should we accept it? At its worse, it is founded on misogynous assumptions about female narcissism and vanity. It is built on problematic Freudian obsessions about female “lack”: women compensate for their lack of the phallus by becoming preoccupied with physical beauty.

The most trenchant critique of Bettelheim has come from Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*. In her words,

His argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have effaced from memory the historical reasons for women’s cruelty within the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation of strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic.

Warner is disturbed by the way Bettelheim accepts and promotes harmful stereotypes about women. She is alarmed by the therapeutic implications of his theory, accusing him of holding young girls, mothers, and stepmothers responsible for the gendered discrimination they are subjected to.

There is another problem with Bettelheim’s account. He assumes that stories such as “Snow White” were addressed to children – in other words, it was a way for girls to unconsciously relieve their aggression against their mothers and, in so doing, resolve their tensions. But the fairy tales collected and composed by the Brothers Grimm were actually stories for *adults*, not children. Despite the fact that the Brothers Grimm published their collection under the title “Nursery and Household Stories”, they were intended to be read by adults, as well as serving as way to preserve folklore. In a review of the volume in 1815, Frederick Rühms stated emphatically that “this [is] not a book to put into the hands of children”. The transformation of the tales into a *children’s* story came later.

Instead of the *child* needing to work through her destructive longings, perhaps our attention should be focussed on homicidal *mothers*. This is where our Evil Queen returns centre stage. Although the

Queen is unacknowledged in the story's title, whether this is "Snow White" or "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", the story is about the anxieties of mothers. Infants are the "flesh of their flesh". They literally consume their mothers' bodies in a cannibalistic sucking of umbilical blood and breast milk. They figuratively consume the mother's time, labour, love, and life. Yet they eventually, inevitably, snub maternal sacrifices. As mothers age, so too do their children. They walk away. Is it any wonder that, at each step, a mother might feel murderous, turning "yellow and green with envy". Like the Evil Queen looking upon an increasingly independent and beautiful Snow White, she felt "her heart heaved in her breast, she hated the girl so much". Her jealousy grew "higher and higher in her heart like a weed, so she had no peace day or night". This is motherhood as monstrous: a refusal to surrender power to the younger generation and, as a consequence, be rendered invisible. The tale, then, is not so much about providing children with a way of safely fantasising about hating their mothers, but about mothers safely dreaming about slaughtering their children.

It gets more complicated, though. After all, the Evil Queen is not simply a mother. She is a *stepmother*. This was not always the case. The Evil Queen was originally Snow White's birth-mother. The Brothers Grimm only made her a stepmother in their 1819 version – perhaps because they wanted to avoid insulting their own beloved mother or because they thought it was a less aggressive script for their more middle-class readers to handle.

In either case, the demonisation of stepmothers has become a folklore staple, appearing, for example, in Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, The Six Swans, and The Juniper Tree, to name just a few. These tales were originally composed and narrated by folk all too aware that being female was to be born into a society where economic options were radically restricted and the one source of power – being able to bear children – was fraught with dangers. A frighteningly large proportion of women died in or shortly after childbirth – as did Snow White's mother. In the period when Snow White was being recited around fireplaces and at bedsides, between one-fifth (and some historians say 80 per cent) of widowers remarried within a year of their spouse's death. Stepmothers were therefore a common presence in homes. Given the few options open to girls and women to make their own living independently, these stepmothers were forced to compete for the affection and economic resources held by and inequitably distributed by the *pater familias*. Maybe we should ask whether the malevolent acts committed by stepmothers were *responses* to oppressive treatment as opposed to women being the *cause* of evil.

In these contexts, a stepmother might have good reason to want to be rid of the offspring of the woman who preceded her in her husband's bed. Historically, stepchildren had a high death rate: infanticide was not necessary when neglect could have the same outcome. There was even the option of relegating unwanted infants and stepchildren to "baby farms", which were notorious for high death rates. Indeed, in my next lecture, we will look at the life of Amelia Dyer, one of the most prolific mass murders in Victorian Britain, responsible for the deaths of around 400 infants and children who had been dumped in her baby farm.

The casual neglect of children by stepmothers has been explained more recently by some evolutionary psychologists. They claim that stepparents are less likely to "squander resources" on children who are not genetically related to them. This means that stepparents are more likely to neglect, abuse, or even kill their stepchildren. Of course, we need to be careful about this argument. After all, there is also research showing that child neglect and infanticide are most likely when "circumstances reduce a mother's chance of successful investment". In other words, the problem of stepmothers is not their inherent evilness, but their reduced options and precarious access to resources. In either case, though, the Evil Queen is portrayed as acting according to type.

What "Snow White" suggests is that there is not such a chasm between the Good Mother (who dies after Snow White's birth) and the Evil Stepmother. As mentioned earlier, the original version of the Grimm's tale refers only to Snow White's mother: the stepmother is added in 1819. Snow White's

birth mother wishes for a daughter as “white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony”. Her wish is granted. In the 1819 version, a stepmother is substituted for the birth-mother and, seeing how beautiful her stepdaughter has become, “her heart turned over in her bosom”. The murderous fantasies begin. On the final occasion of murder – when the Evil stepmother hands Snow White the poisonous apple, she repeats the words of the Good Mother. With a “terrible laugh”, we read, the Evil Queen cries out “White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony. The dwarfs won’t revive you this time”. It is a bitter echo of the magical, maternal dreams of her former self who desired the child with all her heart.

The status of stepmother, with its radically disempowering potential, is augmented by damaging tropes about ageing. At the heart of “Snow White” is the valorisation of a specific type of youthful beauty. Appearance matters. Unfortunately for her, the Evil Queen has internalised this distortion. Time and again, she asks

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who’s the fairest one of all?*

With the passing of time, the brutal truth is eventually revealed to her:

*My queen, you are the fairest one here,
But Snow White is a thousand times more fair than you!*

This causes “envy and pride” to sprout “like weeds in her heart. Day and night, she never had a moment’s peace”.

According to this telling, beauty is manifested on the skin’s surface. Both the Queen and Snow White are there to be looked at – the mirror passes judgment on the Queen and Snow White is encased in a glass coffin to be stared at by the Prince. This is their shared fate. The fate of being female.

This superficiality has another harmful effect. There is no coincidence that the lead character in “Snow White” is pale, with skin “as white as snow” and cheeks “as red as blood”. Her hair, “as black as ebony”, simply offsets the whiteness of her skin. As Henry Giroux contends in his discussion of filmic versions of fairy tales like “Snow White”, “whiteness is universalised through the privileged representation of middle-class social relations, values, and linguistic practices”, such as (in the films) American English.

To be fully human, then, is to be white. Even Disney films such as “The Lion King” (1994) and “Tarzan” (1999), which are set in Africa, contain no black humans. Instead, blackness is associated with witches, wickedness, the underworld, and the abyss. The 1937 version of the Evil Queen has her dressed entirely in black, living in a black castle, and surrounded with a black raven, black rats, and black bats. Snow White inhabits a white world and is eventually carried away to her rightful station in life by a white Prince riding a white stallion galloping towards a white castle. From the opening credits of the 1986 Disney version of “Snow White”, she is joined by five white doves, symbols of gentleness and goodness. In contrast, the first image of the Evil Queen has her adorned in dark clothes and a black headpiece. In the Evil Queen’s incarnation as a witch, she is draped entirely in black and, as she mixes her poison, is watched by a black raven. For readers, the message is clear: white is good; black is evil. As Jessica Baker Kee and Alphonso Walter Grant point out in “Disney’s (Post?)-Racial Gaze” (2016), “these films serve as *racial pedagogies*”. They “both reinforce structural and institutional racism and maintain status quo ideologies”. The result for children of colour is that they are denied positive role models. Instead “their identities” are “either lampooned by negative stereotypes or rendered invisible altogether.”

For readers of “Snow White”, this beauty is not only physical. It is also moral. “Snow White” is not alone in equating girlish beauty with helplessness and ugliness with womanly agency. Female evil is post-menopausal; she is of no use anymore to the fully human, which is male. Evil resides in an aged, bad-tempered, and *active* body. While Snow White skulks in the cabin of the Seven Dwarfs, doing housework and passively waiting to be found by her evil stepmother, the Evil One roams the land, dons disguises, and hatches monstrous plans, which she then sets to carry out. Her malevolent powers are masculine. But the *evaluation* of agency is different for the two sexes. When men take charge, they are praised (the Prince, for example, is portrayed in a positive light when he does everything possible to possess Snow White, even after her supposed death); when women actively pursue their desires, they are evil.

The Evil Queen, then, will have to be punished. As we know, when the Queen attends the wedding of Snow White to her Prince, she is given “iron slippers” that

had already been heated up over a fire of coals. They were brought in with tongs and set right in front of her.... She had to put on the red hot iron shoes and dance in them until she dropped to the ground dead.

Like the witches at the stake – most of whom were menopausal or aged women – there is a particularly hot hell reserved for women who pursue their cravings.

In these stories, female passivity is the ideal. The good woman is compliant and dependent. She is also stupid: after all, why would Snow White repeatedly open the door to danger? She is seduced by stays, a comb, and an apple – prompting the questions: what is her life worth? Her most valuable assets are her youth (she is fourteen years old in the tale) and beauty. Her bovine domesticity is also prized. The seven dwarfs need not have been anxious about whether Snow White will “take care of our house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and... will keep everything neat and clean” because, in her dim-witted way, Snow White is happy to do these chores. It is all such good fun.

Her presence in the home of the dwarfs is, after all, simply an apprenticeship. Heterosexuality is assumed: it solves all women’s problems. As long ago as 1953, Simone de Beauvoir contended that “everything still encourages the young girl to expect fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming, rather than to attempt by herself their difficult and uncertain conquest”. The reward for girl-women like Snow White is marriage – but, as we know, Snow White will also age and, most likely, turn into an Evil Witch herself. That is, unless she dies – as do all Good Mothers.

This brings me to my final theme. What if Snow White and the Evil Queen are, in fact, the same person? Women are faced with two options. They can be the virginal, sweet, and submissive woman imprisoned in a child-like state and dependent on the Prince. Or they can be the powerful woman, active and creative, but derided as witchlike, masculine, and evil. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contended that Snow White is an “angel in the house of myth.... Not only a child but (as female angels always are) childlike, docile, submissive”. In contrast, the Queen is “a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, and artist, an impersonator, a woman of infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are”. Is it any wonder that the “adult and demonic” Queen should want “to kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house”.

In this scenario, where stepmother and stepdaughter are complementary aspects of the same person, it is worth asking: who is evil? Clearly, no one is truly good. But Evil resides in the monstrous mirror, with its shimmering misogyny. It is the mirror that causes all the harms. The mirror refuses to tell the Queen that she is gorgeous as well as powerful. It can only register superficial beauty. It

is the absent yet all-encompassing Father who is incapable of recognising the beauty that is inherent in ageing. The mirror is the tool of patriarchy, setting women against each other.

Does it have to be this way? Fairy tales – like all stories – do not merely *report* or *reflect* cultural anxieties but also *create* them. This is why subversion is so sweet.

Witches are increasingly embracing their own powers. Admittedly, some are less rebellious than others. In the television programme “Bewitched” (which was broadcast between 1964 and 1972), witch Samantha Stephens is a cutie-pie housewife who uses her powers in positive ways. Her most radical action is to gently mock her husband. The girl power of Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996-2003) and “Charmed” (1998-2006) are also a saccharine kind. These witches live in traditional homes and are careful not to exercise too much agency. In other words, they propagate the message that Evil Queens can be powerful – but only if they maintain the façade of acting in traditional, gendered ways. More astute is the witch in the hit musical of 2003, “Wicked”. In it, Elphaba-the-Witch struggles to be accepted in a world that reviles her difference – that is, her green skin. It is a musical about empowerment, female friendship, inclusivity, and inner goodness as the highest form of beauty. These stories are reminders that witchery is socially constructed.

The Evil Queen – as witch as well as stepmother – has been embraced by feminists, keen to repudiate traditional forms of femininity and to emphasis female agency outside the marriage-and-home model. My personal favourite is artist Joanna Frueh’s “The Amorous Stepmother”. Frueh declares that she aims to “save the stepmother from her cultural fate, from her status as a clichéd victim of her own monster/beauty”. She is quick to insist that this does not mean that she will

vindicate the stepmother by remaking her from a martyr into saint[,] for the stepmother must remain a provocative figure, as are all archetypes and individuals steeped in erotic allure.

However, she seeks to release the stepmother “from the archetype’s scandalous and perverse essence”.

Frueh’s performance, then, positions the older woman and stepmother as seductive. The word “seduce” has its roots in the Latin “to lead astray”, which is exactly what ageing women do. For Frueh, the archetype of the ageing women/stepmother is drawn from the 1937 film “Snow White”, where the monstrous beauty of the Evil Queen is evidenced by her severe features and falsely arched eyebrows. She is a stark contrast to Snow White’s creamy, doe-eyed passivity. For Frueh, the Queen is the true star. She is possessed of an “acute intelligence that is burdened by aesthetic/erotic fire”. In an older woman, being erotic is not undignified: it is the ultimate in seductiveness. It is the villainous mirror that not only destroys the powerful Queen but denies her the pleasures of intergenerational female closeness. It denies her the erotic possibilities embedded in friendships with daughters, stepdaughters, and their allies.

In short, it is the Evil Queen – as witch and stepmother – who should be celebrated. She is imperfect, cruel, creative. She is ageing but, in her wisdom, refuses to be erased, as the Brothers Grimm and their successors have done in the wrongly titled “Snow White” and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”. The Queen’s ancestors are the feminists who have inverted misogynistic tales spawn from old memories of witch hunts. These witches don’t tempt young Eves with poisoned apples – indeed, they are more likely to seek to fatten them up with tofu. They also shun mirrors, preferring to trust their female companions to tell them that they are truly beautiful. Like the Evil Queen in “Snow White”, however, they are still feared by male society, reviled for alleged unattractiveness, and scorned for heretical beliefs. And they are flawed.

This is why there is no happy ending. Anne Sexton tells us what to expect. Her poem ends with these lines:

*And thus Snow White became the prince's bride.
The wicked queen was invited to the wedding feast
and when she arrived there were
red-hot iron shoes,
in the manner of red-hot roller skates,
clamped upon her feet.
First your toes will smoke
and then your heels will turn black
and you will fry upward like a frog,
she was told.
And so she danced until she was dead....*

And there we have it. No “happily ever after” because women still are not free. The Evil Queen is not Evil – just a thwarted soul who believed in the evil words spewed forth by the prattling, gabberling mirror. And the Good Snow White is not so good after all. She is a beautiful, passive, “dumb bunny” (as Anne Sexton put it) who was easily tricked by the Creative Queen before foolishly giving up her life to domestic drudgery. Worse: she doesn’t spare a thought for the older woman dancing in burning shoes at her wedding. She rashly ignores the inevitable: she too will grow old. As Sexton concluded her poem:

*And so [the wicked queen] danced until she was dead.
Meanwhile Snow White held court,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do.*

Snow White will become the Evil Queen. The End.

© Professor Bourke, 2020

Further Reading

Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Routledge, 1977)

Bourke, Joanna, *What It Means To Be Human. Historical Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011)

Gilbert, Sarah and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009)

Kee, Jessica Baker and Alphonso Walter Grant, “Disney’s (Post?)-Racial Gaze”, *Counterpoints*, 477 (2016)

Tatar, Maria, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton, 2003)

Warner, Marina, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage Digital, 2015)

See my personal website:

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-staff/full-time-academic-staff/Joanna>

See the website for Sexual Harms and Medical Encounters (SH+ME): <https://shame.bbk.ac.uk>

Follow me on Twitter: @bourke_joanna and @shme_bbk