Natalie Le Clue and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel (eds.), *Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives: From Evil Queens to Wicked Witches*, Bingley, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022, ISBN 978-1-80117-565-4, 229 pp.

Fairy tales, despite their infantile and, seemingly, straightforward façade, have been one of the most examined genres throughout the 20th century, during which multiple perspectives have been adopted in order to analyse the effects produced on the public. Consequently, scholars from different fields, such as psychoanalysts, have become increasingly interested in exploring and disclosing the meanings lurking beneath the use of symbols and metaphors in fairy tales. As regards feminist approaches to fairy tales, they have tended to concentrate on the role played by female characters, with less attention being paid to villains, who are largely embodied by women. Nevertheless, by the end of the 20th century and beginnings of the next era, a growing awareness of these figures has emerged, with scholars and writers devoting their work to subvert and explore the character of the evil witch/stepmother to which adult women have been relegated throughout centuries, as it is the case of this volume.

One of the most recent publications to cover this matter is *Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives: From Evil Queens to Wicked Witches*, a collection of nineteen essays, including the introduction and conclusion, edited by Natalie Le Clue, and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel. This volume aims at exploring the representation of female villains in cultural products of the 21st century and question whether feminism has been able to eradicate the misogynistic portrayal of women we encounter in classic fairy tales. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the publishing house, Emerald Publishing Limited, appears to be committed to discuss gender issues in multiple contemporary fields of study, for, within the "Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender" series, a substantial number of titles can be found; among them, we can mention *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film* (2019), edited by Samantha Holland, Robert Shail and Steven Gerrard, or *Gender and Parenting in the Worlds of Alien and Blade Runner: A Feminist Analysis* (2021) written by Amanda DiGioia.

According to Natalie Le Clue and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel, the primary aim of their collection is "to bring together a collection of interdisciplinary research on the evolution of female villains form television and film, the impact of these characters on filmmaking, storytelling, narrative structures and considerations with regard to gender representations" (p.1). Therefore, in order to achieve their purpose, the collection is divided into four sections, so as to cover multiple perspectives regarding women's antagonism in fairy tales. The titles of these sections are: "Gender", "Screen Narratives", "Character Reformations", and lastly, "Physicality".

The first section, "Gender", concentrates on the subversion of gender as it was depicted in classic fairy tales by means of analyses of contemporary revisions. This section is composed of four essays by Alice Kelly, Alba Morollón Díaz-Faes, Rebecca Rowe and Sarah Austin. Kelly examines femslash fan-fictions of *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011) in which female villainy is explored as a threat to the heteronormative happy ending, which is distinctive of fairy tales, and the communion of female antagonists into a homosexual relationship to demonstrate that female villainy is a social construct that can be negotiated. Morollón Díaz-Faes focuses on the eradication of 'the good and evil' dichotomy and the heterosexual union of the heroes prompted by the villain's punishment attained by queer retellings. This critic particularly selects Lauren Beukes' *The Hidden Kingdom* (2013), Neil Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014), and ABC'S *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) for a thorough study, since in these narratives we encounter with a bi/homosexual protagonist, Rapunzel, Snow White and

Little Red Riding Hood respectively, who defies the fixed boundaries between virtuousness and monstrosity. Rowe's contribution offers an interesting study of the Good/Terrible Mother binary observed within *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019). The author exposes Disney's failed feminist attempt to subvert this dichotomy in the film by pointing to how it debases "the myth of the perfect motherhood" (p.36) embodied by Ingrith. The role of the Good Mother is confirmed by juxtaposing Maleficent to this character so as to emphasise the Terrible Mother Ingrith is. Austin rather concentrates on the figure of the Wicked Queen depicted in contemporary adaptations of Snow White such as Serena Valentino's *Fairest of All: A Tale of the Wicked Queen* (2009), Marissa Meyer's *Fairest: The Lunar Chronicles: Levana's Story* (2015), and Julie C. Dao's *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* (2018). In Austin's analysis of these revisions, the critic argues that not only are her deplorable actions explained, for she is given a problematic background, but the reason of her vanity is also described, which is not depicted as an innate faculty of her gender, but rather a result of the cultural beauty standards imposed over her.

The second section, "Screen Narratives", which includes four essays, explores the depiction of women as villains in popular and contemporaneous series. It opens with Kirsty Worrow, whose argument aims to dismantle the possibility of a feminist depiction of women in the Netflix series *The Witcher* (2019 – ongoing), for, even though female characters are endowed with agency and reasonable screen time, women in *The Witcher* finally comply with patriarchal narratives. In the sixth chapter, Giulia Bigongiari seeks to examine the character of Mrs. Coulter from the BBC/HBO series *His Dark Materials* (2019 – 2022) by applying two approaches: queer theory, and positioning theory. Bigongiari addresses the process of villainization of Mrs. Coulter, emphasising especially the character's deconstruction of archetypes by negotiating "her position with other characters" (p. 79) and adopting/performing both evil and good identities. Continuing with the subsequent chapter, Sarah Faber elaborates a comparative analysis of three diverse versions of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*: the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale (1812), Disney's film adaptation (1937), and Jim C. Hines' loose retelling *The Snow Queen's Shadow* (2011). Thus, the author focuses on the representation of Snow White, and, especially, of the Evil Queen throughout different time periods, focusing on the effect that the different cultural and social values may have had in the different representations. The last contribution to this section is Amit Kardosh's essay on Cersei Lannister from R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 – ongoing). Kardosh's chapter concentrates on the construction and development of Cersei's character as the female villain, arguing that "her need to gain power and social recognition, […] the corporal and sexual governing of the female body, and her twisted relationship with her family" turns Cersei into a threat to patriarchy (p.104).

The third section, "Character reformations", includes four essays concentrated on the redefinition of characters that conform to the archetype of the villain. The first contribution by Rebecca Gadd explores the issue of information deficit in relation to fairy tales' stepmothers, traditionally vilified as the solely knowledge with which the public is provided is their desire for power and control. However, Gadd, through the analysis of four 2000s fairy tale film retellings, *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *Mirror Mirror* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), and lastly *Cinderella* (2015), demonstrates that they are victims of the patriarchal system. Written by Kirsty Worrow, the tenth chapter offers an examination of the evolution of the threatening and sexualized fembot archetype portrayed in science-fiction media, focusing on *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Westworld* (2016 – 2022). Worrow argues that, despite the complexity with which gynoids are endowed, increasing, therefore, the audience's sympathy for them, these creatures can still be read

as problematic. The eleventh chapter is dedicated to the comparative analysis of Snow White's stepmother in diverse contemporary fictions by Svea Hundertmark. The author's selected sources are the TV-series *Once Upon a Time* (2011 – 2018), the book series *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012 – 2016), the films *Mirror Mirror* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *The Huntsman: Winter's War* (2016). Hundertmark proceeds by contrasting the Evil Queen's backstory, crimes, and fate within the multiple adaptations in order to address the reasons why this character is perpetually vilified and unredeemed. The last chapter of this section closes with a study of *Once Upon a Time*'s Evil Queen by Natalie Le Clue, who concentrates on the character's evolution throughout the seven seasons. According to Le Clue, not only is Regina (i.e.: the Evil Queen) provided with complexity unlike most villains, but she also undergoes a process of transformation and, eventually, achieves redemption.

The collection's last section, "Physicality", provides a broad range of perspectives concerning the subject matter as applied to particular female villains. The first contribution by Hannah Helm examines the figure of Maleficent not only in the film version of 2014, but also in the sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), from the point of view of Feminist Disability Studies. This critic argues that Maleficent's villainization and social exclusion are produced by means of the character's physical appearance, or rather, impairment. As a consequence, Helm brings to the fore the process of "linking disability in fictional representations with evil" (p.179). The fourteenth chapter is dedicated to an exploration of fan impressions when considering the villain Ursula, the Sea Witch from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Janelle Vermaak-Griessel concentrates on three fan-made YouTube videos, and their followers' response, discussing the character of Ursula, who is regarded as a feminist transgressive symbol, for not only does she break with the canons of beauty by accepting her bigger size, but she can also be seen as "race- and gender-fluid" (p.193). The collection closes with an essay by Natalie Le Clue and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel. These scholars carry out a thorough comparative analysis of the representation of the Evil Queen across various media, specifically, the *Queens of Fables* (2000), *The Fairest of Them All* (2013), *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2016), *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), in order to establish and examine the motif which underlies the multiple depictions of this female villain.

Even though fairy tales have been a fertile source of exploration from diverse theoretical perspectives, analyses of female villains have not been prosperous, for these figures, as a consequence of their outwardly inherent evil nature, have been perpetually relegated to a secondary sphere. As opposed to that trend, this collection offers a stimulating interdisciplinary approach to the representation of female villains in several contemporary media. It is a refreshing proposal which deviates from the tradition, abandoning the classics in order to concentrate on popular literature, screenings and series. It contemplates the characters' evolution considering the effect feminism has produced on these narratives, as well as the development of female villains' complexity in current discourses. Consequently, not only does this collection attain successfully its explicitly declared purposes, but it also gives rise to a new thought-provoking discussion regarding villainy as a subjective factor dependent on the narrator's perspective, a consequence of traumatic life experiences, or as a means to survive in a cruel world.

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