

Magical Mothers: The Representation of Witches and Motherhood in Contemporary Fantasy Cinema

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Abstract

Over the past decade, powerful mothers in cinema have reappeared in the fantasy genre in the form of “witches”. Some witches’ stories, such as that of Maleficent (the wicked witch from the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*), have even been rewritten to place greater emphasis on maternal values, while simultaneously having feminist undertones and subverting the ways in which witches’ stories have been told previously. In contrast to the widely regarded belief that only *evil* witches (who are often also read as *femme fatales*) are considered to be “feminist”, the author argues that recently, witches that are both good *and* feminist have started to come to the fore. Significantly, the source of these witches’ power is their display of motherhood, which is an issue that many feminists (especially those who deny gender difference) have been grappling with for some time, as motherhood and feminism seem to be on two opposite ends of the spectrum. Thus, the author argues that, as is displayed in science fiction heroines from the 1980s and 1990s who are often discussed in feminist circles, these witches’ maternal values do not undermine their transgressive potential, as it is conventionally assumed, but rather become the source of their empowerment.

Keywords: feminism; fantasy; film; witches; motherhood; Disney

Introduction

Cinema and television have a history of strong mothers who often saved the world from destruction. The earliest tough mothers, who mostly appeared in science fiction films and television series that were released during the peak of feminism's second wave, were the likes of Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* quadrilogy (Scott 1979; Cameron 1986; Fincher 1992; Jeunet 1997), Sarah Connor from *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984; 1991), and Captain Kathryn Janeway from *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001). Towards the end of the 1990s, however, these characters started disappearing and the fate of the world was left in the hands of young, sexualised postfeminist heroines, such as the private detectives in *Charlie's Angels* (2019) and Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (2018), to cite only two examples, who do not have any associations with motherhood. It is clear from the myriad popular cultural texts that still deal with motherhood, however, that it remains a pertinent issue for women and feminists. "Mom-Coms" that are epitomised by series, such as *Workin' Moms* (2017–present), *Jane the Virgin* (2014–2019) and *SMILF* (2017–2019), reveal how women are still trying to negotiate the "raw reality of modern motherhood" that includes matters such as in-vitro fertilisation, single-motherhood, and working mothers, among other things (Soloski 2018).

Recently, powerful mothers have started reappearing in cinema, especially in the fantasy genre in the form of "witches".¹ Since the green-skinned Wicked Witch of the West appeared in *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939), witches that are often portrayed as monstrous and powerful villains have become a frequent feature in popular American cinema. However, over the past decade, some witches' stories, such as that of the well-known antagonist, Maleficent (the wicked witch from the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*), have been rewritten to place greater emphasis on maternal values, while simultaneously having feminist undertones and subverting the ways in which witches' stories have been told up until recently (Priyanka 2016). In contrast to the widely regarded belief that only "evil" witches (who are often also read as *femme fatales*) are considered to be "feminist" (Mallan 2000),² I argue that recently, witches that are both good *and* feminist have started to come to the fore. Interestingly, the source of these witches' power is their display of motherhood, which is an issue that many feminists (especially those who deny gender difference) have been grappling with for some time (Fraustino and Coats 2016), as motherhood and feminism seem to be on two opposite ends of the spectrum. I argue that, as is displayed in Ripley, Connor and Janeway, who are often discussed in feminist circles (see, e.g., Bowring 2004; Dove-Viebahn 2007; Faithful 2016; Graham 2010; Innes 1999), these witches' maternal values do not

1 I use the term "witch" to refer to a female character that can do any sort of magic.

2 Of course, the definition of feminism is not simple, and each wave of feminism effectively contradicts the other. While I am aware that feminism is multi-faceted, I try to navigate between the various conceptions of feminism and take into consideration how these characters could be considered as "feminist" while bearing each wave's values in mind.

undermine their transgressive potential, but rather become the source of their empowerment.

Firstly, I discuss the ambivalent relationship between motherhood and feminism through an overview of the main arguments surrounding these issues, as well as popular conceptions about biological and non-biological motherhood. Secondly, I briefly consider the history of the representation of powerful women and motherhood in film, with a focus on the science fiction heroines Ellen Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) and Kathryn Janeway (played by Kate Mulgrew). I then move on to the main discussion of witches in film, starting with *Mary Poppins*, and how until recently they were portrayed in terms of good and evil, and feminism. From there, I conduct an analysis of *Maleficent* (played by Angelina Jolie) from the Disney reboot of the story of *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014), *Miss Peregrine* (played by Eva Green) from *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Burton 2016), and Mrs Zimmerman (played by Cate Blanchett) from *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* (Roth 2018) in order to identify the characteristics that these characters share with *Mary Poppins* and one another, and how they are represented in terms of maternity and feminism.³

It is significant that within less than a decade, at least three blockbuster films that perpetuate the specific version of femininity and motherhood that are outlined in this article have appeared in popular culture, as in the current zeitgeist, sexism within the media industry is increasingly being scrutinised and challenged (the #MeToo movement is a prime example). The industry is starting to acknowledge that women have been portrayed in negative ways fuelled by patriarchal and misogynistic ideals for decades (Curtis 2017). It is even more significant that this specific “femininity” is manifested in images of “witches”, as witches have both encapsulated and challenged “idealized visions of femininity” for centuries in folklore, as well as in contemporary popular culture from the last few decades (Valverde 2009, 264). Thus, ultimately, I aim to speculate why this character trope is starting to appear (or make a return) in film, and what this means for contemporary feminist debates.

Motherhood and Feminism in Film

For decades feminists have grappled with the female circumstance of motherhood, and often questioned whether motherhood and feminism are compatible at all. While the suffragettes demanded that the private and domestic skills of women as mothers be recognised and given importance in the public sphere, liberal and radical feminism from the second wave increasingly viewed motherhood as one of patriarchy's main institutions that suppress women (Maroney 1985, 40). For example, Friedan's (1963,

3 While *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* are both based on children's novels, Valverde (2009) notes that the portrayal of *Mary Poppins* in the children's books is vastly different from her portrayal in the Disney film. Therefore, I discuss only the film versions of these characters.

16) seminal early liberal text identifies “the problem that has no name” that most middleclass American women who were confined to the home and raising children experienced towards the end of the 1950s. According to Friedan (1963, 13–14), the epitome of feminine fulfilment after World War II, the highly problematic feminine mystique, was the suburban housewife who was “concerned only about her husband, her children, her home”. Similarly, radical feminist Firestone (1970) envisions a “feminist Utopia” where women are freed from their historically determined biological function of bearing children that has oppressed them for centuries (Thornham 2001, 37). For Firestone (1970), the “social and cultural structures” such as the biological nuclear family and motherhood that have created division between the sexes (and by implication the unequal distribution of power between men and women) need to be abolished (Thornham 2001, 37).

Consequently, even heroines in cinema, who are praised for their subversive representation of women, are often criticised for the prevailing emphasis on their statuses as mothers. In science fiction, for example, Wood (2010, 47) reads the focus on Ripley as a “mother-figure” in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) as “central to what [Laura] Mulvey describes as the ‘devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object’”. This is because Ripley is (supposedly) being punished for being a bad mother to her daughter, whom she left behind in order to serve on *The Nostromo*, and problematically being offered redemption through the adoption of Newt, a young girl whom she saves. Gallardo-C and Smith (2004, 97) further argue that Ripley’s motherhood allows her to *act* as the heroine while remaining safely contained within the patriarchal social order.

Another heroine in science fiction who undermined negative stereotypes of female characters on screen in the 1990s, Janeway from *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001), has also been read as being constricted to traditional stereotypes of femininity through her role as her crew’s symbolic mother, despite her transgressive potential as the first female captain in the *Star Trek* franchise. For De Gaia (1998 21, 27), Janeway’s motherhood, like that of Ripley, ties her to essentialist female qualities, such as intuition and caregiving, and according to Shaw (2006, 75), compulsory heterosexuality as an institution that disempowers women is also reinforced through Janeway’s role as the crew’s mother. Finally, Wood (2004, 33) comes to the conclusion that these representations reinforce women’s assumed connection with motherhood and therefore imply that “being female means being, always already, a mother”, despite being action heroines or captains of star ships.

Evidently, it seems that a woman is not able to be empowered *and* be a mother, whether biological or non-biological. For cultural feminists, which is a strand of feminism that started to be theorised towards the end of the twentieth century, however, certain female roles, especially motherhood, have been devalued by men and therefore it is feminism’s task to reclaim and celebrate these roles (Evans 1995, 76). Rich’s (1986) interrogation of motherhood particularly informs a cultural feminist agenda. For Rich (1986, 13–14), twentieth century motherhood has undoubtedly become nothing less than “penal

servitude”, however, it “*need not be*” (emphasis in original). Rich (1986, 13–14) distinguishes explicitly between “two meanings of motherhood”, namely: “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (emphasis in original). Furthermore, Rich (1986, 13) contends that it is this *institution*, rather than motherhood itself, that “has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities”. In the words of Evans (1995, 84), the conclusion of Rich’s (1986) argument is in fact that “motherhood gives women power”, which is something that recent representations of witches seem to agree with.

In a compelling analysis of Ripley in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986), Bach and Langer (2010, 82) conclude that *adoptive parenthood* is especially one way for women to deny patriarchy’s control of their bodies; in their analysis, it is *biological motherhood* that represents patriarchy’s control of women’s bodies. Bach and Langer (2010, 88–89) provide an interpretation of Ripley’s adoption of Newt that especially denies what Rich (1986) sees as institutionalised motherhood that disempowers women:

Ripley’s *motherhood* of Newt is *unconnected* to the process of childbearing as Newt is her surrogate but not her biological, daughter ... The relationship [therefore] represents a fracturing of the normatively sexual mode of motherhood, in her emotional connection to Newt *despite* her lack of biological connection rather than *because of* the biological connection between a mother and a daughter. It is an active and chosen connection rather than a passive biological connection and functions as a site of Ripley’s power (emphasis in original).

In this way, Bach and Langer (2010, 89) argue that the bond between Ripley and Newt does not place Ripley within the confines of the nuclear family, but rather it is a bond that is “outside of the patriarchal ideal of the biological, nuclear family as primary unit of society” and is therefore empowering for Ripley.

Nevertheless, biological motherhood is still mythically considered superior to non-biological motherhood. Sanner and Coleman (2017, 1462–1463), for example, give reasons why biological motherhood is favoured: firstly, biological motherhood is seen as an important rite of passage to womanhood; secondly, “ideologies of perfection” characterised by “involved, intensive mothering combined with unconditional love, patience and support” are associated only with biological motherhood; and, finally, “normative motherhood” is marked by the biological process of pregnancy, and thus biological maternity becomes “the ultimate symbol of not only motherhood but also womanhood”.

Mary Poppins, Witches and Non-Biological Motherhood

These myths are manifested in popular culture in representations of evil stepmothers or godmothers that are not associated with biological motherhood, who are often presented as wicked witches, such as the Evil Queen in *Snow White* or depictions of Maleficent in

the original *Sleeping Beauty* (Delrosso 2015). Often in children's stories, and in early Disney films especially, the good (human and biological) mother of the protagonist/s, who is "loving, nurturing, attentive and often self-sacrificing", is supplanted by the binary opposite, that is, an evil adoptive mother or stepmother who happens to be a witch in many cases (Delrosso 2015, 520). Notably, in *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (Cohn 1997), Lady Claudia Hoffman (played by Sigourney Weaver), only becomes the "evil stepmother" and realises her magical powers after having a miscarriage. Thus she is forced to adopt the princess as her own daughter, thereby explicitly linking biological motherhood with goodness and non-biological motherhood with evil. Weaver's role as the "evil stepmother" in this film of course stands in stark contrast to her portrayal of Ripley in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986), which not only displays the "masculine woman" and mother, but also as Bach and Langer (2010) postulate, a positive representation of adoptive motherhood. While there still exist negative stereotypes associated with non-biological motherhood, it seems that currently popular culture is acknowledging other forms of motherhood, such as surrogate, adoptive and stepmother, as equally important.

As I mentioned earlier, the history of witches in film could be traced back to as early as the 1930s, when the Wicked Witch of the West first appeared *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939). Other notable witches that have featured in film and television since then include: *The Witches of Eastwick* (Miller 1987); the two sisters from *Practical Magic* (Dunne 1998); Morgana from *Camelot* (Logan 1967); Ridley from *Beautiful Creatures* (LaGravenese 2013); Melisandre from *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019); and a few evil witches in the early Disney animations and films. All of these witches are generally considered to be "wicked", and many of them are defined by their sexual prowess and seductive powers, rather than motherhood (Weyer 2016). Thus, (evil) witches have been read as "feminist" in many instances, as they embody "powerful femininity free from male influence or ownership" (Korvette 2015); they are self-defined, rather than being defined in relation to others (Buxton 2015); and, in line with certain postfeminist sentiments, they use their sexuality as a means of empowerment (Zarranz 2007).⁴

There have of course been good witches (who are notably much younger than the "wicked" ones) in popular culture too, such as Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series, Sabrina Spellman from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and Willow Rosenberg from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to name a few. These teenage witches, however, are not empowered (or disempowered) in the same ways that the above-mentioned "evil" witches are, and their feminism is perhaps a discussion for another day. Good and evil are of course complex concepts, but in an analysis of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels that are about witches, Croft (2008) formulates useful definitions of what it means to be

4 A postfeminist analysis of the witches discussed in this article could also prove to be fruitful, as postfeminism effectively problematises the issues put forward here in an in-depth manner. However, postfeminism is a vast topic, and a postfeminist analysis of Maleficent, Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann is better left as an avenue for further research.

“good” and “right” *as a witch*. For Croft (2008, 155), these terms describe the moral frameworks for how witches handle their powers, treat others, and face their responsibilities to the world. A “good” witch, therefore, “[follows] a moral system imposed from outside” and a “right” witch “[makes] decisions that are just but not necessarily merciful, morally correct but not necessarily pleasant” (Croft 2008, 155). Since the witches that I discuss in the article follow some moral code, and generally base their decision-making on justice and the “greater good”, in the sense of these two definitions, they are good and right, and I refer to them as “good” witches throughout.

One of the first witches that are “good”, potentially feminist, and have associations with motherhood, is Mary Poppins who first appeared in film in *Mary Poppins* in 1964 (Stevenson, portrayed by Julie Andrews), and subsequently in *Mary Poppins Returns* (Marshall 2018, played by Emily Blunt). Mary Poppins was succeeded a few decades later by another magical nanny, *Nanny McPhee* (Jones 2005, played by Emma Thompson) and *Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang* (White 2010), but nevertheless remains a significant and influential figure in popular culture. In contrast to the witches mentioned above, Mary Poppins is not defined by her sexuality, and her appearance is conservative like that of the “good” biological mothers of protagonists in children’s literature (see Figure 1). Mary Poppins is a magical nanny who waits for families that require her particular magical skills to call upon her to be their nanny. In the film, Mary Poppins swoops down with her talking umbrella when the Banks children, who are apparently difficult and have a poor relationship with their father, write a letter requesting a nanny who is “kind”, “witty”, “very sweet and fairly pretty”. Mary Poppins intervenes and resolves the children’s relationship with their father and his attitude toward his family. When she has succeeded in this task, she disappears with the wind once more until the next family needs her. Therefore, Mary Poppins operates on the “margins of traditional family values”, and by taking on a parental role, subversively “dismantles the structure of the nuclear family” (Valverde 2009, 264).



Figure 1: Julie Andrews as the titular character in *Mary Poppins* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1964).

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058331/mediaviewer/rm1275591424/>

Moreover, Mary Poppins belongs to the tradition of the “empowered ‘spinster’ in children’s fiction”, and fits the Jungian “Great Mother” archetype, who is “both creative and destructive, possessing a nourishing as well as a devouring side” (Valverde 2009, 263–264). In her seminal cultural feminist text, Rich (1986, 93) in fact traces the history of female goddess worship and the “Great Mother” archetype who existed in “gynocentric” societies millennia ago that have “women-centred social organizations”. For Rich (1986, 99), an alternative to the problematic institution of motherhood that subjugates women can be found in an ancient “prepatriarchal society” in which this institution did not exist at all. Rich (1986, 94) notes that in images of the “Great Mother”, even while suckling an infant, she “*is for-herself*” (emphasis in original). In addition, Rich (1986, 94) contends that “images of the prepatriarchal goddess-cults did one thing; they told women that power, awesomeness, and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle; the female was primary”. Furthermore, in this “prepatriarchal society”, before motherhood became institutionalised, all the current taboos associated with motherhood and menstruation were instead celebrated for their “transfor[mative]” powers (Rich 1986, 99). In this way, Rich highlights motherhood’s (empowering) potential, as it existed in ancient societies, and particularly in the “Great Mother” archetype. In embodying this transgressive “Great Mother” archetype, therefore, Mary Poppins further subverts the problematic notion of institutionalised

motherhood. Importantly, Mary Poppins is also both a witch and a “good” non-biological mother, which challenges the assumed binary.

In some circles, Mary Poppins is denied feminist readings, however, as she supposedly reinforces the patriarchal order. For Cuomo (1995), Mary Poppins fails to subvert the established social system, as the father of the children in her care, Mr Banks, realises the importance of attending to his family due to Mary Poppins’ endeavours, therefore legitimising patriarchy and once again re-enforcing traditional family values. Furthermore, rather than permanently altering the state of affairs, Mary Poppins only provides a temporary alternative to patriarchy, and she leaves the children once her “work” is done, essentially remaining an outsider (Valverde 2009). For feminists who deny gender difference, the emphasis on Mary Poppins’ maternal capacity would also be problematic, as it reinforces sexual difference.

Maleficent, Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann

In the discussion that follows I will show how Maleficent, Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann are in many ways another version of the empowered spinster and “Great Mother” archetypes, exemplified by Mary Poppins, and that they present an empowered version of the maternal good witch. I aim to show how these characters are simultaneously “good mothers” and “feminist witches”, and that their motherhood does not subjugate them, as has been argued in relation to Ripley and Janeway, and even Mary Poppins, but rather, that it empowers them.

Maleficent

Maleficent first appeared in film in the 1959 Disney animation of *Sleeping Beauty*. She is portrayed as the villain of the piece because she shows up to Princess Aurora’s christening uninvited and curses her (for no legitimate reason) to die on her sixteenth birthday after being pricked by a needle. Naturally, only true love’s first kiss by a prince can break the spell. In the 1959 version, Maleficent can also turn into a dragon if she wishes. According to Zarranz (2007, 57), the original portrayal of Maleficent reflects Disney’s tendency to present older women as villains, where youth (or agelessness) as embodied by Aurora equates goodness, while age as embodied by Maleficent equates evil (Elnahla 2015). In the original film, Maleficent presents the epitome of “middle-aged beauty at its peak of sexuality and authority” (Bell 1995, 108) and therefore also presents the binary opposite of Aurora’s “good” biological mother, the queen, who is portrayed as ageless and innocent (Elnahla 2015).

The reboot of the story of Maleficent (Stromberg 2014) gives the viewer a more sympathetic view of the character though by changing some aspects of the original version of the story of *Sleeping Beauty*. The first important change is that instead of trying to kill Princess Aurora, Maleficent keeps a watchful and protective, “even maternal”, eye on the princess and even regrets initially cursing her (Justice 2014, 195). Secondly, it is Maleficent’s “kiss of maternal love” that saves Aurora, rather than Prince

Phillip's kiss (Justice 2014, 195), and finally, it is "women acting in solidarity and love" that ultimately solve the problems caused by the patriarchal realm of man (Justice 2014, 196). The entirely mis-titled sequel to the 2014 film, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (Ronning 2019), further explores the maternal relationship between Maleficent and Aurora. Even though Prince Phillip features in the sequel, the primary focus remains on the struggles that Maleficent and Aurora overcome as mother and daughter; Maleficent even acknowledges Aurora as her very own daughter and Aurora acknowledges Maleficent, and not her biological mother, as her mother.

Maleficent furthermore displays all the characteristics of the "good biological mother" towards Princess Aurora, which are "loving, nurturing, attentive and often self-sacrificing" (Delrosso 2015, 520). For example, Maleficent follows Aurora in the shadows from birth, and nurtures and feeds her when the three incompetent fairies that are in charge of Aurora fail to do so. Maleficent is also attentive to Aurora; she saves her from tumbling off a cliff as a toddler in one instance. In an act of self-sacrifice, Maleficent is almost captured and killed after trying to get Prince Phillip to Aurora, whom she believes may break the curse she put on Aurora as a baby. Very importantly, Maleficent ultimately tries to revoke the curse that she put on Aurora, revealing that she has developed maternal feelings toward the princess, and she develops a nickname for Aurora, namely, "Beastie".

Another important aspect of the 2014 Maleficent is that she puts the curse on Princess Aurora due to an injustice she has suffered at the hands of "man" (or patriarchy), King Stephan. Wehler (2019, 122) notes that King Stephan's betrayal of Maleficent can be read as rape, as he takes advantage of her trust in him in order to remove her wings violently after "drugging" her with a sleeping potion so that he may prove his worth as successor to the throne. This approach to the villainess's motivations is starkly different to the original version, where Maleficent curses Aurora because she was not invited to her christening, and perhaps even because she is jealous of Aurora's beauty and youth, like many other evil witches, such as Lady Claudia Hoffman in *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (Cohn 1997), presumably are. Therefore, Maleficent's motivation for acting "wicked" is not due to jealousy toward the young and "ageless" Aurora (Elnahla 2015), but rather because of the injustices she suffered at the hands of the (archaic) patriarchal feudal system that rules the realm of the humans. Moreover, Maleficent is not portrayed in terms of her sexuality, but rather in terms of her maternity, like Aurora's mother in the original animated film.

While many dichotomies likely continue to exist in the film, the revised version of Maleficent undeniably presents a more nuanced conception of age, femininity and motherhood, as she cannot be simplistically categorised as either a hero or a villain. In fact, Princess Aurora explicitly notes that Maleficent is *both* a hero and a villain, and indeed, both a witch (or a feminist) and a good mother, like Mary Poppins. More than what Mary Poppins achieves, owing to Maleficent's adoptive maternal relationship with Aurora, the worlds of humans and magical creatures unite, and the state of affairs is

altered *permanently*. Maternity, rather than the heterosexual love between Maleficent and King Stefan that could have united the two worlds, proves to be the answer to the war between the two realms, and ultimately redeems Maleficent, who has been villainised for decades, as a hero.

Miss Peregrine

In 2016, Tim Burton adapted Riggs' (2011) novel, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, into a film with the same title. The film follows the story of a group of "peculiar", who are people that have special (or even magical) powers due to a genetic mutation. One of the main protagonists, Miss Peregrine, is a type of peculiar called an "Ymbryne", who can transform into a peregrine falcon and control and manipulate time. Interestingly, Ymbrynes can only be female, and every Ymbryne commits herself to the care of young peculiar. That is to say that, from birth, Miss Peregrine is predestined never to marry and take care of the group of peculiar children as her own. In the film, Ymbrynes are hunted for their time manipulation abilities by a group of peculiar who turned evil. The group is led by a male antagonist who subjects the captive Ymbrynes to a procedure that strips them of their power; a metaphor that undeniably alludes to themes of rape and female subjugation.

Miss Peregrine presents the epitome of the "Great Mother" archetype, as she is "creative and destructive", "nourishing and ... devouring" (Valverde 2009, 263–264). Miss Peregrine's ability to control time gives her the power to create "loops"⁵ (FANDOM n.d.) where she protects her children from outside persecution, as well as from the wicked peculiar, and she destroys anything that can harm the children or breach their home. For example, Miss Peregrine states that she has "had to kill [the police] twice this week" due to the police threatening the children because of their magical powers. Miss Peregrine is also proficient with a crossbow and skilfully shoots the "hollow"⁶ that comes back to kill the children once a day.

Certain instances in the film also display Miss Peregrine's deep affection for the children, even though she seems strict or cold with them on the surface. Figure 2 shows Miss Peregrine embracing Victor, one of the children who died in her care, whom she keeps in a room and tucks in once a day. In another scene, despite her brave and distant appearance, Miss Peregrine briefly sheds tears when saying goodbye to her children before being taken captive, and even at the dinner table, Miss Peregrine cleans the one

5 A loop is a phenomenon where a past date, such as September 3, 1940 in the case of Miss Peregrine's home, exists and repeats itself every day forever. Miss Peregrine's ability to manipulate time allows her to reverse the past 24 hours of that day, and, therefore, peculiar can live there eternally without having to experience outside persecution.

6 Hollows are peculiar that tried to harness Ymbrynes' time manipulation powers – and failed – and are consequently doomed to roam the earth as monsters (Riggs 2011). Their monstrous state can only be altered by eating the eyes of other peculiar; therefore, they raid loops and kill the children (Riggs 2011).

peculiar's monstrous mouth after she has eaten. These scenes hint subtly at Miss Peregrine's sincere maternal love toward the children.



Figure 2: Eva Green as Miss Peregrine holding Victor in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (20th Century Fox, 2016).
Source: Screenshot by author.

In addition to protecting the children, Miss Peregrine performs domestic tasks, such as cooking for them and maintaining their house. Instead of this diminishing her feminist potential, however, I argue that this makes her a contemporary heroine who successfully embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics (see Engelbrecht 2020; Goodwill 2009). The fact that all Ymbrynes are female may also be problematic, as it suggests that only women can (or should) take on maternal roles, but because they are all spinsters, it nevertheless means that they remain “outside the ties of traditional kinship”, therefore “[escaping] patriarchal control” (Valverde 2009, 204). Like the feminist evil witch, Miss Peregrine functions entirely on her own and she is free from male “influence [and] ownership” (Korvette 2015), but she is defined in relation to the children and not by her sexuality or in relation to other male characters, which provides a model for female empowerment similar to that of Mary Poppins and Maleficent. Ultimately, Miss Peregrine works with the children and together they overthrow the (subtly patriarchal) organisation that exploits Ymbrynes for their powers, similar to Maleficent who defeats the (overtly patriarchal) King Stefan and unites the worlds of humans and fairies through maternal love.

Mrs Florence Zimmermann

In 2018, Bellairs' novel, *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* (1973), was turned into a film starring Cate Blanchett as the witch, Mrs Florence Zimmermann.⁷ Mrs Zimmermann (as she is referred to in the film) lost her husband and daughter during the war, and consequently, also her ability to perform "any real magic". Her neighbour, Jonathan, who is also a magician of sorts, is given custody of his late brother's son, Lewis, after Lewis's parents die in a car crash. Lewis moves in with Jonathan and Mrs Zimmermann becomes fond of the boy. After she develops maternal feelings towards Lewis, she regains her formidable magical powers and saves both him and her neighbour, Jonathan, from the evil wizard, Isaac Izard, and his wife, Selena.

Throughout the film, Jonathan hints at the extent of Mrs Zimmermann's magical proficiency (he states that she is "nice and good [at magic]"), and she has various magical college degrees, but she does not perform any serious magic throughout the film. Later, Mrs Zimmermann describes that after she lost her husband and her little girl, "everything comes out broken". One of Mrs Zimmermann's failed attempts at magic for example, is her pet snake that turned into a monster after she tried to change it purple, which is reflective of her inner state of being after losing her biological child that can be translated into something "monstrous". This narrative trope is similar to that used in *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (Cohn 1997), where Lady Claudia Hoffmann's state of mind also degenerates after losing her child in a miscarriage. Although it is clear that Mrs Zimmermann did not become "wicked" after losing her biological daughter, as was the fate of Lady Claudia Hoffmann, she did lose something that made her a heroine or that enabled her to do "good", namely, her magical powers.

Evidently, Mrs Zimmermann's identity as a mother is as fundamental to her as her identity as a witch. After an argument with Jonathan, who does not understand Lewis's behaviour because he "just [wants his] mom", Mrs Zimmermann states explicitly that "[she] would give anything to have her little girl back" and have the opportunity to raise (or parent) her daughter, or at least, *a* daughter. Soon after, when Lewis is captured by Izard and his life is threatened, her "maternal instinct" kicks in and makes her "real magic" return. After adopting Lewis as her own after the ordeal, Mrs Zimmermann permanently regains her magical powers and consequently her ability to do "good". It is worth noting here that where Lady Claudia Hoffmann gains magical abilities after losing her child, and uses her magic to do "evil", interestingly, Mrs Zimmermann *loses* her magical powers after losing her child, and when she does regain her powers through the adoption of another child, she uses her magical gifts to do "good". In this way, Mrs

7 The three actresses who portray these characters, namely Angelina Jolie (Maleficent), Eva Green (Miss Peregrine) and Cate Blanchett (Mrs Zimmermann), all have public personas that frame them as independent and "empowered" women.

Zimmermann’s narratological trajectory subverts established tropes of witches, motherhood, and good and evil.

Another witch in the film, Selena (played by Renée Elise Goldsberry), the evil wife of Isaac Izard, also attempts to win Lewis over as her son. Selena represents the archetype of the evil witch described earlier, who is manipulative, deceitful and displays a heightened sexuality (Zarranz 2007). Selena passionately kisses her husband after he comes back from the dead; she manipulates Lewis into raising Isaac from the dead; and she disguises herself as Lewis’s mother in order to get him to do her bidding. Figure 3 shows Selena’s sexualised appearance, where she has a low neckline displaying her busts, in contrast to Mrs Zimmermann who wears clothing that covers her chest and neck (see Figure 4). Selena’s skirt is also short compared to Mrs Zimmermann’s conservative long pencil skirts. She therefore presents the *femme fatale* figure often displayed in Disney films who is “explicitly sexual, and often explicitly violent” and reinforces Mrs Zimmermann’s “goodness” (Place 1998).



Figure 3: Renée Elise Goldsberry as Selena Izard in *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* (Amblin Entertainment, 2018).

Source: Screenshot by author.



Figure 4: Cate Blanchett as Mrs Florence Zimmermann in *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* (Amblin Entertainment, 2018).

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2119543/mediaviewer/rm1291155712/>

Selena supposedly has greater feminist potential than Mrs Zimmermann, since she comes across as more empowered (and powerful) than Mrs Zimmermann, who is “broken” and would only like to mother a child. However, instead of providing a model of “powerful femininity” that is “free from male influence or ownership” (Korvette 2015), or being self-defined, Selena only exists in relation to her husband, Isaac, as his “sidekick”. Mrs Zimmermann is to some extent also defined by her late husband, as she

keeps his surname after his death, but in terms of her relationship with her friend Jonathan, she functions entirely on her own, and they often battle *alongside* each other (where she is often more capable than him). In this way, Mrs Zimmermann subtly resists the patriarchal structures inherent in *her* world as well. To cite a simple example, Mrs Zimmermann asks Jonathan if he is going to play poker with her or if she is “playing solitaire” alone, where playing cards alone is no different for her than playing with Jonathan.

Moreover, even though the three form a sort of a nuclear family towards the end of the film, Mrs Zimmermann is not romantically involved with Jonathan, nor is she dependent on his magic (or love) to save Lewis. The viewer can assume that for her, Lewis is more important than Jonathan, as she clearly takes his side even after he has committed a major magical crime. The relationship between Mrs Zimmermann and Jonathan is similar to the relationship between Mary Poppins and Bert, that is, one of equal companionship without romantic affiliations, and even though they work together, they are not defined by each other and this relationship does not deny Mary Poppins (or Mrs Zimmermann) agency. To recall Bach and Langer’s (2010) analysis of Ripley, the unequal distribution of power in (heterosexual) relationships is fostered by the institution of the nuclear family. Therefore, the fact that Mary Poppins, as well as these three contemporary witches, are presented as largely asexual, and since they function outside of the structure of the nuclear family by not engaging in romantic relationships, is in itself empowering. In the case of Mrs Zimmermann, her motherhood does not deny her feminist potential, but rather becomes the source of it.

Contemporary Feminism and Motherhood

The three characters discussed above not only present a reincarnation of Mary Poppins, arguably the first empowered spinster and “Great Mother” in cinema, but a more contemporary and positive representation of witches, and more broadly, adoptive or non-biological motherhood. It is significant that the empowered spinster and “Great Mother” archetypes have been returning to cinema since 2014 (even Mary Poppins herself reappeared in Disney’s *Mary Poppins Returns* (Marshall 2018)), as issues of motherhood and feminism also seem to have resurged in the media in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In a recent publication of women in science fiction and fantasy and the novel notion of fourth wave feminism (Frankel 2019), Wehler (2019) identifies Maleficent as a fourth wave feminist heroine. Although I do not necessarily wish to do a fourth wave feminist analysis of these characters, it is useful to examine briefly what makes Maleficent a fourth wave heroine, or at least a *contemporary* heroine, and to consider whether Mrs Zimmermann and Miss Peregrine do not also perhaps fit a fourth wave version of femininity. Like Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann, as a fourth wave feminist, “motherhood does not consume Maleficent; it enhances her”, “she draws power by having a gynocentric relationship”, and her love “transcends obligatory familial affection” (Wehler 2019, 111). Most importantly, for these three characters, their

identities as mothers do not define them, but rather form only one part of their complex identities as (contemporary) women/witches.

In a similar vein, even though these characters can be argued to be a reincarnation of the exotic spinster and “Great Mother” archetypes exemplified by Mary Poppins, they are clearly more. I agree with Wehler (2019, 110) that these characters, like Maleficent, display a version of a “modern mother who combines traditional maternal roles such as protector, mentor, and companion with a more nuanced understanding of women’s identities”. Motherhood, embodied by these characters, cannot be reduced to either a “saintly dead mother or cardboard villainess”, but rather a “complex person”, which reflects a more nuanced understanding and “modern definition” of what it means to be a mother in the twenty-first century (Wehler 2019, 119–120).

These new witches are not entirely unproblematic in their representation though. Some may argue that these characters’ conservative dress and somewhat Victorian approach to sexuality perpetuate neoconservative values, as Alvarez (2019), for example, argues about another supposedly fourth wave heroine, Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012). Alvarez (2019, 124–125) contends that although the recent move towards the desexualisation of heroines is largely positive, it promotes the neoconservative ideal of “sexual innocence as virtue”, which facilitates “women’s adherence to neoconservative values and tries to prevent them from engaging in their sexual agency”. The notion of sexual agency and feminism is extensively explored in literature on post-feminism, and as I pointed out in an earlier footnote, a postfeminist analysis is beyond the scope of this essay. Although Alvarez’s (2019, 124–125) concerns could certainly apply to Maleficent, Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann, despite their apparent neo-conservatism, these characters nonetheless introduce different, and I hold, more positive, ways in which women and non-biological motherhood could be thought of in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, representations of witches in popular culture have changed from largely sexualised villains, to complex characters who especially gain power from their maternal relationships. These contemporary witches question the binaries between youth and goodness and middle-age and evil, displayed in earlier children’s fantasy films. Importantly, these characters display a more positive representation of non-biological motherhood, and in subverting established binaries and problematic stereotypes regarding non-biological motherhood, they embody a more nuanced and realistic representation of experiences of motherhood and womanhood in the twenty-first century. Although it may be premature to make such an assumption, these characters display an awareness of gender politics that could possibly be attributed to the rise of so-called fourth wave feminism. I believe that Maleficent, Miss Peregrine and Mrs Zimmermann could be read as feminist characters who ultimately aid in a feminist enterprise.

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