

Genre and Female Aging in Two Contemporary Filmic Adaptations of "Snow White"

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This article outlines the role genre plays in the representation of female aging in the films "Mirror Mirror" (Singh 2012) and "Snow White and the Huntsman" (Sanders 2012). Focusing on the queen, the paper considers how the films' varying generic engagements create alternative story worlds for the queen to take shape and evolve within. From this context, the article argues that the films' generic alignments become instrumentalized in the (re)construction of regressive and patriarchal representations of the queen found in preceding versions. Revisiting Anita Wohlmann's question about whether "the movies undermine and expose the tale's implicit ageism," the paper centrally argues that the depictions of the queen in both films entrench and supplement, rather than resist, regressive representations of female aging commonly found in preceding "Snow White" adaptations and in Western contemporary popular culture more broadly.

Released within months of each other in 2012, Tarsem Singh's *Mirror Mirror* and Rupert Sanders' *Snow White and the Huntsman* both adapt the "Snow White" tale. These adaptations make use of similar motifs, such as the magic mirror, the coveting of organs, and the poisoned apple, but are separated by their different generic engagements as fantasy hybrids. *Mirror Mirror* draws on aspects of romance, adventure, and comedy, and *Snow White and the Huntsman* incorporates aspects of the action-adventure genre. Rated PG and targeting a family audience, *Mirror Mirror* sets a lighthearted tone through engagement with the transformative, magical, and whimsical as well as incorporation of aspects of the screwball comedy. Conversely, rated PG13 and targeting a teen audience, *Snow White and the Huntsman's* supernatural

engagement (the queen's stopping hearts, shape shifting, and draining youth from women) and integration of the action-adventure genre sets a darker tone.¹

Mirror Mirror explores the conflict between Snow White (Lily Collins) and the queen (Julia Roberts) after Snow White decides to take back her kingdom and rival the queen for Prince Alcott's (Armie Hammer) affection. Alternately, *Snow White and the Huntsman* depicts the conflict that arises when the queen (Charlize Theron) discovers that Snow White (Kristen Stewart) will be her downfall unless she eats Snow White's heart and, as a consequence, becomes forever youthful. Despite these differences, at their cores, both films engage with the tension created when an aging woman comes to perceive a maturing female as a threat.

The films mimic preceding adaptations which depict a vain queen (Zipes 115) whose fear of being replaced by a younger woman is shaped by the patriarchal voice found in classic fairy tales (Sale 41-42). While the films seemingly reiterate the patriarchal nature of preceding tellings, Anita Wohlmann suggests that "an alternative view of age and aging is laid out in these contemporary representations of the tale" (228). Drawing on Kathleen Woodward and Aagje Swinnen, she asserts that the films make use of masquerade and the hyperbolic as means to defy and resist dominant discourses of aging.

In many ways, this article resonates and builds on Wohlmann's findings, published in a previous issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities*. We are, for example, in agreement that both films fail to move beyond many of the sexist and ageist components found in preceding Snow White tales, and that neither film "seems to suggest any alternative to the inexorable and concomitant loss of youth and power that allegedly comes with aging" (227). Yet, we differ in our reading of the hyperbolic and the films' abilities to critique or undermine regressive discourses surrounding female aging. Bringing together scholarship on genre, fairy tales, and female aging, this article seeks to consider how an analysis of the films' generic engagements problematizes, speaks to, and further flushes out Wohlmann's question, "Do the movies undermine and expose the tale's implicit

¹ When referring to the supernatural, I am referring to content (characters or events) in a fantastical work that extends beyond the possibilities of the natural world.

ageism?” (235). In addressing Wohlmann’s question, this article will demonstrate more broadly how genre can give insight into the narratives of age and aging that contemporary films (re)construct. Centrally, this paper argues that despite trends that suggest an increased reception of older female characters in Hollywood films, as the queen is differentiated and defined in relation to fantasy, comedy, or action-adventure, the diverging hyperbolic depictions of her character entrench and supplement, rather than resist, regressive representations of female aging commonly found in preceding “Snow White” adaptations and in Western contemporary popular culture more broadly.

GENRE AND TONE: CREATING DIVERGENT STORY WORLDS

Before exploring how the hybrid status of each film facilitates a rereading of the queen as a villain and an aging woman, this paper will first explain how the films’ generic engagements enable them to construct different story worlds, tones, and moods. This consideration will serve as the basis to outline how the films invite the audience to accept, rather than challenge, the age-based stereotypes they present. Writing from a literary and folkloric background, Zipes initially identifies the fairy-tale film as a subgenre of the literary fairy tale (11). However, as he goes on to note, “... fairy tale also borrows from other genres and incorporates motifs and techniques from other art forms to adapt to cultural expectations and changing conditions in the film industry” (11). When reading *Mirror Mirror* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* as fantasy hybrids, it becomes apparent that their variant engagement with comedy (*Mirror Mirror*) and action-adventure (*Snow White and the Huntsman*) film genres separates them in terms of tone and style. As Hutcheon asserts, a change in genre can create wholly different interpretations of a story/tale (7-8). Reflecting this notion, when fairy-tale films are read beyond literary traditions, it becomes apparent that their alignment with film genres creates different spaces and avenues for tales to unfold.

Considering fairy-tale films, Katherine Fowkes positions fairy tales as a strand of the fantasy tradition (2; 9-10). According to Fowkes, “one of the

hallmarks of the [fantasy] genre” is the way it fundamentally breaks with a sense of reality (2). Fairy tales, with their temporal dislocation and incorporation of mythical creatures and/or magic, provide the narrative strands, characters, and motifs to support the ontological rupture characterized by fantasy. As Brian Laetz and Joshua Johnston note, “Fantasy essentially involves the supernatural” (163), with works of fantasy incorporating supernatural characters (witches, wizards, dragons, elves) and/or events (levitation, magical storms) (163). As fairy tales often draw on aspects of the supernatural, these narrative components help to account for fairy tales’ association with fantasy. Beyond this straightforward connection, an understanding of how fantasy is represented through film aesthetics—such as costume, makeup, décor, landscape, and computer-generated imagery—can clarify how the fairy-tale films explored in this article draw on fantasy when pronouncing, constructing, and reaffirming their otherworldliness. More important, as I will demonstrate, this understanding can give insight into how fantasy is mobilized as a tool when addressing the dominant social discourses and ideologies commonly found in the tale.

In *Mirror Mirror*, hyperbolic costumes and makeup (i.e., brightly colored oversized dresses, costumes that mimic animal forms or inanimate objects such as chess pieces, brightly dyed and elaborate wigs, and florescent makeup) draw immediate attention to the film as artifice and mark it strikingly as camp. This open, at times ironic, playfulness and theatrical style contribute to the film’s family-friendly tone by inviting the spectator’s shock and amusement, and promising an ostentatious retelling full of spectacle, humor, and wonder.

The costumes reaffirm the film’s otherworldly status as they muddle the film’s engagement with time and place. When interviewed about the making of the costumes, costume designer Eiko Ishioka stated, “Tarsem and I decided the basic concept is hybrid classic so I can use a hint of the source from sixteenth century to nineteenth century and plus Eiko’s ‘Art Nouveau’ and Tarsem[’s] freedom vision. So all cooked together is a special stew” (*Mirror Mirror* DVD extras). Ishioka’s descriptions are reflected in costumes that incorporate elaborate collars, frills, and wigs that were popular throughout the sixteenth to

nineteenth centuries (for examples, see Perrot; Delpierre; Cumming, Cunnington, and Cunnington; Picken). These costumes contribute to the film's ahistoric quality, particularly when cuts and styles from that time range are paired with vibrant and diverse color palettes and elaborate geometric and floral prints reminiscent of 1960s textiles. At the same time that the characters' extravagant and playful costumes parallel and mimic aspects of the "real" world, they display a self-conscious disinterest with the "real" that seemingly liberates characters from the socio-cultural expectations of any given society, time, or place.

Like *Mirror Mirror*, *Snow White and the Huntsman* aligns with fantasy by both referencing and breaking from real-world expectations. Using CGI to incorporate supernatural creatures such as trolls, dwarfs, and fairies, the film makes the story world both familiar and strange by anthropomorphizing and augmenting the natural world. For example, in the forest Sanctuary (the home of the fairies), flowers are revealed as a cluster of butterflies, mushrooms have eyes, and plants respond and move in a seemingly conscious manner.

Snow White and the Huntsman's wondrous and surreal story world takes on darker tones when in the dark forest. In this space, tree branches move and/or appear to be snakes, dark hooded figures rise from the earth, and vampiric creatures burst forth from trees. The spectator's impaired sensory experience during this sequence establishes the dark forest space as threatening and otherworldly. This occurs as acoustic sounds are slowed down and echoed, temporal perceptions are distorted (with the scene's sequencing at times slowed or quickened) and as the camera moves in and out of focus. In inhibiting the ability to make sense of the space, the film provides a reminder of its distance from the real and from a measurable understanding of time and place.

The dark forest's color palettes and lighting are muted, primarily using grays and blacks. This choice is set in striking contrast to the light and vibrant color tones of the forest Sanctuary, creating a story world centered on dichotomies such as light and dark magic, life and death, good and evil, and morality and immorality. While dichotomy is common in the action-adventure genre, the

conjunction with fantasy creates a story world that is seemingly detached from the (moral) ambiguity of the “real” world.

The contrasting tones and aesthetics these films achieve through their employment of fantasy create the illusion that these narratives are not bound to or informed by the rules, laws, and norms of everyday life. When the characters’ actions are rewarded or punished, the films set boundaries for what is or is not socially appropriate conduct and invite the spectator to accept these boundaries. As will become apparent, it is through the illusion of distance from the real world and the implicit acceptance of the story world’s norms that the audience is positioned to accept socially constructed and malleable discourses as inherent truths. Contrary to Wohlmann’s suggestion that the sensational and spectacular aspects of the films become means to foreground and draw the audience’s attention to the constructed nature of age and aging, my analysis of these films’ hybrid status will reveal that the use of spectacle and the hyperbolic simply creates alternative avenues to reaffirm ageist discourses.

THE COUGAR AND (POST)MENOPAUSAL WOMAN: FRAMES OF COMEDY AND FANTASY IN *MIRROR MIRROR*

Reflecting aspects of the screwball comedy, *Mirror Mirror*’s queen is framed as a source of comic relief. Although the character is villainous, evident by her repeated attempts to kill Snow White, Roberts’s performance undermines the serious and deadly intentions behind the queen’s request and actions, and thus reinforces the film’s lighthearted tone. For instance, when the queen’s servant, fulfilling the role of the huntsman, (mis)informs the queen that he has killed Snow White, her excitement and happy exuberance stand at odds with the serious and cold-hearted villainy of the queen in preceding versions. For example, in the Grimms’ 1857 version of the tale, the queen boils and eats the lungs and liver of a boar when she is falsely led to believe that they are Snow White’s organs. This act reveals her eagerness to engage in filicide and cannibalism. Her consumption of the organs and cold reception of Snow White’s death position her as an unfeeling and evil woman. In contrast, *Mirror Mirror*’s queen’s giddy excitement sees her diverge from classic tellings as she is

repositioned as silly, playful, and eccentric. Since, as Geoff King asserts, comedy arises from the “departure of a particular kind—of particular kinds—from what are considered to be the ‘normal’ routines of life of the social group in question” (5), Roberts’s divergence from the evil queen in preceding versions incites humor through the use “of similarity with difference” (16).

Yet, despite this alternative framing and positioning, the queen’s comedic role does not distance her from the motivations and fears that often attend her character, namely her fear of aging and of being replaced by a younger woman. Conversely, Alternatively, the film’s engagement with comedy and fantasy creates additional layers that renew regressive perceptions of aging through the queen’s role as a villainous older woman. According to Roger Sale, in early versions of the tale, the queen’s obsession with beauty and desire for power were neither sources of pleasure nor linked to sexual feelings (41-12). Instead, youth, beauty, and sexual attractiveness provided a means for the queen to maintain her social position and power. In *Mirror Mirror*, the queen’s power and social (economic) stability similarly rely on her ability to attract a wealthy suitor. As such, beauty and youth become a central concern for the queen as she seeks to maintain and worries about the appearance and capital of her aging body.

The film initially introduces and pokes fun at female aging during a conversation between the queen and her mirror. When first introduced, her mirror states, “I am after all merely a reflection of you, well, not an exact reflection, [(whispering)] I have no wrinkles,” the queen gasps and replies, “They’re not wrinkles, just crinkles.” The mirror’s hushed voice, the queen’s exaggerated shock, and her attempt to deny aging by renaming her wrinkles reaffirm signs of aging as taboo. As Wohlmann notes, Roberts does not show the “tell-tale signs” of aging, as her skin is wrinkle- and crinkle-free (226). The playful exchange and the queen’s discomfort despite her lack of wrinkles (or crinkles) facilitate both straightforward and camp readings, one in which female aging is a point of criticism and mockery before aging has even left its marks, and one in which the stereotypically fearful female is mocked for her apprehension about aging before having actually aged.

The film advances these antipathetic sentiments by aligning aging with illness. The scene showing a beautification process, referred to as “the treatment,” employs medical signifiers, such as Baker Margret’s nineteenth-century nurse’s outfit, to frame the treatment as a “corrective” medical procedure. Described as “extreme,” the treatment is clearly unpleasant, with the queen expressing discomfort as scorpions sting her skin and maggots cleanse her ears and hands. The fantastical nature of the transformation paired with gross-out humor sets a playful tone. As this engagement draws attention to the queen’s bodily changes, the film highlights how “medical” procedures and body “maintenance” are used to reverse physical signs of aging and artificially replicate “markers of youth.” For example, after a bee stings the queen’s lips, her lips swell. Paired with the sound of a balloon being blown up, the visual and aural framings emphasize her transformation and visually separate the physical attributes of aging women (thinner lips) from younger women (fuller lips) by providing close-up shots of her transitioning form.

As cosmetic surgery is not only “accepted, but embraced as an essential part of the fight against ageing” in Western contemporary society (Fairclough-Isaacs 144), the scene’s excess and campy sentiments provide a parody of the cosmetic industry, ridiculing and mocking its societal embrace by casting it as extreme, while at the same time drawing attention to the relatively minor improvement the queen achieves. Yet, rather than questioning Western society’s obsession with (perpetual) youth, the scene in fact “mimics dominant narratives that cast cosmetic surgery and the older woman as equally abject” (Whitehurst 12). As Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs notes, two dominant narratives about the age-related beauty industry exist within Western contemporary culture. On the one hand, women are praised for embracing the surgical technologies that facilitate their fight against aging (144). On the other, female stars who use (or are accused of overusing) these technologies are often belittled for their “abject plasticity” (144). With the identification of women who have undergone cosmetic surgery or been airbrushed now becoming a sport, such women are rendered as abject for refusing to “act their age” (Whelehan 78).

The scene's mockery of the cosmetic industry reflects this scrutiny and judgment by inviting the spectator to bear witness to the queen's artificial and fantastical transformation; by rendering her and the process as abject through the use of gross-out humor and comedic sound effects; and by subsequently drawing attention to the prince's continued perception of her as an older (i.e., sexually undesirable) woman. Despite the fanciful nature of "the treatment" and its distance from the medical procedures used in real life (such as Botox, tummy tucks, and face lifts), the film draws upon a rhetoric of "proper" and "improper" body maintenance and opens the space for critical allegations of "age passing."

In considering this scene, Wohlmann asserts that "the movie tries to render visible ageist assumptions via an exaggerated staging of its characters" (240). Drawing on Woodward's assertion that masquerade has two main contrasting functions, namely as a denial of old age that facilitates a submission to social norms/expectations or as a means of defiance and resistance, Wohlmann concludes that Roberts's performance can be read as the latter because of the way it aligns with Swinnen's concept, "age bending." Age bending can be understood as a transgression of expected age-based roles. For example, older people who mimic particular codes associated with youth culture would be seen as age bending. Swinnen suggests that when older actors bend age, these actors enable parodic laughter, which invites the audience to identify the "reductionist view of third age as a stage of rigidity, dependency and disability" (11). Drawing on this scholarship, Wohlmann concludes that *Mirror Mirror* "offers a case of parodic laughter, where the audience laughs with the queen and the other characters at the hyperbolic mise-en-scène and the implicit critical commentary on the beauty industry" (241).

Although I would agree with Wohlmann that the scene is hyperbolic and that it humorously critiques the beauty industry, I would question whether this is an example of age bending and thus, by extension, a moment that invites parodic laughter. Swinnen's definition of age bending requires an individual to embody the norms of a different generation in an exaggerated and identifiable manner. Roberts's performance does not embody the codes of a younger generation.

Rather, her performance conforms to stereotypical perceptions of older/aging women in Western contemporary society. This conformance becomes apparent in her romantic pursuit of the prince. Moving beyond the “Snow White” tale’s representation of sexual attractiveness as a singular means to obtain power, the film depicts the queen’s obsession with youth and beauty as a means to also fulfill her sexual desires. Wohlmann concludes that by pursuing the prince, the queen refuses to act her age (242). Her transgressive behavior, according to Wohlmann, is another moment of age bending, which enables the film to “exploit this scandal for parodic purposes” (242).

However, I would contend that this is not a moment of age bending, as the queen’s sexuality reflects entrenched age-based stereotypes, with the queen seeking to position herself as a “cougar” and with the film alternatively associating her with the unrestrained sexuality of the (post-)menopausal woman. According to Deborah Jermyn, cougar is “a term [used] to describe an older woman who seeks out and dates younger men” and who is “preoccupied with their image, sexually predatory and afraid of ageing” (*Female Celebrity and Ageing* 10–11). The film initially positions the queen as a cougar, as she seeks to combat aging and to pursue a man who is significantly younger than she is. As the queen fails to convince the prince of her sexual desirability as a cougar, his unreceptive acknowledgement of her advances sees her repositioned as the (post-)menopausal woman with abject sexuality. The two characters’ contrasting perceptions and the queen’s shifting role are used to incite humor. This humor is comic rather than parodic. Swinnen refers to comic laughter as that which is levied against older characters and which reaffirms the age script. *Mirror Mirror* invites comic laughter as it uses regressive discourses of female aging to create humor at the queen’s expense and, as a consequence, at the expense of aged/aging women.

A prime example of this regression is when the queen attempts to seduce the prince over lunch. Leaning forward and extending her hand across the table, the queen begins to propose marriage to the prince. Reflecting the way gender is performed through the body (see Butler, “Performative Acts”; *Gender Trouble*; *Undoing Gender*), the queen’s physical agency and direct address masculinizes her

character and simultaneously feminizes the prince. As Wohlmann notes, the queen's commentary "makes the prince appear unmasculine" when she refers to him as bashful and as a "kid" (424). The prince is subsequently feminized through the queen's attempts at seduction as her performance forces him into the princess role described by Propp—becoming the sought-for person and potential reward for the queen—and, as he is positioned as the recipient of the queen's attention and advances, with the stereotypical gender roles of a heterosexual marriage proposal reversed.

In doubly feminizing the prince and assuming a dominant position, the queen draws attention to the performative nature of gender and reaffirms her eccentric positioning. Since gender "is created through sustained social performances, [...] the performative aspect of gender is concealed" as the body consistently conforms to gender-coded cultural signifiers (Butler, "Performative Acts" 528). When the queen's performance breaks from heterosexual "norms" and expectations, her gendered performance becomes apparent and is labeled as transgressive. Reflecting Judith Butler's assertion that "[p]erforming one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" ("Performative Acts" 528), the queen's gendered performance is met with disdain, particularly when the prince responds to her advances by asserting that he does not think they are the same age. His assertion draws attention to her distance from youth and her failed performance as a cougar, highlighting her misplaced sexual attention and reduced sexual value as an older female. The prince's rejection paired with her forward behavior sees her regressively coded as the archetypal predatory and masculinized (post-)menopausal woman, whose "potential for rampant sexuality," according to Jeannette King, is seen "as both ridiculous and monstrous" (12).

Having detailed the various ways the film plays with the archetypes of the cougar and (post)menopausal woman, it becomes apparent that the treatment, which emphasizes the queen's pursuit of a younger man, her preoccupation with her image and her fear of aging, initially aligns her with the cougar. Roberts's performance is not a moment of age bending. Instead, her performance, the scene's engagement with the fantastical and use of gross-out

humor reaffirm the age script. The queen's initial association with the cougar is used to further the film's comic address when she is later revealed as the ridiculous (post)menopausal woman. When outlining the film's engagement with comedy, it becomes clear that this scene cannot be read as a moment that invites parodic laughter.

Contrary to playing young, it might be argued that Julia Roberts is in fact playing old, as she was only forty-four at the film's release and had thus yet to reach fifty, the symbolic marker of female aging in the West (Woodward xiii; King, *Discourses of Ageing* xvii). Yet, as Paul McDonald notes, in the youth-obsessed culture of Hollywood, "Hollywood's rare band of female leads reach a glass ceiling during their early 30s" (274). While their male colleagues continue to be cast, often in romantic relationships with younger women, the older female actors get increasingly secondary roles until they eventually disappear (McDonald 30). Within this Hollywood context, Roberts aligns with the figure of the aging female star and thus the aging woman. Her performance of an aging female cannot be read as a younger woman playing old until the final scene when she transitions into deep old age and subsequently dies. As her rapid aging and death are not humorous, this performance of deep old age cannot be read as a moment of age bending that invites parodic laughter.

The spectator is positioned to perceive the queen as doubly scorned, with her aging body framed as undesirable and her attempts to retain youth presented as ridiculous (if not impossible). Roberts's hyperbolic performance corresponds with a function of masquerade that facilitates a denial/critique of old age. Using Roberts's age as the film's primary source of humor, *Mirror Mirror* plays to the notion "that audiences are only receptive to older women stars when they play their age for laughs" (Jermyn, *Female Celebrity and Ageing* 41). The film's fantastical and comedic elements reflect the mockery and scorn found in contemporary Hollywood, and popular culture more generally, particularly when older women fail to (properly) masquerade as younger than their years. The film's engagement with comedy consequently makes use of comic, not parodic, laughter.

Although the film's implementation of comedy resonates with contemporary Western ageist discourses, because the film's fantastical engagement gives the illusion that the film is disconnected from any particular time, place, or society, the historical and culturally specific connections detailed above are obscured. In masking the film's culturally specific links, the film shifts its representation of female aging from the realm of discourse to the realm of ideology, as the film's critical, fantastic, and comedic portrayal of female aging presents regressive ageist discourses as inherent truths unbound by time or culture. As I will now demonstrate, *Snow White and the Huntsman's* positioning as a fantasy hybrid similarly facilitates the presentation of ageist discourses as truths.

ACTION-ADVENTURE, FEMALE AGING AND *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*

In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the queen is a threatening figure. Reflecting the tendency of action-adventure films to confront the protagonist with “human, natural, or supernatural powers that[,] hav[ing] improperly assumed control over the world[,]” the protagonist must overcome (Sobchack qtd. in Neale 9), the threat the queen poses is exaggerated as she is reimagined as a larger than life character that exists to be conquered. In this role, she serves as a threat to the entire community rather than simply Snow White. Within this dichotomy of good against evil, the queen's villainy becomes hyperbolic. Where in preceding versions the queen's violence derives from her jealousy towards Snow White, *Snow White and the Huntsman* roots that violence and abuse of power in her aversion to aging. In so doing, Snow White, as the protagonist, must overcome an adversary who fulfills the attributes of the villain in action-adventure films—disrupting the laws of the natural world and the community's equilibrium—by refusing to age.

Like *Mirror Mirror*, the queen in *Snow White and the Huntsman* is a transgressive figure, but, drawing from the action-adventure genre, her experience of aging is not played for laughs. *Snow White and the Huntsman* puts female aging at the forefront of the film as the queen repeatedly asserts that as a woman ages, she loses power and is doomed to be replaced. In addition to highlighting her

inability to escape from a patriarchal system (Wohlmann 232), the queen's her assertions engage with what Whelehan refers to as Western society's pathologization of aging, with the queen attributing her failed or weakened magic to her aging state (79).

The film links aging to illness and decline by contrasting the fragility of the queen's aged body with the strength and health of her youthful form. For example, in youth, the queen's naked back, golden and unblemished with muscle and fat covering her ribs and spine, points to the health of her body. In contrast, as she ages, her skin grays and her body becomes frail and weakened, with her spine and ribs protruding from her emaciated form. Where her naked youthful body is well lit in a bright and open space, her aged body is depicted in a darkened room, with the light centralized on her back and the window before her. Despite the candles in the room, they fail to light the space, giving the darkness a physical presence which begins to press in on her aging form. The darkness symbolically points to her growing nearness to death, and, in so doing, reiterates the stereotypical links between aging and death. In depictions of her youthful form, the queen wears a crown. Her crown serves as a reminder of her social position and power as a ruling monarch. When depicting the queen as aged, it is notable that the queen's crown is absent, symbolizing her weakened state. In this way, age is connected not only to physical decay but also to declining power.

Considering the special effects used to dramatically age the queen, Wohlmann questions whether the queen's dramatic transformations can be read as a subversive element. Identifying the queen's aging as hyperbolic, she suggests that the digital effects are self-reflexive as they, at some level, draw the spectator's attention to the artificiality of the effect. Wohlmann concludes that it is through this recognition of artificiality that "the film exposes age-as-masquerade and enables a critique of age norms" (239). Despite this assertion, it is not entirely clear what critique of age norms the special effects facilitate. I would suggest that this lack of clarity is because the special effects are not working to critique age norms, but simply align with the conventions of the

fantasy and action-adventure genres, specifically their use of spectacle and engagement with the supernatural.

For example, although the queen's fear of aging and her transitioning form are hyperbolic, this quality is reflective of the hyperbolic villainy found in the action-adventure genre. The links between the hyperbolic spectacles of the special effects and the film's engagement with the action-adventure genre are apparent when the queen is first depicted rejuvenating on-screen. She stands holding a girl by the neck, consuming her life force through her open mouth. With her jaw hyperextended, the queen looks abnormal and supernatural. Her ability to lift the girl with one hand highlights her strength, power, and distance from humanly norms. As her youthful form is restored, the film reaffirms its connection to fantasy through the positioning of her as supernatural, and emphasizes the film's links to the action-adventure genre by establishing this unnatural transition as the evil that must be resisted and overcome.

The queen's hyperbolic framing extends beyond the use of age-based special effects. Her character disrupts the story world's equilibrium by dramatically bringing death to the natural environment and spoiling the kingdom. This is evident through the contrasting appearance of the kingdom and landscape before and during her rule. Prior to the queen's introduction and the king's death, fertile lands surround the kingdom—evidenced by the abundance of growing and healthy wheat and surrounding vegetation. The local village is heavily populated with cheerful and well-dressed people, their homes and streets are clean and well cared for, and the women's baskets and men's carts are full, highlighting the village's economic prosperity. The castle is a vibrant space, with its courtyard featuring a blooming apple tree. All three locations are well-lit, colorful, and welcoming spaces.

In contrast, under the queen's rule, the kingdom begins to decay, symbolically represented by a fallen apple and small flowers that rapidly die and rot. The scene's narrative voice-over directly links this decay to the queen stating, "So poisonous was the reign of Ravenna [the queen] that nature turned on itself, people turned on each other, the land died and with it hope." Reflecting this statement, the film emphasizes the devastation of the queen's

rule by providing contrasting shots of the surrounding land, village, and castle courtyard as blackened and decayed. The lighting in these locations is dark and overcast, highlighting the queen's repressive power. The village is in disrepair with the brightly painted houses chipped and grayed, the road muddy, and the people poorly clothed and hostile. The village's population is significantly reduced and there is no sign of trade or commerce. As the film's framing of the queen as hyperbolic extends beyond her fantastical movement between different age categories to her dramatic impact on the community's equilibrium, her digital aging can be read as only one component of a larger hyperbolic framing that centrally positions her as the villain within an action-adventure context.

The film's engagement with fantasy further entrenches the hyperbolic nature of the queen through her association with witchcraft. The queen is often described as a witch or associated with witchcraft in the "Snow White" tale. The Grimms' 1857 adaptation specifically states that the queen used witchcraft to make a poison comb. This link to witchcraft was reiterated in Paull and Wheatley's 1868 version of the tale, helping to solidify the queen's connection to the dark arts and serving to further entrench a narrative of devil woman as crone. The ties between the queen and witchcraft have been strengthened across numerous adaptations in later years, with theatrical, filmic, televisual, and comic adaptations such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Ames, 1912, theatre), *Snow White* (Ames and Dawley, 1916, film), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney, 1937, film), *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (Cohn, 1997, made-for-TV film), *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-present, television) and *Fables* (Willingham, 2002-2015, comic book) all connecting the queen in some way to witchcraft. At times, the queen is specifically identified as a witch (*Once Upon a Time*, *Fables*, *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), while, at other times, she seeks help from a witch (Ames's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and Ames and Dawley's *Snow White*). When the queen is depicted as a witch, the nature of the witchcraft ranges from creating poisons and casting spells to creating glamors, which mask her true appearance.

The queen's link to witchcraft in *Snow White and the Huntsman* is foreseeable because of the common reoccurrence of witchcraft in these earlier adaptations. Despite this similarity, *Snow White and the Huntsman* deviates from preceding depictions of the queen's witchcraft by giving her character the power to rejuvenate and the ability to poison the land and kingdom. This alteration of her witchcraft sees the queen, as an older woman, cast as parasitic, reflecting a post-feminist framing of the older woman as a bad woman, anti-role model, and a figure of calculated deceit (Negra 75). Instead of providing a critique of age norms, the film heightens the ageism found in the tale through the queen's positioning as the villain within an action-adventure framework and by reimagining the nature of her witchcraft within the context of fantasy.

It might be argued that the film seeks to rationalize and humanize the queen's villainy as an aging woman by explaining how her traumatic past shaped her as a villain. It is revealed that when she was a young girl, her community was attacked and mother, assumedly, killed. Before dying, her mother cast a spell on the queen to enable her to use her youth and beauty as protection and potentially as a means to obtain revenge. Despite the rationale the film provides, it nonetheless reaffirms the dichotomy of good and evil often found in action-adventure films through the paralleling of Snow White and the queen. For example, the queen's traumatic past is not dissimilar to Snow White's trauma, having witnessed the death of her father and destruction of her community. In addition to this mirrored experience of trauma, both women have a power for renewal, with Ravenna possessing the ability to regain youth and renew the youth of others (evidenced by her brother's sustained youth), and Snow White enabling the renewal and healing of those around her. As the women experienced similar traumas and losses, the alternative paths chosen by the women, Ravenna as destroyer and Snow White as savior, serve to hold the queen responsible for the villainous decisions she makes and emphasize the queen's conduct as misguided. She is yet again established as an anti-role model and a bad woman within the context of the action-adventure film.

In connecting a patriarchal representation of female capital as rooted in youth, beauty, and reproduction to discourses of the (post-)menopausal woman

as mentally strong, angry, aggressive, and politically engaged (King 11), the film's employment of the action-adventure genre facilitates the emergence of a character whose alignment with the aggressive (post-)menopausal woman and whose ability to secure power through the facade of youth create a supremely threatening woman. The presentation of the (post-)menopausal woman in the guise of youth adds weight to the regressive social narratives that frame (post-)menopausal women as disruptive to a naturalized and idealized patriarchal order by highlighting the social danger of older women who successfully masquerade as younger than their years. Thus, where *Mirror Mirror* and its engagement with comedy opens the space for critical allegations of "age passing," with female aging positioned as a source of mockery and ridicule, *Snow White and the Huntsman* presents a cautionary tale about the threat posed by older women who pass as youthful.

CONCLUSION

Although "Snow White" adaptations are often ageist and sexist, these elements are not inherent to the tale. Anne Sexton's poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," for example, encourages the reader to identify both Snow White and the queen as social constructs. It reveals how a masculine imaginary privileges youth and beauty, and, in so doing, reduces both women's value to their sexual capital. Her poem draws attention to this injustice and offers a critique of the social discourses surrounding female growth and aging. Similarly, Delia Sherman's "Snow White to the Prince" and Polly Peterson's "The Prince to Snow White" explore the politics of female growth and aging and contemplate how patriarchy isolates mother from daughter. Rather than placing blame on the aging woman, both poems highlight how societal ideals of youth and beauty and aging and decay inhibit female bonding. As neither the tale nor the genres explored in this paper are inherently ageist, it is evident that it is through the films' narrative choices, their selective employment of the tale and their generic engagements, that a regressive framing of female aging is perpetuated.

When addressing Wohlmann's question, "Do the movies undermine and expose the tale's implicit ageism?" it becomes evident, when analyzing the films in relation to genre, that the movies do not undermine or expose the ageism often found in the tale. These films further entrench ageism by interlinking their representations with Western contemporary ageist discourses. Despite the changing audience demographics that have resulted from an aging population, my case studies work against trends that suggest that there is a gradual, though admittedly limited, reception of narratives that explore and celebrate the complexity of older female characters (Jermyn, "Grey is the New Green" 167). It is difficult to say with any certainty whether *Mirror Mirror* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* represent a broader backlash against the increasingly diverse depiction of older/aging women on screen. To do so would require a broader investigation into whether there has been a revival/renewal of ageist sentiments more widely in contemporary films, an investigation that is beyond the scope of this paper. What is evident is that these films' employment of fantasy, comedy, and/or action-adventure resists a celebration of older females by denying alternative narratives and presenting regressive age-based scripts as universal truths. As these age-based discourses are ideologically packaged, Jermyn's assertion that "ageing women hold little cultural currency in our society beyond the neoliberal and capitalist imperative to feel, exploit and monetise fears of ageing" remains true ("Grey is the New Green" 175). The cultural problems embodied in both these films to some extent persist within the sequel to *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *The Huntsman: Winter's War*. The spectacle of Ravenna's aging is not revisited, but the ageist and sexist values often embodied by the mirror are troublingly reaffirmed. This representation would be worth exploring in future studies that wish to consider the intersection between female aging and the action-adventure genre more broadly. The framework adopted by this article illustrates how an understanding of genre can help to expose the contemporary ageism found in fairy-tale adaptations and in films that feature age-based narratives more broadly. What remains to be explored is whether these film genres are used elsewhere to challenge the

patriarchal voice and ageism often found in these tales and/or in Hollywood films that feature aging stars.

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