Grotesque Drag Queens and Toxic Matriarchs: Motherhood and The Subversive Female Body in Disney Animated Films

Allison Footit
University of Connecticut - Storrs, allisonfootit@gmail.com

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Allison K. Footit


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Grotesque Drag Queens and Toxic Matriarchs: Motherhood and The Subversive Female Body in Disney Animated Films

Presented by

Allison K. Footit, M.A.

Major Advisor

Alexis Boylan

Associate Advisor

Margo Machida

Associate Advisor

Anna-Mae Duane

University of Connecticut

2013
Dedication

First and foremost, this thesis is dedicated to my mentor and major advisor, Dr. Alexis Boylan, for her unending advice, support, time and energy throughout every step of the writing process. I would also like to thank the other essential members of my thesis committee: Dr. Margo Machida and Dr. Anna-Mae Duane for their unique passion, enthusiasm, feedback and support. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude towards Dr. Anne D’Alleva and Dr. Kelly Dennis for your guidance, your patience, and your confidence in me from the very beginning. I could never have done it without all of you.
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INTRODUCTION

The Disney Corporation is arguably one of the most powerful in the world, extending its cultural reach far beyond United States borders. Besides the theme parks and motion picture studios for which Disney is best known, the corporation also owns numerous radio stations, television networks, a publishing company and a massive array of consumer products related to the Disney brand. According to Forbes.com, Disney is number thirteen on “The World’s Most Powerful Brands” list, and the company is currently worth an astronomical $77.41 billion dollars.\(^1\) The reinterpretations of classic fairy tales and folk tales created by the Disney production team have become iconic symbols of contemporary popular culture, reflecting the values of the capitalist, hetero-patriarchal society for which they are created.

Despite the prevalence of hetero-normative, patriarchal ideologies, themes and institutions privileged in the majority of Disney films, my thesis acts as an in depth investigation of the alternate, subversive narratives that appear despite the dominant, normative narratives that are so obviously privileged at face value.\(^2\) As both a corporation and an ideology, Disney has been described as a “…master trope for all symbolic meanings of late capitalist society,” \(^3\) and, as such, is recognized as being heavily informed by cultural myths and Western ideology. In each of their animated films, Disney continues to inscribe, reinvent, and reinvigorate conservative, anti-aging, misogynistic, and racially problematic imagery. This is primarily a reflection of Disney’s own unique cultural history and the early precedent set by their unique

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\(^{2}\) This argument is the premise of Henry A. Giroux’s, The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999).

imagery, but this sustaining of normative narratives and visuality is also a reflection of the larger, iconographic history of Western art as a whole.

Yet, the ‘cohesive’ narratives Disney creates and visualizes can actually be said to weaken and, at points, fall apart completely, allowing for narrative and visual ‘holes’ that reveal anti-normative, often highly revolutionary readings. The films themselves are, in a sense, unruly: providing audiences with the opportunity to refuse or question the stories and visuals they are presented. In his book *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, W.J.T. Mitchell develops a rhetoric that shifts the question of the visual away from the function of objects in order to further articulate and develop the desire these objects or, in this case images, can be said to hold. Under this rhetoric, images become “models of the subaltern,” whose strong desires make up for the power they lack in their silence.

As Mitchell notes, critics and audiences often “…want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing or grasping them.”4 For the modern viewer, engaging with the objects or films produced by Disney, puts the individual in a unique subject position, allowing him or her to gaze upon the image with nostalgia, searching for a means to access the individuals pictured, whether real or animated. The viewer searches for a means to access these individuals, to ‘commune’ with them, to commiserate. In this sense, the modern viewer actively elevates the Disney films into markers of a particular moment in time, reflective of a thoroughly Western cultural and ideological framework.

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My central question is premised on this desire individual and collective images hold. If the desire of the art object or the animation is, as Mitchell states, “…to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture,” than Disney films can absolutely be said to activate this “Medusa effect.”\(^5\) Following this rhetoric, I argue that images of the Disney villainess demand “equal rights with language,” and must be critiqued as “…complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” in and of themselves.\(^6\) This distinction allows for the recognition of the enormous importance of the relationality of image and beholder to the forefront of this and other visual investigations. In more simple terms: what these images want from the viewer is not always in line with the message they overtly communicate, or the subsequent effects they produce.\(^7\) I seek to explore the contrasting desires of the evil women visualized by Disney and the ways in which their performances subvert the predictable and produce revolutionary readings to an actively engaged or receptive audience.

When turning a scholarly eye towards Disney, it is necessary to explicitly define what, in fact, ‘Disney’ can be said to stand for. First and foremost, there is Walt Disney, the man: whose legacy still holds immense sway over the production of Disney media, objects and experiences. Second, it is necessary for the purposes of my arguments to recognize Disney’s status as a corporation. Like every other profit driven institution in the world, Disney necessarily operates with the overarching goal being to make as much money as possible.

Throughout this paper, ‘Disney’ will also be used to refer to the entire production team involved in the creation and production of their animated, feature-length films. It is essential to

\(^5\) Ibid, 36.
\(^6\) Ibid, 47.
\(^7\) Ibid, 46.
recognize that these production teams are made up of and dependent on many individual persons driven by a variety of intentions, both personal and professional. Script writers, animators, executives, actors, producers and more each have a hand in the final product and each makes conscious and subconscious throughout every phase of production that affect the end result of the film itself. Despite this fact, my training as an art historian has provided me with the skills to look for both visual and narrative *patterns* that, collectively and individually, speak towards the larger goals and intentions of Disney as a whole, in all its facets. In order to sustain its popularity, Disney strategically employs an ethos of innocence as well as a privileging of the hetero-normative family unit in order to cloak itself in goodness and avoid blame for the problematic ideologies and messages at work in many of their animated feature films.  

Cinema is an especially powerful force in helping to sustain, or diverge from, prescribed societal norms. Scholar Forest Pyle recognizes the massive impacts cinema has had on the modern audience.

Cinema has a way of leaving the images of certain faces and bodies permanently inscribed in our memories…Perhaps no aspect of cinema is more powerful—or more potentially troubling—than its capacity to confront viewers with such moving bodies and faces, larger than life images projected in motion and time.

My research is premised on this very power. I seek to explore the messages these ‘larger than life’ images send to viewers, both blatantly and subtly, while also exploring the potential impacts on both scholarship and society at large.

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Disney has been attacked and critiqued by prominent scholars for its problematic display of gender roles and its demonization of aging, non-maternal women. The most common villain in Disney film is the anti-matriarch: an evil, post-menopausal woman who stands against everything the Princess can be said to embody, namely the sustainment of the royal lineage and the hetero-normative family unit. These villainesses are visually grotesque, overly consumptive women whose larger than life power threatens not only their individual victims, but the hetero-patriarchal society as a whole. While on the surface many of these women can be said to represent gross stereotypes of the non-white, aging female body, there is also another reading possible.

The face value or ‘surface’ reading Disney presents to the audience marks certain bodies as dangerous or unnatural. The linking of the non-maternal, grotesque, or non-white body to immorality, darkness and evil is a connection made explicitly in the face value readings presented in Disney film. It is a tried and true visual and narrative trope that is easily accepted and interpreted by audiences who have seen thousands of films that utilize similar cinematic strategies. Due to its historical dependence on the classic binary of good versus evil or hero versus villain, Disney necessarily situates the wholesome, white, classically beautiful princesses as the direct opposite of the non-normative, highly exaggerated personas of those dangerous women existing on the outskirts of society. These predetermined narratives have become entirely predictable over time because they are so successful, yielding enormous profits for the corporation that produces them. Disney animated film is premised on, and continues to be

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informed by, normative gender roles, family values and ‘proper’ or expected behavior for certain bodies and subject positions. The employment of the evil or false matriarch further heightens the potential for female on female violence to drive the conflict forward, resulting in a clear “winner” and “loser” at the climax of the film.

There is something to be said, however, about the fact that these evil women are also the most fascinating and memorable in Disney history, particularly in the past decade. Both visually and narratively, Disney villainesses unarguably dominate their respective films, outshining the Princesses who cannot help but to appear dull and boring in comparison. While these royal females are almost identical in terms of their physicality, each individual Disney villain is vastly different from the others. Singing and dancing along with the heroes, these authoritative women are able to weave their enticing web, capturing the audience like flies and demanding their gaze and respect until they are finally and utterly destroyed. An immense amount of film and art historical scholarship has invoked these women as powerful, modern reinterpretations of the literary and artistic *femme fatale* (or ‘deadly female’) archetype.11 The Disney villainess represents the physically and sexually consumptive female, dangerous because of the fact that her pleasure derives from her own power and agency as femme fatale. She is the visual embodiment of the latent male anxiety surrounding the woman who lives and thinks only for herself, existing as an active, sexual subject rather than a passive, sexual object.12

As a major producer and monitor of ‘cultural pedagogy,’ the Disney corporation produces films premised on formulaic narratives that play off of societal norms and expectations they themselves have helped perpetuate. While Disney seemingly presents ‘wholesome, family fun’ with each of its G rated films, the products and social texts it produces are not ‘innocent’ in any sense of the word. As Elizabeth Bell et al. argue, this purported ‘innocence’ can actually be said to “…[operate] as a systematic sanitization of violence, sexuality and political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference.” If we recognize the reality of this intended “systematic sanitization” in the creation of Disney’s animated hyper-realities, than I argue that it is equally necessary to explore the ways in which Disney can be said to present the viewer with subsequent, alternative readings that paradoxically work against this very imperative to decontaminate the public consciousness.

It could be said that a wrench exists in the works of the all-powerful Disney machine that necessitates a major weakness. When one moves beyond the initial readings consciously intended by Disney the culture machine, I argue that these villainesses can actually be said to represent highly subversive figures that embody and perform non-normative femininities. They are immensely powerful and persuasive in their visuality despite their existence outside of the dominant culture. Disney provides the audience with the opportunity to resist and reinterpret the dominant narratives, creating moments for the desires of the images, on their own terms, to be recognized and consumed by the audience. Alternatively, one can read these women as far more empowering female figures who live for themselves and play by their own rules. They are

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15 Ibid, 11.
directly opposed to the domestic, passive princesses whose lives have been preordained since birth and whose only goal in life is to perpetuate the royal lineage by having children and giving up any claim to the throne to the first eligible male heir possible.

While these deadly women are ultimately punished in order to sustain the legacy of “goodness” and its triumph over evil, I argue that there is a hidden victory in the alternative readings of these women as liberating models of alternative femininity. Although it can be said Disney ultimately attempts to stifle or destroy these subversive, revolutionary potentialities by executing these women for their deliberate resistance to order and power, the lasting impact of these females has allowed for critical, ongoing dialogues between scholars and fans alike to emerge and evolve, transferring the immense power and influence of the Disney corporation into the hands and minds of their consumers.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that the success of Disney films has been and will continue to be heavily dependent on the employment of false binaries, primarily that between good and evil which governs all others, acting as the over-arching marker of ‘Normative’ or, alternatively, ‘Other.’ If the Princess represents the white, traditionally beautiful body and all the morals and ideologies imbued in this subject position, than the female villainess must necessarily represent all that is immoral and ugly. Ugliness and questionable morality go hand and hand in Disney film, as do goodness and beauty. Studies have been enacted to prove the active promotion of the ‘Beauty-Goodness Stereotype’ in Disney film\textsuperscript{16}, and the results reveal that the physical attractiveness and normativity of a character directly impacted how positively the character was portrayed in the film, even above and beyond the actual role the character enacted.

In Disney film, traditionally ‘attractive’ characters are far more likely to achieve positive life outcomes than characters that were not marked as physically attractive. Thus, it can be said the animated films produced by Disney work to both maintain and promote the belief that attractive, normative bodies attain more overall positivity in their lives and are, therefore, morally superior to their less attractive counterparts.

When investigating the visualization of the non-normative female body in Disney film, and the moral implications they can be said to hold, one of the most productive frameworks for reinterpreting these animated bodies is that developed by queer theorists and scholars. Having recognized the importance of critically analyzing alternative identities and experiences, queer theorists have necessarily begun the exploration and excavation of the multiple, non-normative readings often made available texts and images produced by Disney and other major manufacturers of popular culture.\footnote{Judith/Jack Halberstam has been especially beneficial in advancing the field of queer theory studies of popular culture. Of particular interest to my research were her books \textit{Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters} (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995) and \textit{The Queer Art of Failure} (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).} Communications and cultural scholar Alexander Doty describes this new use of “queer” as a scholarly and everyday attitude, “…that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm.”\footnote{Griffin, \textit{Tinker Belles}, xxi.} Queerness is about the \textit{negation} of an identity as opposed to the proud \textit{assertion} of a non-normative identity utilized in the larger gay rights movement. Asserting an identity is, therefore, always and already problematic because it necessitates the recognition and sanctification of the normative identity it proposes to stand against.

The same women that Disney marks as ‘evil’ or ‘unnatural,’ are also among those who actively ‘queer’ their lifestyles, resisting the dominion of the hetero-patriarchal structure and its
prevailing ideologies. According to Bell, these \textit{femme fatales} represent the exact \textit{antithesis} of the maternal. ‘Sterile’ or ‘barren’ are the most common words used to negatively code these women, who produce nothing in a society that fetishizes production.\textsuperscript{19} Situating these women as entirely content, non-reproductive females unconcerned with the process or experience of birth immediately serves to mark their femininity as one in stark contrast to that of the sexually maturing Princesses who are charged with the continuation of the royal bloodline despite the bodily sacrifices this responsibility often entails, as evidenced, most notably by the number of Disney mothers who die during childbirth.

This hetero-normative generational logic\textsuperscript{20} heavily informs the ‘family values’ conveyed in Disney films, and as such simultaneously reflects and reinforces the Western imperative to organize historical change “…by anchoring it to an idea of generational shifts…,”\textsuperscript{21} most often those between biological dyads such as father/son or mother/daughter. According to Halberstam, women are situated as the primary repositories for the generational logics of being and becoming. The female identity is directly and often inescapably tied to maternity and, subsequently, to the related processes of birthing and raising children within the domestic realm. For this reason, women are held responsible for transmitting the dominant, patriarchal logic and ideologies from one generation to the next. When popular representations of the female body consistently reinforce and display how they are supposedly ‘designed’ for motherhood, a normalized discourse emerges that promotes heterosexuality as the assumed, ‘natural’ order of things.\textsuperscript{22} Subsequently, such normalizing discourses work to privilege the nuclear family unit

\textsuperscript{19} Bell, “Somatexts,” 119.
\textsuperscript{20} This theme is invoked and further dissected by Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure} (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 70.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 70.
\textsuperscript{22} Griffin, \textit{Tinker Belles}, 5.
above all others, thereby erasing the potential benefits available when one is able to embrace, learn from and function within alternative modes of kinship.\textsuperscript{23}

If the Princesses can be said to represent the continuation of this generational logic, than their evil counterparts must necessarily embody the exact opposite. The obvious, face value readings that Disney actively condones can be altered or ignored by the audience in favor of alternative readings. These women can be read as actively taking a stand against what scholar Lee Edelman defines as “reproductive futurism:” a moral imperative that “…imposes an ideological limit on political discourses…preserving in the process the \textit{absolute privilege of heteronormativity} by rendering unthinkable the possibility of a \textit{queer resistance} to this organizing principle of communal relations.”\textsuperscript{24} Edelman’s argument reflects the fact that the majority of Disney’s evil women have existed as figures \textit{outside and beyond} the symptoms of such overarching discourses, existing in the realm and temporality of queerness itself.\textsuperscript{25}

Queerness, Edelman continues, is the place of this social order’s ‘death drive’: originally defined by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud as the ‘death instinct’ or the drive towards self-destruction, and the return to the inorganic.\textsuperscript{26} It is a place of abjection and stigma, but also one of resistance, agency and revolt.\textsuperscript{27} If the ‘Child’ as defined by Edelman exists as “…the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the \textit{fantasmic beneficiary of every political}

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\textsuperscript{23} Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure}, 71.
\textsuperscript{25} Halberstam in \textit{The Queer Art of Failure}, was among the first to identify the prevalence of ‘queer’ modes of time and space at work in animated films, the majority of which are driven by and dependent upon revolutionary motifs, politics of resistance, and a breaking away from the traditional family unit.
\textsuperscript{27} Literally defined as “the state of being cast off,” the term abjection was developed by philosopher Julia Kristeva and is related to the process of degradation. I will return in Chapter Two to the theory of abjection as articulated by Kristeva in \textit{Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection}, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
\end{flushleft}
then the anti- or alternative maternal substitutes embodied in the form of the grotesque villainess need not concern themselves with the drive for futurity. They actively refuse participation in the form of the heterosexual institutions of marriage and childbirth. As such, these women actively queer their lifestyles by uncoupling “...the process of generation from the force of the historical process”, as a means of disassociating the notion of change from the supposed ‘natural’ and immutable forms of family and inheritance. The result yields complex visual manifestations of alternative, intergenerational female relationships premised (however falsely) on the equal sharing of knowledge, bodily sacrifice, and mutual respect.

These conflicts between the Princess and her mature adversary are easily read and understood in terms of mother-daughter relationships. The obvious, surface reading of Disney animated films situates the aging female as a wicked maternal substitute, visually grotesque and excessive in both appearance and action. These “replacement” mother figures serve to simultaneously erase the ‘good’ mother figure and replace her with an easily despised, negative image informed by various degrading stereotypes of the non-white, aging, female body. The most common evil replacement figure is the evil stepmother, although I argue Disney utilizes aspects of this anti-maternal trope in their reinvention of even more toxic and damaging non-biological mother figures. Rebecca Anne Do’Rozario also recognizes that these conflicts can actually be read in terms of the exercising of female authority in addition to being about maternal issues. These tales of feminine power conflicts can actually be said to reflect the paradoxical fear and enticement of maturity, and a fascination with and admiration for the immense power that

29 Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, 70.
comes from existing, both physically and ideologically, outside the hetero-normative realm of production.

In turning a critical eye towards Disney film, I hope to add to the already existing discourse by allowing an art historical methodology to inform my study. Many of my arguments will be enhanced by close visual analyses, references to history and iconography, as well as the notion of the gaze as developed in the discourses of cinematic scholarship. Although Disney has been heavily explored through the lens of sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and queer theory there is a serious lack of critical scholarship in regards to such realms of popular culture within the traditional discourse of art history. Taking a feminist and queer approach to Disney film, I will articulate a dual argument throughout this paper: first identifying the intended, surface readings of these characters which are heavily impacted by negative stereotypes, gerontophobia, and the stifling or demonization of non-normative subject positions. By focusing on two of the most visually fascinating and complex anti-matriarchs in Disney’s history, Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989)\(^\text{32}\) and Mother Gothel from *Tangled* (2010)\(^\text{33}\), I hope to guide the reader towards the potential for subversive, alternative readings imbued with revolutionary politics, particular those that celebrate the alternative performances of gender, sexuality, age and motherhood as enacted by the unforgettable Disney villainess.

There are far too many memorable Disney villains available for criticism and interpretation to address in a single thesis. As such, I have chosen to focus my scholarly lens on two of the most popular figures created by Disney animators thus far, one from the ‘Classic’ past and one from the technologically unprecedented present. Ursula the Sea Witch from *The Little Mermaid*...
*Mermaid* (1989) was an obvious choice for one of two in-depth case studies I will undergo, due to her over-the-top burlesque performances, the unique visual characteristics of her being, and the highly ambiguous nature of her sexuality. In Chapter One I will attempt to make explicit the multi-layered readings made available by the Disney villainess, using Ursula as the prototypical example of the subversive potential and alternative nature waiting to be unlocked in the reinvented archetype of the Disney villainess.

In Chapter Two I will turn the reader’s attention towards a second, corresponding case study of another highly performative character whose creation represents an entirely new version of motherhood employed by Disney animators. Mother Gothel was originally created by The Brothers Grimm in their 1812 tale, *Rapunzel* and the Disney Corporation, characteristically, had no issues with heavily altering her character in order to invent a new, toxic version of motherhood informed by, but diverging from, evil females from past animated films. In this chapter I will further explore the ways in which Disney utilizes strategic visual and narrative choices to initially code these two *femme fatales* as evil, greedy perversions of the natural order\(^34\), whose bodies are ultimately to be punished by a cruel and painful death.

I want to explicitly argue that, despite their inevitable violent deaths and the ultimate erasure and demonization of their subversive bodies, Ursula and Gothel are two prime examples of fascinating Disney villainesses who have had a more lasting impact outside of their films in the lived experiences of individuals and social groups. Their reach extends far beyond the film itself, allowing these women to inform real life performances of gender, sexuality and motherhood. They provide subversive models for children and adults alike, and their legacy far outlasts that of the docile, domestic and one-dimensional Princesses. The very fact that these

\(^{34}\) Elizabeth Bell et al., “Introduction,” 11.
women *must* and *always* die speaks towards their immense power and the threat they present to society. I argue that if a single, non-normative individual can undermine and destroy an entire society, it must inevitably expose the inherent instability and fragility of the royal patriarchy and the entire notion of normativity itself.

My conclusion will focus on the current production of Disney’s first live action treatment of one of its original *femme fatales*: Malificent, the evil sorceress who starred in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). I will where I started: with many questions in regards to the legacy and potential of the subversive female body in Disney film. Will this live action treatment serve as yet another perpetuation of negative images of socially deviant bodies, or is the Disney corporation on the precipice of a paradigm shift, or at the very least a reinvigoration, in regards to the visualization of non-normative performances of femininity and motherhood? I argue that these live action characters will provide even more opportunity for audience/image relatability, allowing audiences to further mine and apply those revolutionary and subversive narratives and performances to their own, lived realities.

**CHAPTER ONE: The *Femme Fatale* as Grotesque Drag Queen**

After the death of Walt Disney in 1966, the Disney animation team fell into a period of disarray. The man credited with saving the corporation is none other than former CEO Michael Eisner. “Team Eisner” led the fierce comeback by producing *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, a film that had the “Classic” style of the earlier animations with a new emphasis placed on creating

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a heroine and villainess with intergeneration appeal. Thus, Ursula the grotesque drag queen was born. Entirely unprecedented in both appearance and action, Ursula represented an entirely unique reinterpretation of sexuality, whose performance oscillated freely between masculine and feminine, shattering traditional representations of gender. Although Disney certainly intended to create a hyper-sexualized drag diva, unapologetic of her masculine attributes, actions and motivations, I argue they could not have anticipated the sheer popularity Ursula would obtain. In this chapter, I identify the revolutionary, subversive potential embodied in Ursula as a means of arguing that she extends her reach far beyond the confines of the film. As a powerful, unprecedented visualization of gender, sexuality and motherhood, I argue that Ursula was responsible for the enormous comeback Disney experienced from 1989 onward. In taking a risk and pushing the boundaries of their own ideology and ‘ethos of innocence,’ Disney created an unforgettable character who ultimately took on a life of her own, impacting and inspiring audiences with her revolutionary and subversive potential.

Inspired by the tale of Hans Christen Andersen, Disney’s Hollywood reinterpretation retells the story of a rebellious mermaid princess named Ariel who dreams of escaping the ocean in order to explore the human world above. After saving the life of a Prince whose ship was wrecked in a storm, Ariel falls hopelessly in love with the forbidden human, a force which inevitably drives her towards the realm and influence of the unforgettable Ursula, an evil sea witch whose singular goal is to dethrone King Triton and rule Atlantica on her own. After exchanging her voice for a pair of human legs, Ariel travels to the surface in order to obtain “true

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36 For the remainder of this article I will use the term “Disney Formalism” in lieu of “Classical Disney” as articulated by Chris Pallant in his article, “Disney Formalism: Rethinking ‘Classic Disney’”, Animation 5.3 (2010): 345.

37 Although Disney had previously ‘nodded’ to drag culture in earlier films, particularly with Medusa in The Rescuers and Cruella De’ Vil in One Hundred and One Dalmatians, I argue that Ursula was the first overtly drag female and the most masculine of all the female villains thus far.

love’s kiss” from Prince Eric. Ursula attempts to foil her plan to marry by transforming herself in a sexy brunette human named Vanessa, placing a spell on Eric and stealing him from Ariel. As a punishment, Ariel is transformed into one of Ursula’s “poor unfortunate souls,” those clients who were not able to pay the price before the evil spells’ magic runs out. King Triton, father of Ariel, exchanges himself as a prisoner in order to free his daughter, relinquishing his crown to Ursula. Her victory is short-lived, however, as she transforms herself into an enormous, grotesque monster only to be impaled by the prow of Prince Eric’s ship in perhaps the most obviously phallic death in the history of Disney film.

In this chapter, I seek to explore the implications of visualizing Ursula as a non-traditional, grotesque parody of femininity and sexuality heavily informed by drag culture. I also seek to explore the visual and narrative coding of Ursula as non-reproductive, abject mother, caring for her garden of unfortunate souls as well as her doomed clients. Subsequently, I will explore Ursula’s strategic displays of more traditional maternity, actively utilized by the sea witch to manipulate her victims and enhance her subhuman power.

Ursula Visualized

The first image the audience is granted of this villain immediately works to situate Ursula as both abject social pariah and brooding drama queen (Figure 1). Enveloped by an enormous, black and lavender crevasse darkly reminiscent of female genitalia, her setting immediately works to heighten the sexual, feminine nature of Ursula while simultaneously alluding to the barren, unnatural nature of her womb. At first glance, the bodily form of Ursula appears

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ambiguous, animated with large lines and rounded shapes that work initially to emphasize her enormity. Speaking in a manly, exaggerated voice, Ursula begins to emerge from the shell, revealing her bulbous upper half, enhanced by the tight black dress clinging to her overweight body. Her face is a dramatic display of stage makeup punctuated by powder blue eye shadow, red lipstick and false beauty mark. Her purple skin appears both abnormal and sickly, serving at once to ostracize Ursula as the unnatural antithesis to Ariel, whose pale white skin and flowing red hair act as markers of the ‘Classically beautiful’ body: one that embodies the traditions of proportionality, containment and perfection. The visualization of the Classical, idealized body dates back to ancient times, articulated in the Canon of sculptor Polykleitos. Directly related to Greek and Roman ideas and ideals of proportion, this visualization of bodily perfection also continues to inform contemporary notions of ‘traditional’ beauty.40

The true nature of Ursula’s unnatural form is realized in her descent from her private liar. Dominating the entire picture plane, it is revealed that she takes the form of an overweight, aging, human/octopus hybrid (See Figure 2). Her rage is apparent in her harsh expression, gritted teeth and menacing eyes. Her short white hair is the most obvious marker of chronological age, and her immense body is matched only by the vaginal structure from which she emerges. Her eight black tentacles appear to move on their own accord like so many snakes, reaching to every side and threatening to consume the viewer as Ursula makes her dark descent. This strategic choice to visualize Ursula as Octopus was heavily discussed during production. These ocean dwellers are frightening, dangerous creatures that literally latch onto their prey, sucking the life

out of their victims. This parasitic consumption is a manifestation and reflection of the latent male anxiety of the consuming, sexually threatening woman who ‘latches on’ and never lets go.41

Ursula not only fails to fit within the normative boundaries of ideal beauty, she shatters them, making a mockery of the very notion of “beautiful” by overtly displaying the false nature of her appearance, as opposed to attempting to hide it. While the adorable, innocent Ariel is visualized as “…transcendental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek,”42 Ursula is anthropomorphized in a form that is more closely aligned with the grotesque or carnivalesque body, a visual trope I will further unpack throughout this chapter (See Figure 3). Unlike the waif-like Ariel with her impossibly small waist and barely-there breasts, Ursula threatens to be too much body. She represents the excessive female, in both action and appearance, and is shown dominating Ariel both physically and psychologically throughout the film.

**Ursula as Grotesque Witch**

Scholars and fans alike have identified Ursula as a grotesque parody of both traditional femininity and hetero-normative sexuality.43 The concept of the grotesque body was originally put forth by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin beginning in the 1920s and later developed and unpacked further by modern critical theorists including Mary Russo and Geoffrey Galt Harpham.44 Originally employed as a literary trope, the essential principle of the grotesque is the degradation of the unruly body. In a positive light, the grotesque body exists as a ‘comic figure of profound ambivalence,’ and is linked to birth and renewal. In a more negative sense, the

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41 Elizabeth Bell, “Somatexts,” 117.
grotesque is linked to abjection, death and decay.\textsuperscript{45} As an adjective, the grotesque is most often employed in reference to the strange or the ugly, the fantastic or disgusting. Contrary to the Classical, balanced, symmetrical body, the grotesque body is marked as deviant due to its excessive, unpredictable and changeable nature. For Disney, the anti-grotesque is anthropomorphized in the bodies of Ariel and her ‘good’ female predecessors, women who serve as archetypes of the feminine ideal to which all females should aspire.\textsuperscript{46}

By situating Ursula as an evil witch and visually marking her as a social pariah, Disney leads the audience to assume the excessive, visually grotesque form of Ursula must necessarily fit with and act as a reflection of her status as exiled being and threat to the natural moral order. Ugly, childless women, the film implies, do not belong to or deserve a place in this underwater patriarchy. If there is no place for a biological mother/queen figure in the royal court (as Ariel’s mother is never alluded to) than there is certainly no place for a motherless, heirless female leader whose very existence undermines the continuation of the patriarchal lineage. For King Triton and Ariel to ‘succeed,’ Ursula must either die or remain hidden in her abject realm. If misogyny is based on males’ anxiety towards their inability to reproduce, I echo the radical feminist argument that Ursula’s refusal to procreate is an even greater threat to society. It is these “unruly” women that refusal to fall in line that are the real threat. Perhaps the most frightening and subversive aspect of Ursula is that she finds no power whatsoever in the traditional hetero-patriarchal rituals and refuse to accept futurity as their dominant, driving ideology.

Witches have a long history of being marked as “agents of evil” in mythology, literature, film and art and Disney is no exception when it comes to linking supernatural powers with evil.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{47} Zipes, “Breaking the Disney Spell,” 37.
Equally important for this investigation, however, is the witch as representative of those “…erotic and subversive forces that are more appealing both for the artists who drew them and the audiences.”48 The narrative coding of Ursula as “witch” further marks her as potentially subversive in her status as “…implacable enemy of the symbolic order.”49 Throughout history, as evidenced most obviously by the Witch Hunts in fifteenth century England, the female witch has always been feared for her ability to disrupt society through the use of her magical powers. These women were recognized as highly subversive female figures that went against the “rational”, male dominated order of society in order to exert their own control and influence over such life processes as birth, death and sickness.

For anthropologist Kathryn Rountree, the traditional designation of the witch as illegitimate model of ‘normal’ womanhood depends on the recognition that she ultimately constitutes a female power position that is outside male control.50 The alleged crimes committed by these ‘witches’ were almost always sexually deviant in nature, and many were accused of allowing the Devil himself to feed off of their breast milk and perform sexual intercourse.51 These women were also charted with the literal castration or theft of male penises, accusations that can be said to best reflect the male anxiety at the heart of this female massacre. In modern times, feminist scholars and practitioners of Feminist Wicca actively work to redefine “witch” so that it denotes a woman “…who challenges patriarchal control and claims independent knowledge and power.”52

48 Ibid, 37.
49 Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 76.
51 Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 75.
This re-imagining of the witch is an important concept that further supports the dual nature of Ursula as both dangerous and subversive female. It is extremely interesting to note that, at any given time, Ursula possesses enough power to transform herself into whatever form she wishes, including a manifestation of the classically beautiful maiden, Vanessa who is essentially a brunette Ariel (See Figure 4). This would suggest that Ursula plays with gender roles and sexuality primarily as a means of achieving her deeper desires for power, and that she is actually most comfortable and confident in her hyper-sexualized, hybrid female form. Throughout the film, she actively utilizes the flexible nature of her sexuality as well as her unique female form to strategically further her own means, and to manipulate and establish trust in her potential clients.

**Drag Roots: Divine as the Inspiration for Ursula**

Ursula can essentially be viewed as a reinterpretation of the traditional *femme fatale*, embodied in the form of drag diva and representative of an entirely new version of femininity employed by Disney. Her grotesque nature further marks her as other, while also offering her the unique potential to relish in her exiled status, far from the forces that wish to police, control and contain her body. Ursula is proud of what and *who* she is, and she actively refuses to present herself in a ‘natural,’ inoffensive humanized form, despite her having the potential to transform herself into anything or anyone she wants at any given time. Her theatricality is undeniable, and her multiple, varied performances of femininity and sexuality work to destabilize the ideologies that normalize certain subject positions while demonizing others, while also further situating her both physically and ideologically outside the boundaries of the ruling, hetero-patriarchal society.

The unique movements and over-the-top spectacles enacted by Ursula’s grotesque form were heavily informed by drag culture and performance. Scholar Laura Sells describes her character as a complex “…composite of so many drag queens and camp icons—Joan Collins, Tallulah

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53 See first and foremost Jon Adams, “Critiquing the Cartoon Caricature.”
Bankhead, Norma Desmond, Divine.” While the voice and ethos of Ursula can be attributed to performer Pat Carroll, the appearance and visual performance of Ursula were inspired and informed by another larger than life cross-dressing performer of the era. According to the directing animator of the film, Ruben Acquine, Ursula was quite literally modeled off of the real-life drag queen Divine: a bold, vivacious figure most notable for her appearances in the body films produced by John Waters (See Figure 5).

Divine is best known for her obese figure (weighing in at 320 lbs.) and her disgusting, abject behavior in films such as Pink Flamingos (1972). Rocking a bleach blonde wig, a heavily painted face and a set of enormous foam-rubber false breasts, Divine has been referred to as “the Goddess of Gross,” “the Punk Elephant,” and “the Big Bad Mama of the Midnight Movies,” among other titles. Unprecedented and outrageous in both appearance and performance, Divine was extremely proud of her self-presentation of femininity, perhaps best described in one obituary as “…a unique and hilarious high-camp cartoon, a Miss Piggy for the blissfully depraved.” Divine died dreaming of the day when she would be recognized as a serious character actor who could take on any role with gusto, professionalism and camp sensibility.

Ursula exists primarily as a visualization of artifice and exaggeration, following in the tradition of some of the most memorably cross-dressing performers. Visually and narratively, Ursula is overtly informed by the notion of ‘camp.’ Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as

55 Ibid, 182.
58 Ibid.
“ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual,” ‘camp’ is recognized as an aesthetic sensibility, and is distinct from a strict rule or idea.\(^5\) The camp aesthetic began to take a definable form in the 18\(^{th}\) century, and is recognized as one that is both ‘fundamentally emotional’ and ‘apolitical.’ By its very nature, camp is opposed to any and all essentialist ontologies as it holds the object as artifice. The camp aesthetic has been heavily utilized in both feminist discourse and queer theory, and scholar Susan Sontag recognizes that conceptions of gender and sexuality are especially prone to camp sensibilities because its style is so heavily exaggerated. Scholar Judith Butler uses this notion in her interpretation of drag’s camp aesthetic as a performative critique of gender.\(^6\) Ursula, like other camp icons including Divine and Madonna, is a visualization of camp whose character and performance actively work to deconstruct notions of masculinity and femininity.\(^6\)

Ursula’s sexually coercive movements are clearly modeled off that of a stage diva, as she shimmies and shakes her hips, singing to Ariel about never underestimating the importance of body language. After her father Triton destroys Ariel’s hideaway and forbids her to visit the surface to interact with the human world, the Princess chooses to visit the only person she knows might be able to help her find her true love: the all-powerful sea witch. During their initial meeting, Ariel witnesses Ursula “putting on” her stage face, sprucing up her hair and applying layer upon layer of lipstick and eyeshadow with an array of underwater beauty products. She


\(^6\) Ibid.
even goes as far as to wrap her two eels around her neck, transforming them into feather boas: a traditional costume prop utilized in drag performances (See Figures 6-8).  

Her convincing song and dance for Ariel has been described by scholars and critics as “burlesque”, a highly sexualized, working class form of dance that is a far cry from the movements of Classical ballet and ballroom dancing that informed the movements of Aurora, Cinderella and others. It can be said that Ursula actually provides Ariel with a chance to increase her agency by teaching her that performance and voice are manifestations and liberations of gender. Because she lacks a biological mother who is never referred to within the narrative, Ursula is able to take on certain maternal characteristics in order to further her own goals, while subsequently providing Ariel with very real, very subversive advice.

**Ursula as Abject Pariah**

Ursula is actively visualized as both repulsive and excessive in both body and personality throughout the film. She can essentially be recognized as a manifestation of the abject, a theory heavily developed by scholar Julia Kristeva. Abjection and the abject body are always and already associated with the realm of the feminine due to the fact that “…[they exist] in opposition to the paternal symbolic, which is governed by rules and laws.” This makes sense given Ursula’s forced segregation from the ruling force of the royal patriarchy that governs Atlantica. As an abject figure, Ursula’s potential to “…inherently disturb [both] conventional identity and cultural concepts” is even furthered heightened. She represents a subversive,

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62 Adams, Critiquing the Cartoon Caricature.”  
63 See Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom” and Bell, “Somatexts.”  
65 Bell, “Somatexts,” 181-182.  
grotesque female whose very existence functions as both, “…a challenge of patriarchal symbolic systems and as an expression of…the female wild zone.” 68 In this sense, Ursula can alternatively be read as a revolutionary character, driven by the ultimate, male-oriented goal of disrupting and demolishing the royal patriarchal lineage under the sea. The ‘wild’ nature of her appearance matches the untamed nature of her performances of gender and sexuality.

Abjection is literally recognized as the state of being cast off. Kristeva’s theories reveal the conditions that must be met before an abject, expelled being can return to fulfill their proper place in the symbolic order. It can be assumed, based on this notion, that to return from her exiled state Ursula would be forced to “…reject or repress all forms of behavior, speech and modes of being regarded as unacceptable, improper, or unclean.”69 If abjection is also constructed as “…a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh,” this would mean reentrance in normative society would require an extreme exertion of control on the part of Ursula over her body, so that she might “re-make” and “re-constitute” it as one that is ‘appropriate’, ‘clean,’ and ‘proper.’ 70 It seems as though Ursula would need to reinvent her entire being in order to be accepted by the society she looks down upon. For these reasons, I believe Ursula is content in her contained setting and that the exile has, to an extent, actually become self-segregation.

As the site of her excommunication, Ursula’s underwater setting is particularly informative as it serves as a direct visual metaphor for Ursula’s status as social pariah. This setting

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69 Creed, The Monstrous Feminine, 37.
70 Ibid, 38.
simultaneously acts as a visual manifestation of the barren, lifeless womb of the abject, non-reproductive mother as embodied by Ursula.\(^7\)

The notions of the grotesque and the abject used to inform the visualization of Ursula’s body can also be said to heavily proliferate in the underwater lair where she resides and spends nearly all of her time. The importance of visually analyzing setting in relation to the subversive female body in Disney film stems from the fact that the underwater lair is the site in which the audience most often sees and interacts with Ursula. It is an unchanging visual reminder that works to ensure the recognition of her anti-normativity.

The word grotesque is used interchangeably with the adjective “grotto-esque,” referring to a claustrophobic, reclusive way of living and tied to the ‘underground’ or the ‘ghetto.’\(^7\) The first time the audience sees Ursula she is enveloped by an enormous, cave-like shell (See Figure 1). As Russo and other scholars have articulated, the word grotesque itself necessarily evokes the image and feelings associated with the cave, namely darkness, enclosure and self-isolation. It is no coincidence that Ursula is both visually and narratively banished to the lowest, darkest corners of the ocean where her body and her persona can remain hidden, ‘quarantined,’ in a sense and so as to limit her dangerous influence over the rest of the ‘normal’ society.

If, as Russo points out in her discussion of Carnival and theory, the act of “making a spectacle of oneself” represents a specifically feminine danger related to over-exposure, Ursula can be said to represent the dangers of excess in a variety of ways including her lust for power, and her over-consumption of food and other unnecessary pleasures. There is a long history of the grotesque cave being metaphorically tied to and identified by the “cavernous anatomical female

\(^7\) For more on this notion of the ‘abject mother’ see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis Group), 77.

body.” Links between female monstrosity and intra-uterine settings have been heavily explored by film scholars in relation to the genres of horror and science-fiction. The frightening, Freudian imagery that proliferates in Ursula’s underwater lair was first identified and unpacked by scholar Merry G. Perry, whose article *Animated Gerontophobia* unpacks the most common stereotypes employed in the creation of the Disney villainess and the damaging impacts they can be said to have on society, particularly in regards to the climate fear and hatred towards the aging body that is being perpetuated by these supposedly ‘innocent,’ ‘apolitical’ animations.

The vaginal, womblike setting that serves as the site of Ursula’s excommunication works to further sexualize her character, while simultaneously, albeit subconsciously, reminding the viewer of her ultimate status as non-maternal, sexual perversion of the moral order and society (See Figures 9 & 10). Her setting acts as the exact antithesis the towering, phallic castles that dominate Triton’s hetero-patriarchal kingdom. The employment of such gynophobic imagery creates a grotesque, visual parody of the female anatomy. Each and every time the audience sees her lair, they are also consuming numerous images of vaginal openings, long caverns reminiscent of fallopian tubes, and womb like entities that are constantly “giving birth” to the ultimate abject evil that is Ursula.

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Similarly, in the history of Christian art production, religion and film scholar Margaret Miles observes that hell was often represented as ‘a lurid and rotting uterus’ or womb.\textsuperscript{76}  This is partly due to the fact that a woman was directly associated with the natural events of sex and childbirth, bodily processes that were viewed as ‘quintessentially grotesque.’\textsuperscript{77}  Saint Margaret of Antioch was named the patron saint of childbirth due to her miraculous escape from the stomach of Satan. In Christian iconography, she is often represented as “…the infant escaping from the threatening birth canal, identified in medieval biological discourse as polluted and even as ‘a hell-mouth that is cursed with an all-consuming thirst.’”\textsuperscript{78}  The history of Christian symbolism has marked the color black as that which represents the womb as well as the concepts of the absolute and the eternal.\textsuperscript{79}  Disney’s employment of this negative, hyper-feminized environment serves as a modern predecessor in this tradition of marking the non-reproductive or unnatural woman as dangerous, dirty and hyper-sexualized and the barren, unused womb as inherently monstrous.\textsuperscript{80}  This ultimate coding of Ursula as evil, anti-mother works to validate her inevitable, violent death at the close of the film.

**Ursula’s Death: The Triumph of the Phallic**

During the final scenes of the film, the audience witnesses the wedding between villainess Ursula, disguised as Vanessa, and Prince Eric begin. Ariel’s animal friend, Scuttle the sea gull,
interrupts the ceremony by ripping the conch necklace off Ursula’s neck, robbing her of all her power and breaking her evil spell. At the point of transformation, the true form of Ursula is slowly revealed as her eyes become crazy and her huge lips re-appear on her face. She crawls in an unnatural, crab-like way towards Ariel before dragging her down to the depths of the sea as a hostage. As a prisoner, Ariel’s classically beautiful body is to be transformed into a “poor unfortunate soul,” an identity that can essentially be described as a stagnant, ugly polyp or abject pile of feces. When the hyper-masculine, muscled patriarch King Triton comes to his daughter’s rescue, he realizes his only choice is to take her place as underwater prisoner. Relinquishing his triton, the ultimate phallic symbol and the source of his own magic powers, Ursula takes complete control and wraps her many tentacles around Ariel, enveloping her entire body as a final symbol of physical and psychological domination.

Ursula then transforms herself into the most grotesque, excessive form the audience has seen her inhabit thus far. Using her newly honed power, she begins to grow enormous to the point of disgust (See Figure 11). The larger she grows, the more masculine her voice becomes. “I am the ruler of all the urchins,” she proclaims with psychotic glee before demanding the sea kingdom “bow to [her] power.” Ursula is finally undone and destroyed in an extremely phallic manner that ultimately symbolizes the reinstitution patriarchal rule. The long, hard mast of the ship penetrates her giant form, which has become more vulnerable due to its sheer enormity (See Figures 12 & 13). She dies an extremely dramatic death, shooting electric magic out of her body and surrounded by an ominous cloud of purple smoke that envelops her until she melts into pink, bubbling lava. As is often the case in horror and science fiction film, the death of their “mother” allows all the unfortunate souls to transform back into their beautiful, youthful selves.
Is Ursula’s death the end to her subversive potential? Within the film, yes, but I would argue that her legacy lives on in the minds of persons representing a variety of different cultural backgrounds and subject positions. Her sustained popularity is reflected in the constant reinvention and reimagining of her form. Whether on stage in the theatrical adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*, or thin and trim as a sexy Barbie for the newest line of Disney dolls, her image and her persona continue to influence audiences young and old today, reaching far beyond the confines of the screen.\(^1\) Ursula is among those memorable characters that completely and utterly outshine the Princess heroines. Her immense popularity and her status as one of the few animated ‘cult icons’ ultimately work to undermine the hetero-normative premises on which Disney films so heavily rely.

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\(^1\) CITE DOLLS AND THEATRICAL ADAPTATION/ADD 2 MORE SENTENCES FOR EXPLANATION!
CHAPTER THREE:

Reinventing Maternity: Gothel as Toxic Mother Figure

Although the role of the classic ‘Disney Princess’ is typically interchangeable, presenting the viewer with heroines reduced to “…happy homemakers-in-waiting…portrayed as dependent and innocent ingénues waiting for a royal husband as life’s fulfillment,” the Disney production team is famous for creating powerful, ‘evil’ women that dominate their respective films in both appearance and performance. On the surface “…the caricature and melodramatics of the femme fatale [deadly woman] are iconic and congruous cinematic codes that inscribe middle age as a time of treachery, consumption, and danger in the feminine life cycle.” These villainesses are far more visually fascinating, complex and individualized than their younger, fairer counterparts and command the gaze and respect of the viewer until their bitter end.

In this chapter, I will argue that the initial, intended reading of Disney’s newest villainess, as enhanced by traditionally strategic visual and narrative cues employed by the Disney production team, serves to mark Mother Gothel as both femme fatale and ‘old hag’ simultaneously. The surface reading of this character elicits a response in the audience premised on the belief that she is a ‘bad’ woman, and, as such, exists first and foremost as an evil, greedy perversion of the natural order. Disney further works to mark Gothel as non-normative ‘Other’ in a variety of ways heavily informed by a wealth of negative, damaging stereotypes surrounding non-white, aging females.

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84 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, introduction to From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 11.
Queer theory allows for the reading that *Tangled* also offers audiences a subsequent, highly subversive reading, allowing the film to go beyond its intended function as simply another ‘innocent, fun-filled, family film’\(^85\) to incite revolutionary conversations, criticisms and politics. Although *Tangled* fits nicely into the formulaic legacy Disney films have sustained for nearly a century, the audience is also guided towards peeling off the surface layers of the film, and of villainess Mother Gothel, in order to engage in these alternative readings and analyses.

Far from being absent in popular cinema geared towards children, queer theorist Judith/Jack Halberstam reveals that “queerness” actually circulates openly in a variety of forms within the larger body of mainstream animated film, most notably in Disney Pixar films.\(^86\) Rather than dismissing Disney as just another form of negative hegemonic ideology, Halberstam recognizes animated cinema as “…a rich technological field for rethinking collectivities, transformation, identification, animality and posthumanity,”\(^87\) investigating Disney so as to unearth its revolutionary potentialities. If we accept the social fact that all genders and sexualities are ultimately learned and performed, including the normalized heterosexual lifestyle, then Disney can be said to present a visually fascinating tradition of animated human forms that consistently create new and subversive performances of gender, while simultaneously reinforcing those that have been most normalized and celebrated in Western society. As cultural critic and theorist Henry Giroux states, “…Disney offers access to a postmodern world of free-floating identity signifiers…replacing the concept of selfhood with a performance-driven notion...

\(^85\) According to fairy tale expert and scholar Jack Zipes, Disney as a man, was among the first radical filmmakers to entirely alter the way we view fairy tales, and that “...his revolutionary technical means capitalized on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo.” After his death, the corporation has continued to capitalize on and self-promote this limited, Victorian-era definition of ‘innocence’ as a hallmark of their mission. Jack Zipes, “Breaking the Disney Spell,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21-22.


\(^87\) Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 174.
of the self” that is far more flexible than any fixed notion of the self. The highly performative and spectacular elements available for analysis in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Tangled* mark these animated musical films as ideal possibilities for queer readings.

*Tangled* is a reworking of the original Brothers Grimm tale *Rapunzel*, a modern retelling noted for its conscious depiction of a ‘heroic’ princess who leads adventures, fights villains, and saves the life of the prince more than once as opposed to lying in wait. Rapunzel is symbolically granted with the power of glowing, healing golden hair, hoarded by Gothel in order to remain young and healthy. Stolen by the evil Mother Gothel from her crib as an infant, Rapunzel is raised in a tower, blissful in her ignorance of the outside world, a world painted by Gothel as dangerous and full of disease, hatred and selfish people. On the day of her 16th birthday, Rapunzel decides to escape her tower in pursuit of the massive amounts of glowing lanterns released in the sky every year on her birthday. Unbeknownst to her, these lanterns are a deliberate symbol from the royal castle and her biological parents, released every year in hopes she will find her way back to her ‘true’ home. Upon realizing her secret to eternal youth has escaped, Gothel roams the woods, enlisting help from two evil goons in order to ensure Rapunzel will never discover her true heritage.

Despite capturing Rapunzel and bringing her back to the tower it is too late for Gothel, as Rapunzel puts the pieces together and realizes Gothel has been deceiving her all along. Flynn Ryder, the hero, returns to rescue Rapunzel only to be brutally stabbed by Gothel but not before Flynn severs the hair of Rapunzel, causing her to lose her magical power and, subsequently,

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89 Queer theorist Judith/Jack Halberstam has been especially beneficial towards contributing to the growing body of visual culture studies directed towards Disney animation. The immense popularity of Disney and the Disney villainess in particular, among the larger gay male community also reflects the potential for these subversive readings.
acting as a catalyst for the raping aging of Gothel who falls out the window of the tower, her body evaporating to dust before hitting the ground. Rapunzel’s goodness and healing powers are not lost, however, as her tears bring Flynn back to life, allowing them to return to castle. Like so many Disney films before it, Tangled ends with the traditional, heavily Christian themed wedding that is marked as the first step towards living ‘happily ever after,’ and ultimately works to re-inscribe the nuclear, heterosexual family unit as both ‘normative’ and ‘natural’.

Despite her initial coding as evil, false matriarch, there unquestionably exists a certain amount of evidence within Tangled actively urging the viewer toward a recognition of, and admiration for, the highly subversive nature of Gothel as an entirely alternative embodiment of femininity. Unlike Ursula, who was banished to her cavernous underwater domain, it appears Gothel has purposefully situated herself outside the boundaries of the hetero-normative patriarchy, refusing to procreate and contributing nothing to the society that demonizes her. She represents the antithesis of all that the traditional ‘Disney Princess,’ stands for. Embodying youthful existence and budding sexuality, the Princess ultimately symbolizes the continuation of patriarchal domination enhanced by the sustainment of the royal lineage. Gothel can also be said to act out an alternative performance of maternity as a member of a non-traditional family. 90 Gothel exists outside of all the normative institutions that dominate Western society, actively refusing to participate in (or completely ignoring) the employment industry as well as the social processes of marriage, courtship, and ‘natural’ childbirth.

Despite the highly subversive nature of Gothel, Disney uses Tangled as yet another opportunity to demonize the potential for alternative, revolutionary politics so readily available

in the villainess or *femme fatale*. It is no wonder that Ursula, Mother Gothel, and earlier villains such as Cruella De Vil (*One Hundred and One Dalmations*, 1961) have had a more lasting impact on their multi-generational audiences than any other characters, as evidenced by both corporate sponsored and informal fan polls.\(^9\) The legacy of these women undeniably lives on, but their subversive motivations, actions, and moralistic impulses are ultimately squelched within the created reality of the film, leaving it up to the viewer to go beyond and outside of the film to push these suggested boundaries as far as they will go. The immense success of Disney films depends upon this delicate balance between the ‘obvious,’ tried and true narratives, enacted repeatedly by the stereotypical ‘good’ heroes, and the radical, enticing and often dangerous possibilities offered by the villains.

**Coding Mother Gothel as ‘Evil’**

The starring villain making her debut in *Tangled* is the newest in a long legacy of memorable evil women in Disney film, and her subversive potential matches her larger-than-life appearance and performance. Mother Gothel at once represents negative stereotypes of the aging non-maternal, non-white body while simultaneously and alternatively embodying an entirely non-normative femininity. While certainly revealing disturbing moral choices, Mother Gothel is also both visually and narratively fascinating, and her performative nature appeals to and captures the attention of audiences while also serving to drive the narrative forward. If the patriarchal, hetero-normative society has been marked by Disney ideology as representing all that is ‘good’ and ‘natural,’ then Gothel can be said to defiantly, and unapologetically, situate herself outside of these boundaries so as to live by her own rules and cultivate her own identity.

Gothel essentially represents a dual-identity, oscillating between two dominant visual appearances: youthful, hyper-sexualized vixen and aging, decrepit hag.\(^{92}\) Often, visual cues such as greying hair and dulling skin suggest Gothel as existing in the liminal phase between these two visual personas. She is at once young and old, one minute decaying and the next healthy; and her appearance has a direct impact on her actions and her personality at any given moment in the narrative, allowing her to oscillate freely between archetypes and identities.

As Elizabeth Bell so aptly articulates in her discussion of early, hand-created Disney animation, the pentimentos of women’s animated bodies exist as “…paintings layered upon paintings, images drawn on images, in a cultural accumulation of representations of good girls, bad women and doting servants.”\(^{93}\) The teenaged heroine, individuated in each of Rapunzel’s predecessors, stands as the flowering, pubescent picture of beauty and innocence. Female wickedness, as embodied by the Evil Queen, Gothel, Ursula and others, is alternatively rendered as “middle-aged beauty at its peak of sexuality and authority.”\(^{94}\) The filmic introduction to Mother Gothel utilizes certain visual and narrative cues that work to lead the audience in a prescribed direction by beginning to situate the traditional binary of good versus evil so essential to Disney film.

Setting the stage for the initial introduction to Gothel, Tangled animators employ the use of typical scenery often visually linked to darkness and evil. The night is extremely dark, perhaps

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\(^{92}\) The word ‘hag’ is actually quite neutral in its definition, denoting an ‘old, wizened woman’ neither benevolent nor malicious. It is interesting to note that, despite its definition, ‘hag’ is most often employed as a negative signifier as evidenced by aging studies and the larger realm of popular culture. Many scholars use the word in reference to earlier Disney villainesses, noting the ultimate crimes are performed in the form of ‘old hag’. My use of the term here reflects the intended reading of Gothel as a negative embodiment of old age.

\(^{93}\) Pentimentos are defined as alterations in a painting or animation that show evidence of the previous work and allude to the critical, heavily evolving process undergone for each individual cel within an animation. (Bell, Somatexts, 108).

\(^{94}\) Ibid, 108.
‘the witching hour’, and a heavily wooded forest frames a rocky, cliff-like atmosphere overlooking crashing, unruly ocean waves. As the audience looks on, a magical drop of sunshine falls through grey storm clouds. Gently touching the ground, it begins to grow into a beautiful, glowing lily-like flower. A powerful orchestra plays a dramatic score to heighten the inevitable power of this magical gift of light. Immediately, Mother Gothel appears, slinking into the frame from behind a rock (See Figure 14). Her form is hunch-backed, and although and her face is almost completely hidden by a hooded cloak, this bodily malformation serves immediately, albeit subtly, to suggest her old age.

As she approaches the light of the flower, Gothel is illuminated and her identity as aging hag is both revealed and confirmed. The viewer is able to see the skin that hangs loose off her bones and bushy grey eyebrows framing a look of utter desperation and bewilderment. Crawling hungrily towards the flower, she carries a lantern that serves to bathe Gothel in ominous, sickly green light, another unsubtle visual cue often utilized by Disney to mark the unnatural or dangerous. Her visibly gnarled fingers reach for the flower greedily, while her large, hooded eyes threaten to pop out of her head with wonderment and desire. The voice over narration from muscled, brunette hero “Flynn Ryder” explains: “See that old woman right there? You might want to remember her.” Although Gothel initially appears addled in her old age, moving slowly and giving the viewer the impression she is weak and powerless, these visual, auditory, and narrative cues work to plant a seed in the head of the viewer, that this character is certainly more dangerous than her appearance would suggest.

As scholar Rebecca do’Rozario and others have noticed, threat is often visualized as dark and old with safety symbolized as bright and young. Older women are most often associated with ominous, outdoor settings as well as natural disasters such as cyclones and rockslides who, like the women themselves ‘threaten to uproot man from himself’ (Bell, Somatexts, 115).

Most often, this unnatural sickly lighting is directly tied to acts of sorcery and witchcraft, whether standing above a cauldron or stealing the voice of a young princess, as is the case with Ursula in The Little Mermaid.
When Gothel removes the hood of her cloak to sing to the flower, a mass of grey curly hair falls out. As she sings the words: “Flower bloom and grow, Let your power shine, Make the clock reverse, Bring back what once was mine,” her arthritic fingers, rendered in painstaking detail, begin to visibly smooth and straighten (See Figure 15). As the miracle sunlight of the flower washes over her body, Gothel transforms before the eyes of the audience into the visual persona she embodies most often throughout the film: that of sexy, seductive femme fatale. With her tightly clung red velvet dress, long flowing black hair, beautifully manicured nails, and symmetrical facial features enhanced by seemingly natural eye-shadow and lipstick, Gothel is undeniably attractive. There is no remaining trace of her old age, and nothing to visually suggest she is, in fact, centuries old.

This emergence of Gothel from the darkness to hoard the power of the light can essentially be viewed as a metaphor for the entire Disney ethos. Disney animated film consistently enforces and reinforces the binaries between good and evil, light and dark, old and young, through such strategic visual and narrative choices. The singular verbal coding Disney offers the audience in regards to Gothel is the signifier “old.” By invoking this identity, the creators of the film push the audience in a particular direction that plays upon many assumptions about the aging and elderly cultivated in a youth worshipping society. By linking the identity of “old” to feelings of desperation and selfishness, Disney suggests an easily accepted, seemingly obvious motivation driving Gothel: the desire for eternal youth. By visually associating Gothel with darkness, Disney similarly ensures that the audience will continue formulating the idea that this ‘old’ character must necessarily be “evil” in some way, and that the flower, and all that its essence embodies, must represent all that is “light” and “good”. Immediately, the new, youthful appearance of Gothel further heightens the already growing sense that this woman does, indeed,
possess a great deal of ominously laden power, while also working to situate her driving motivation as the desire for eternal youth.

The cultural denigration of older women began in the oral and written traditions of fairy and folk tales, the narratives from which Disney most often draws in order to create their modern version of these classic narratives. The ugliness the very first Disney villain: the Evil Queen of Snow White, serves to “…[mirror] the grotesqueness of her obsession with youth and beauty.”97 Similarly, Cruella De Vil has been described as “…the aging beauty queen who cares more for her own attractiveness than for other people.”98 The audience often unquestioningly accepts these driving motives for female villains, especially those who are “past their prime.” Disney has utilized numerous animated films to verify this cultural narrative.

As narrator Flynn Ryder explains, Gothel need only sing to the flower in order to use its healing power to remain young and beautiful. This narrative is one that is familiar to audiences, and has been known to satisfy both young and old alike, a fact that the prevailing popularity of Disney alone attests to. Such narratives predictably lead the audience toward the readily available assumption that older women have always and will always want to be beautiful and young. In employing these problematic stereotypes, Disney animation continues the eternal tradition of policing the aging body, an impetus now heavily capitalized upon by popular media culture.99 By marking the identity of “old” or “aging” as dark, negative and necessarily threatening, Disney continues to perpetuate those prevailing societal norms and ideologies that

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98 Ibid, 204.
mark certain behaviors, appearances, and desires as appropriate or inappropriate, ‘normal’ or ‘unnatural,’ ‘contained,’ or ‘excessive’.

By marking the process Gothel undergoes to remain young and healthy as “creepy,” Disney further pushes audiences toward identifying this desire to stay young as somehow wrong and unnatural, linking this drive to feelings of vanity or jealousy. I argue that these are not the emotions driving Gothel, despite the allusions Disney makes. It is actually fear that is motivating Gothel, a fear that is extremely reasonable and serves as a reflection of the very real and extremely immense amount of pressure Western society places on women to look and stay young. If one recognizes this as a valid motivation for Gothel, it can be recognized that the very text Disney produced works to undermine itself. In drawing attention to the problematic acceptance of these ageist narratives, and the overwhelming existence of such gross stereotypes in children’s animated film, there can be resistance the prevailing ideologies that privilege certain subject positions and bodies while demonizing others.

Studies have proven that male members of Western society, regardless of their age, are judged most often by the level of their accomplishments and their accumulation of wealth. Conversely, women are judged consistently throughout their lives by their physical appearance and relationship status. This inequality is directly reflected in the realm of visual culture. Under this dominant social framework, old age represents yet another subaltern identity. Defined in opposition to youth and demonized as a state of physical decline and post-reproduction, it is marked as a time when one is no longer ‘contributing’ the capitalist society, a time when bodily betrayals lead towards ‘regression’ back to stages of infancy and dependence on others to

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100 See, for example, Eboni J. Baugh, “Body Image and the Aging Female” (fact sheet for Electronic Data Information Source, Published by UF Dept. of Family Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 2009).
survive. It is no surprise, then, that aging or aged bodies are rarely celebrated within the realms of mass media and popular culture. Gerontologists, sociologists and psychologists alike have undergone massive amounts of research and data collection in regards to visual depictions of these individuals in popular media outlets. The research reflects the prevailing, youth-worshipping ideologies dominating Western society that have created an atmosphere of utter gerontophobia: defined both as ‘fear of the elderly’ and/or ‘fear of growing old.’ Distinct from ageism: ‘the societal obsession with being young’, gerontophobia works to uphold the standards of beauty perpetuated by the media that produces a never-ending supply of images of impossibly thin, physically fit women.

If not cast aside completely, as is the case in magazine and television advertisements, the elderly are often pitied or infantilized, the other side of the ageist coin.101 Whether male or female, these individuals are most often depicted as degrading in both mind and body. Furthermore, economic records reflect this obsession with “staying” or at the very least “appearing to stay” young as billions of dollars are spent each year on anything from products to surgeries, marketed as magical “keys” to the metaphorical fountain of youth.102 Adhering to these false binaries between the aging body and the “ideal,” youthful leads to a diminished self-worth and a high degree of self-loathing amongst elderly community.

An alternative reading of Tangled allows the viewer to recognize the fact that Gothel, like most aging women, does not want to end up as another aging stereotype. Gothel articulates fears and anxieties in regards to the finality of life to which old age is the most obvious precursor. If

102 Bedford and Johnson, “Societal Influences,” 2.
she remains in her youthful body, she will literally never have to face the ultimate end. Contrary to the surface reading, which encourages the viewer to look upon Gothel as a pathetic, evil other who will ultimately get what is coming to her, Gothel can also be read as both powerful and proud in her anti-normativity: two attributes that should be admired and lead her to actively work to control her own eternal fate.

Despite this demonization of Gothel at face value, she also actively resists societal expectations further enhancing her revolutionary potential. Gothel remains young not because society tells her to, but because she wants it for herself. It is the skin in which she is most comfortable, a skin that does not limit her in any way. Physically, a healthy young person can, and often does, do whatever pleases him or her without any worry about the immediate or impending effects on their bodies. An “attractive” individual by normative standards need not worry that someone does not like them for their appearance, for example, or that they did not receive a job because of the way they looked. These are just a few instances of youth privilege, and may help enlighten the unaddressed motivation driving Gothel to remain young. In failing to overtly articulate her driving goals, Disney creates yet another narrative hole that allows for alternative readings.

Although Ursula has the power to transform herself into a ‘normative’ appearance of femininity, as evidenced by her transformation into the sexy brunette vixen Vanessa, Ursula chooses to remain in her overweight, hyper-sexual octopus form. Gothel, on the other hand, chooses to stay young forever and will do practically anything to ensure that her appearance stays uniform. It is interesting to note, however, that the ideal age for Gothel is not virginal teen or sexually experienced twenty-something, but woman who is visualized as securely middle-aged. Her idea of ‘youth’ is not one that is necessarily synonymous with ‘young.’ In having the
power to alter her visual age so as to reflect an identity that is vastly different from her chronological age, Gothel is most comfortable in allowing her appearance to reflect a more settled, rewarding, and self-assured aspect of life. Unlike Ursula, who is seen ‘performing’ or ‘putting on’ her gender numerous times throughout The Little Mermaid, Gothel seems to do little in terms of personal upkeep. She is never shown in the act of ‘keeping her appearance up’ or attempting to beautify herself in any traditional way. She has no suitors to speak of and has completely isolated herself from the world with only a ditzy blonde teenager to keep her company.

All of this visual and narrative evidence suggests that her obsession with retaining a youthful demeanor is driven by a desire to stay pain free and avoid the bodily and mental decline that are so often associated with aging. It is a choice she makes for herself and no one else. Gothel is frightened of the process of aging and all of the bodily failures and betrayals that are traditionally connected to this process. In this framework, Gothel’s motivations move beyond a gendered, personality flaw. It is not vanity or sexual appetite driving Gothel. Instead, she can be said to maintain her youthful form solely because it is an inherent aspect of her self-worth and her own identity. She is a bold figure who refuses to act of the performances of femininity, aging and motherhood as defined by normalizing societal standards. Like Ursula, Gothel is content in her self-segregation, showing no interest in finding a mate for either herself or Rapunzel.

Despite the existence of such a highly subversive female figure, it is essential to note that the fate met by Gothel is the same faced by each of her alternative predecessors. At the close of the film, Gothel is killed after committing her ultimate act of evil in the form of stabbing Flynn Ryder. Her death works to solidify the self-defined ‘innocence’ upon which Disney is premised,
an innocence that ultimately operates “…as a systematic sanitization of violence, sexuality and political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference,” stifling the subversive potential of the film by punishing those characters who seek to remain, entirely unchanged, outside of the realm of the dominant, hetero-normative patriarchy. The message Disney is sending is clear: women who step outside the borders of normative society must be contained and punished.

**Gothel as False Matriarch**

If age is marked as one disruptive, unruly characteristic displayed by Gothel, her unique, darkly laden performance of motherhood represents another. Gothel is the visual manifestation of an entirely new, toxic version of motherhood that is, nonetheless, premised on the tropes of the traditional Disney role of ‘evil stepmother.’ The problematic nature of her performance as ‘mother’ necessarily and ultimately works to demonize Gothel and pervert the mother/child relationship she has cultivated with Rapunzel. In regards to the historical depictions (or lack thereof) of mothers in Disney films, it is a fact that the corporation has often been ridiculed by scholars and audiences alike for its “matricidal tendencies,” most notably the now classic move of “killing off” the biological mother in the very beginning of a film. This tactic is arguably utilized as a means of creating and driving meaningful conflict, often by filling the character gap of “biological mother” with a prototypical “replacement” figure, epitomized most often by the character of the evil stepmother whose identity, in the eyes of Disney, is synonymous with the role of “villain”.

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104 See, for example, Linda Haas article “86 the Mother: Murder, Matricide and Good Mothers,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). Although Rapunzel’s ‘true’ mother is not dead or absent in the film, she is entirely unknown to Rapunzel and therefore ‘absent’ in the sense that she has no recollection or knowledge of her existence and, therefore, can be said to not exist.
Although Rapunzel is naïve in her belief that Gothel is her real mother, she has not been presented with a false picture of *motherhood itself*. The fact that Gothel hides her motives from the one she claims to love and care for makes Gothel all the more dangerous. She does everything a good mother would and, by society’s standards, *should* do. Although we, the audience, are aware of the ulterior motives driving Gothel, to Rapunzel she is a real mother who sacrificed everything to raise her and provide her with all of life’s necessities. Besides the usual teenage angst and restless curiosity, Rapunzel appears healthy and happy. She does household chores, but unlike Cinderella she seems unburdened by the work she does. She is clothed, fed, bathed, and learns every art from reading, to cooking, to painting. All of this serves to reflect the fact that Rapunzel is simply another isolated teenager who appears to be experiencing a typical phase of ‘teen rebellion.’ Gothel is, in fact, quite a good mother by traditional standards. She and Rapunzel exchange “I love you’s” constantly, and she has obviously provided almost everything Rapunzel could want or need during the first eighteen years of her life. Gothel often travels into the woods to fetch Rapunzel her favorite foods. Gothel refers to the girl lovingly as “flower,” and only the audience knows the true nature of this seemingly harmless pet name.

Gothel also displays other, more negative (and perhaps realistic) characteristics and performances related to the role of mother, including nagging and controlling behavior. She is situated as the controlling mother who fears for her daughter in the outside world, much like any other good parent would. Because of her unique, magical ability, Rapunzel is especially vulnerable in the eyes of Mother Gothel. She fears not only the loss of her magical hair, but also shows genuine concern that someone even worse than herself will take advantage of this power.

*Tangled* essentially presents a re-working of the ‘evil stepmother’ figure, morphing her into a deranged, obsessive parent whose role is essentially positioned as that of evil, adoptive
mother. The evil stepmother trope is one that was introduced by Disney in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but this new, toxic version of the anti-maternal, older female takes this trope a step further by situating Gothel as a jealous, smothering mother who literally steals her child in order to further her own selfish gains.\(^{105}\)

Gothel can be said to diverge from the traditional evil stepmother in two major ways. As already established, she is made a mother not by marriage or physical labor but on her own accord, despite its violent origin as a kidnapping. Secondly, although the evil stepmother trope relies on the premise that ‘real’, ‘good’ mothers would never do the horrible things these “mothers” do. Gothel shifts the narrative because she is as good or a better mother than any of these other characters ever have been or could be. Unlike the victims of evil stepmothers, Rapunzel has no ‘real’ mother with whom to compare Gothel and, as such, leads her life believing their relationship is premised on truth and love. As a character, Gothel suggests the frightening possibility that, in reality, *all* mothers could be hiding dark, sinister secrets and hidden agendas.

Both Ursula and Gothel are actively manipulative in their false maternity. They use the role as ‘mother’ to psychologically control their captors and to ensure the princesses are always indebted to or dependent on their power or protection in one way or another. By pretending to be caring, concerned mother-figures, Ursula and Gothel manipulate Ariel and Rapunzel respectively into certain forms of bodily sacrifice. For Ariel, the price she pays for Ursula’s power and guidance is her beautiful, youthful voice. She is literally silenced in order to possess a pair of

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\(^{105}\) Recent and past headlines of real-life kidnappings clearly reflect the psychological and moral judgment imposed upon these women, who are situated as psychotic pathologies to be pitied and feared. For an in depth analysis of society’s obsession with kidnapping narratives, see Paula S. Fass, *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
shapely, feminine legs. Rapunzel must sacrifice not only her freedom and knowledge of the outside world for Gothel, but also her magical hair. She is never allowed to cut it, and every day she must sing the magic song to Gothel while she brushes her long golden tresses so that Gothel may remain young and pain free.

Instead of seeking help from others, or attempting to use her sorcery to create her own magic spell, Gothel takes it entirely upon herself to control her own destiny. She has more agency than the majority of Disney females, and uses her intellect in an attempt to wrest eternal control over her own destiny. By stealing Rapunzel, Gothel is ensuring that she will always have the power to remain young at the tip of her finger. Youth and beauty are her obsessions, yet the purposes they serve for Gothel are entirely removed from trying to finding a mate or wresting control of a kingdom, allowing her to exist in direct opposition to the strain of biological essentialism that exists throughout and ultimately triumphs at the close of the film.

Disney actively promotes biological essentialism and the hetero-sexual family unit by situating Gothel as the ‘evil,’ ‘fake,’ and, in many ways ‘adoptive’ mother. Conversely, the royal parents of Rapunzel are consistently situated as the ‘real,’ ‘loving,’ parents with whom Rapunzel truly belongs. Collectively, the King and Queen have no more than three total lines of dialogue throughout the film, and most scenes involve close-ups of the grieving father/King, powerless against the larger-than-life forces of evil that have robbed him of his daughter and heir. The opening scenes of the film mark the Queen immediately and unquestionably as the biological mother of Rapunzel by showing her in labor, followed by brightly lit scenes of cuddling and cooing with Rapunzel in her nursery directly after the birth.
In opposition to the presentation of the King and Queen, Gothel is introduced to the audience in her old hag appearance, and as such is immediately marked as well past the point of reproduction. The audience is granted absolutely no evidence of a family or biological children, suggesting that Gothel, like Ursula, lives her life content in her solitude. Gothel becomes a mother not out of want but out of necessity, in order to sustain her personal health and well-being. By morphing Gothel from kidnapper into mother figure, Disney further heightens the potential for female on female violence on which it relies so heavily, while simultaneously falling into biological essentialism. Disney does not situate Rapunzel as a servant, being held against her will, but rather as a child in the home of a loving, albeit strange parent.

The narrative created by Disney in Tangled is one that deals with issues surrounding the very real and varied processes of adoption in Western society, while also demonizing Gothel by situating her as the psychotic mother who literally steals her child from birth and raises her to believe she is her ‘real’ (biological) mother. The film essentially presents a warped adoption narrative, as evidenced by the confusion it has evoked in young viewers, especially those who are members of an adoptive or non-traditional family.106

The Racial Coding of Gothel and Rapunzel

Disney binds together the narratives of age and motherhood through a subtle dialogue of race. Disney racially codes both Gothel and Rapunzel through visual and narrative means to further solidify and normalize the previously invoked binaries between good and evil, old and young, natural and unnatural. Rapunzel is symbolically linked to the sun, healing energies, and

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106 One example comes from anuncommonfamily.com blogger, Laura. When asked by her two year old adopted daughter, “Tangled [Rapunzel] has two mommies…I don’t like her mean mommy. Why is one mean?” Laura began to respond, “One of her mommies isn’t actually her real mommy. That mommy took her away from her real mommy,” before stopping midsentence upon realizing the problematic position she was about to put herself into.
purity. These associations are further enhanced by her outward appearance, namely the whiteness of her skin and the silky, blonde texture of her unprecedented, animated hair.\textsuperscript{107} She is visually tied to bright, multifaceted sunlit spaces. Whether viewed in the tower, the forest or the kingdom she is associated with morning and daylight. Conversely, Gothel is associated with the darker aspects of the outside world, reflecting the balance between threat and safety, beauty and horror that nature offers.

While the actual racial coding of these characters is important, there is no enough space in this study for a full examination of this dialogue. What is important for the purposes of this argument, however, are what the various tropes being utilized by the production can be said to imply and how these tropes are crucial in considering the models of gender and age that Disney can be said to both evoke and subvert. Racial signifiers actively work to situate Rapunzel as the absolute, ideal embodiment of whiteness and femininity, with Gothel necessarily marked as the non-normative, female ‘Other’ or opposite.

The first scene in which the visual differences between Rapunzel and Gothel are most obvious is a mirror scene, utilized in order to remind the viewer early on of the violent and unnatural nature of this mother/daughter dyad. The mirror, of course, has a long art historical tradition as a symbol of vanity especially for women and the image of the mirror was first invoked by Disney in its very first feature length animation, \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs} (1937) in the form of the evil queen’s magic advisor (See Figure 16).\textsuperscript{108} Next to Rapunzel, Gothel appears much older than usual, and her inevitable transformation back to hag is evident in

\textsuperscript{107} According to a 2011 article by Lina Das in \textit{Regional Business News}, it took $250 million dollars and ten years of experimenting with computer graphics’ technology before film-makers felt ready to commit Rapunzel to the big screen. Bryon Howard of the animation department noted the importance of the hair as “almost another character in the movie…and we needed to do it justice.”

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs}. DVD. Directed by David Hand et. Al (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Animation Studios, originally produced in 1937).
the greying of her hair. While Rapunzel is animated with peaches and rosy pinks, Gothel’s skin tone is shades of olive and grey. Her thick black curls, while not unruly, are clearly meant to appear effortless and un-styled, resembling textured ethnic hair. It seems impossible that Gothel could have birthed the long, corn silk haired Rapunzel because, indeed, it is. Rapunzel’s bright green eyes contrast with the paler grey shade of Gothel’s. Rapunzel’s waist is anatomically inaccurate in its impossible smallness, while Gothel appears voluptuous.

This presentation of consistent, visual binaries that work to code ‘lightness’ and ‘darkness’ onto actual female bodies pushes the audience towards racially coding the characters based on their own individual experiences and subject position. Blonde hair is consistently linked by Disney to purity and goodness, and it has never graced the head of an evil villainess. Aurora, whose name symbolically translates to “sun,” was the original “blonde bombshell,” and star of Disney’s Sleeping Beauty (1959) and in Cinderella (1950) the audience fell in love with a more subdued, classic version of the hue as well as the princess who sported it. Light hair and skin have iconographically been linked with all the ideologies and expectations imbued in the concept and identity of ‘whiteness’. In her thesis “Embodying Disney Dreams: The Representation of Femininity and Whiteness in Recent Disney Animated Films,” Allison Maplesden suggests that “…upper and middle-class white women particularly have historically been represented in ways which emphasize their whiteness and depict it coming from within, as emanating from an inner spiritual light.”109 Scholar Matt Roth argues this “inner glow” that Rapunzel both literally and

figuratively exudes, is a metaphor throughout Disney film of the overarching “Disney vision:” the prevailing ideology that only the strong and beautiful (and white) may triumph.  

As scholars have shown, bodies in Disney film are often visually coded in terms of light and dark, with the fair skinned, blonde haired Princesses standing in stark contrast to their darker haired, olive-skinned vixen counterparts, visually associated with colder, darker tones. Yet, in *Tangled*, this impetus seems to go beyond the usual use of blues, blacks and (in Ursula’s case) purples. Throughout the film, Disney overtly invokes certain racial signifiers to mark Rapunzel as the ideal embodiment of whiteness and femininity, while coding Gothel as a Jewish ‘Other,’ an argument that Gothel’s outrageous, over-the-top dialogue, actions and performances heavily support.

Scholar Joyce Antler recognizes that representations of Jewish women in popular culture media mirror patterns of avant-garde art. Unlike the prevalence of white, youthful images worshipped by corporate America, “erasure and exaggeration…remain the dominant characteristics of the treatment of Jewish women in film [and television].” Images of Jewish women, especially those in leading roles, are extremely rare. More troubling, however, is the fact that when these representations are present, as is the case with Gothel, they are overwhelmingly represented as ‘overblown caricatures’ and ‘pejorative stereotypes’ that misrepresent the real, lived experiences of Jewish women in Western society. I am not purporting that Disney has created a racist film in *Tangled*. I am, however, attempting a critical and necessary analysis of the numerous stereotypes apparent in the film.

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113 Ibid, 243.
The “trope” of the Jewish mother is one that has not escaped representation by popular media. One need only think of Jerry Seinfeld’s mother or Seymour’s mother from any of the numerous productions of Little Shop of Horrors. These women are visualized for the primary purpose of comedy, and their status as ridiculous, over-bearing parents is one that audiences find relatable and amusing. Although these representations may appear harmless at face value there are a variety of ways this trope is apparent in the personification of Gothel, both positive and negative in nature. Despite the fact that her ethnicity was never officially discussed or referenced, either within the film itself or by the creative team in related press and media, the obvious associations and tropes employed have not gone unnoticed by the audience. This is best evidenced by the number of fan and cult sites that are devoted to Gothel, including her page on squidoo.com: by far the most extensive and in depth site dedicated to Gothel I have discovered thus far, featuring fan art, discussions, fan fiction, polls and more. The creators and contributors to these sites are a fascinating indication of the multiple readings, both traditional and alternative, available and accessible in a single Disney animated film. The individuals posting on this website are constantly pushing past the set boundaries of the film, questioning the narrative, creating new narratives, exploring character motivations, and interpreting the film in new and varied ways.

Discussions on these sites often address the supposed or implied ethnic background of Gothel are most often and explicitly formulated. “She’s mature and sexy and has been described as a ‘classic Jewish mama,’” claims one author. “…She is an embarrassment to mothers, Jewish and not Jewish,” responds another. In reference to the filmic trope of the ‘Evil Matriarch,’ one poster added as an afterthought, “She’s also the stereotypical Jewish Mother. Of course, she also

covers Mama Bear, My Beloved smother, and Manipulative Bitch”. This is evidence serves to suggest that Gothel is viewed by fans and viewers as manipulative, overbearing, smothering, and deceitful. It should come as no surprise, then, that the most common stereotypes imposed upon Jewish mothers also serve as the most common adjectives used to describe Mother Gothel both on screen and in publications related to the film. She is the mother who controls the entire life of her child, using psychological tactics to keep Rapunzel dependent on her, and frightens her so she will be too scared to leave.

The coding of Gothel as ‘Jewish,’ if unsolidified early on, is arguably confirmed during her very first performance of the song: *Mother Knows Best*. Serving as an ideal example of the type of psychological manipulation employed to ensure Rapunzel stays captive, Gothel describes the horrors of the outside world, filling her daughter’s head with fears related to villains, disease and destruction. She situates herself as the caring, albeit overprotective mother who will protect Rapunzel from all these harms. Crooning, “Mother’s right here, mother will protect you,” she immediately switches roles to become the overly dramatic, self-pitying mother: “Go ahead and leave me, I deserve it. Let me die alone here, be my guest.” By constantly situating herself so as to evoke pity and shame in Rapunzel, Gothel ensures her daughter, and her power, will never be inaccessible: leaving her to die old and alone. Along with squelching her sense of adventure, the song also works to demean Rapunzel’s sense of self-esteem and self-worth by berating her.

Sloppy, under-dressed, immature, clumsy. Please, they’ll eat you up alive. Gullible, naïve, positively grubby, ditzy and a bit, well, vague. Plus, I believe, [you’re] getting’ kind of chubby. I’m just saying ‘cause I love you.

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By situating herself as a “good” mother who wants to protect her daughter, Gothel bars Rapunzel from questioning the true nature of her birth and instead, leads her to accept what Gothel presents to her as truth solely because she is her mother.

**Conclusion**

I have attempted to identify and critique two readings of Mother Gothel: the surface reading that situates her, ultimately and always, as an evil perversion in opposition to the normative society. The second reading celebrates the subversive potential of Gothel as a powerful display of alternative femininity whose refusal to function within the hetero-patriarchal structures presents an oppositional way of being that is divorced from any notions of futurity. Despite her subversive potential, however, it is essential to recognize now ‘classic’, characteristic move employed by the production team of concluding Gothel’s story with her predictable, untimely death. Deadly women, Elizabeth Bell notes, are necessarily doomed women,117 and Disney has yet to create a villainess who ultimately ‘succeeds’ on her own accord. The demise of Gothel, like that of Ursula and her other predecessors, simultaneously represents the ultimate end to evil and the eternal triumph of good. These physical and symbolic deaths work to ultimately solidify this false binary between good and evil upon which Disney, as both corporation and ideology, so wholly depends.

While the surface value of the Disney villainess is ultimately a negative interpretation of the aging, non-maternal, non-white body, there are alternative femininities, sexualities and lifestyles being suggested that can be mined for their revolutionary potential. If Ursula

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represented the “last stand” of the *femme fatale*\(^\text{118}\), I would argue that Mother Gothel represents an even newer representation of the ‘deadly woman’ that is at once toxic and subversive.

**CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The question that begs to be answered is *how* Disney will continue this legacy of visualizing the anti-maternal, grotesque female body. Most recently, The Disney Corporation began to undertake a multi-billion dollar production of *the first* live action Disney film center on a villainess, *Malificent*, set to debut July 2, 2014.\(^\text{119}\) The star of the film is none other than infamous bad girl Angelina Jolie. Known for her action packed, hyper-sexualized portrayals of video game heroine Lara Croft, drug addicted model Gia, and assassin Mrs. Smith.\(^\text{120}\) This choice alone could ultimately symbolize an admission on the part of the Disney cooperation, however resistant or overdue, that the villainess is far more powerful and interesting than the princess. In creating a film centered on the villainess, Disney is providing a clear, unapologetic opportunity for the audience to *relate to* and sympathize with the villainess more than ever before.

Originally known for her outrageous, gothic inspired persona, Jolie now represents one of society’s most complex portrayals of motherhood to date, mother to three biological and three adoptive children, representing a veritable pantheon of racial and cultural backgrounds. Prior to and following the release of this film, it would be extremely interesting to critique this live action treatment of one of the original, iconic demon women and *how* the choice of Jolie impacts the dialogues this film will undoubtedly present surrounding motherhood, gender, and sexuality. Is

\(^{118}\) Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom,” 44.


this a liberation for the subversive Disney villain, or just another opportunity to demonize the subversive potential of the *femme fatale* since Disney’s inception? Other live action treatments of the Disney villainess such as *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror/Mirror*, starring Hollywood bombshells Charlize Theron and Julia Roberts respectfully, could serve as potential touchstones for expanding the dialogue beyond Disney animation. Could Disney be experiencing a reinvigoration or rebirth? And could this reinvigoration be heavily informed by such non-normative performances of femininity and motherhood I have presented thus far, and ones that have yet to come? Only time will tell. For now I urge the reader to watch Disney films with critical eyes, noting the initial, intended readings along with unpacking and reinterpreting the film so as to reveal subversive, alternative narratives enhanced by revolutionary politics.
ILLUSTRATIONS

All film stills from The Little Mermaid obtained from http://www.mylittlemermaid.com/main.html

FIGURE 1: Ursula at First Glance, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.
FIGURE 2: *Ursula Descends from Her Lair*, Film Still from *The Little Mermaid*, 1989.

FIGURE 4: Ursula as the ‘Classically Beautiful’ Vanessa, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.

FIGURES 6, 7 & 8 (below): Ursula’s Performance, Film Stills from *The Little Mermaid*, 1989.
FIGURE 9: Ursula’s Lair, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.
FIGURE 10: Vaginal Caverns and Fallopian Tube Tunnels, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.

FIGURE 11: Ursula Gazes at Her Unfortunate Souls, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.
FIGURE 12: Enormous Ursula, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.
FIGURES 13 & 14: Ursula’s Death and the Triumph of the Phallic, Film Still from The Little Mermaid, 1989.
All images from *Tangled* are my own screen shots. These images are owned by The Disney Corporation.

FIGURE 15: Gothel Appears, Film Still from *Tangled*, 2010.

FIGURE 16: Gothel’s Transformation, Film Still from *Tangled*, 2010.
FIGURE 17: Gothel and Rapunzel, Film Still from Tangled (2010).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


