



Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives

From Evil Queens to Wicked Witches

Edited by

Natalie Le Clue

Janelle Vermaak-Griessel

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives

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Kirsty Worrow is a Graduate of Sheffield Hallam University and Birmingham City University. She is Programme Leader for Film Studies, Media Studies and Music at Shrewsbury Colleges Group, Shropshire, UK. She has written about *Hannibal* for *The Daily Fandom* and *In Media Res*. She is a regular contributor to *Media Magazine*, published by the English and Media Centre, UK. She is the author of "My Darling Cannibal: The Mechanics of Perverse Allegiance in Hannibal," a chapter in *Hannibal for Dinner: Essays on America's Favorite Cannibal on Television*, edited by Kyle A. Moody & Nicholas A. Yanes (McFarland Press, 2021). She is a co-presenter of the horror podcast *And Now the Podcast Starts....* Her research interests include horror, gender, celebrity and fan cultures.

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Foreword

My interest in fairy tales had been conjured at an early age by my parents who had unveiled to me a world beyond the mortal plane, a world of books where imagination knows no bounds and inspiration is limitless. Amongst the many books that littered my childhood was the story of Beauty and the Beast. I vividly remember pointing out a word in the book and asking my dad what it meant. Enchant, he said, means to cast a magic spell over someone or something.

Many years later I had consigned fairy tales to my childhood and scarcely gave it a second thought. That was until mid-2013 when I found myself in search of something that would pull me out of my boredom. And so it came to be that I stumbled across a television series named *Once Upon A Time*. Suddenly I was plunged into the world of Storybrooke where at the centre of it all stood the imperious Regina Mills, played by the sublime Lana Parrilla. Before long she was revealed to be the magnificent Evil Queen. Although I didn't know it at the time it was the beginning of a journey that would completely change my life. As I continued to devour the episodes so the creators and writers laced together a labyrinth of strikingly intricate and storylines and characters that were not only vivacious and arresting but that seemed to encompass a cacophony of colourful nuance and relevance. It was an exhilarating experience that I will treasure for as long as I live. And it was this that opened the world of academic research to me with one indelible question: Why do we know so little about villains?

How apt it seems now that the word I did not know the meaning of is the perfect sentiment to describe my mesmeric enchantment and affection for the universe of fairy tales and the inimitable villain.

Natalie Le Clue

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Janelle

Thank you to my special friend Natalie Le Clue, who drew me into the magical world of fairy tales and villains. This book is just the start of our publishing journey and I look forward to publishing with you in the future!

I also want to thank my husband, Charl Griessel, who has been the best support and encouragement for me throughout this project.

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Introduction

Natalie Le Clue and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel

Abstract

For every hero, there is a villain, and for every villain there should be a story. But, how much do we really know about the villain? *Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives: From Evil Queens to Wicked Witches* seeks to fill a gap in the field of gender representation and character evolution, with chapters centred on female villains in the fairy tale narratives of the twenty-first-century media.

This book aims to bring together a collection of interdisciplinary research on the evolution of female villains from television and film, the impact of these characters on filmmaking, storytelling, narrative structures and considerations with regard to gender representations.

Within the realm of fairy tale study, the characters of princesses, princes, heroes and the damsels-in-distress have been researched extensively. However, the female villain has rarely been the central focus of academic study. This book is the first collection of chapters based on female villains in the twenty-first century fairy tale narratives.

Keywords: Villains; gender; fairy tales; film; television; literature

Introduction

Once upon a time are the magical words that have the power to plunge you into enchanted journeys filled with knights and curses and heroes and villains. Born from oral traditions, the mystical world of folklore and fairy tales has entranced humankind for decades if not centuries.

Although the definitive origin of folklore remains indeterminate, the foundation of this genre can be traced back to not only the Middle Ages or biblical times but perhaps even to before recorded history.¹ By whichever name they are identified these tales of wonder, folktales or fairy tales have been told, re-told and interpreted in all corners of the world from Antoine Galland's translated works, *Thousand and One Nights*, published between 1704 and 1706, to Giambattista

Basile's *The Cinderella Cat* in the early- to mid-sixteenth century to 1812 and the Brothers Grimm collection of stories *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*.

The methods of storytelling and interpretations evolved as time past and in 1937 Disney presented the first-ever feature length animated film with the famed story of Snow White and the Evil Queen at its core. In that one hour and 28 minutes of running time the manner in which audience look at fairy tales would be forever transformed. Now there existed a visual manifestation of pure and innocent Snow White and her garishly dark stepmother the Evil Queen. And so several more animated films followed each depicting a princess, a hero, and an imposing villain. What quickly became evident is that the villain of the piece was almost always presented as a female. But these villains would seem to be evil simply for the sake of it and be presented as reductive and one-dimensional caricatures.

For decades the only story purported to be significant was that of the princess and her prince who would, at the end of each story, live happily ever after. However, as the audience became more sophisticated the demand for more nuanced stories and characters persisted so to it expanded the field of academic study and the fairy tale genre. From the formula of the narrative structures to cultural representations to the construction of the characters, and much more, the genre has produced, if you can excuse the pun, a treasure trove of relevant and prime areas of and for research.

As the research around the genre progressed so to the questions that were being asked began to morph and evolve. But still it seemed that the villain did not enjoy as much attention as the other characters within the fairy tale narrative. After all for every hero there is a villain and thus it seems fitting that for every villain there should be a story. As it stands *Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives: From Evil Queens to Wicked Witches* is the first collection that exclusively addresses the field of gender representation and character evolution of the twenty-first-century female villain.

This edited collection, divided into four main parts, engages in discussions around gender and femininity and the construction of female villains in the twenty-first century. It also presents meticulous evaluation around not only the impact of information deficit but also considers the re-positioning and re-imagining of several of the most renowned female villains.

The first section, Gender, includes Alice Kelly's examination of how female villainy in femslash fan-fiction is constructed under the lesbian gaze while Alba Morollon Diaz-Faes explores the significance of queer monstrosity and the reinterpretation of the conservative villain archetype as a subversion of empowerment for queer readers. This is followed by Rebecca Rowe's argument that the simplistic constructions of the villain and mother figures in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* leads to a false view of morality and gender. Through analysis of the Wicked Queen, Sarah Austin presents an in-depth discussion on the rhetorical power of fairy tales in the context of gender and body dysmorphia.

The second section examines the adaptation of female villains to the small screen. Kirsty Worrow investigates the destabilization of patriarchal narratives through the representation of the female characters in *The Witcher* while Giulia

Bigongiari assesses the framing of *His Dark Materials*' Mrs Coulter with specific focus on the construction of evil. Through an investigation of Jim C. Hines' *The Snow Queen's Shadow* Sarah Faber examines the multi-faceted discourse around the dynamic of power and its relation to gender, queerness and disability. The section is concluded with Amit Kardosh's analysis of Cersei Lannister as she appears in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Kardosh considers the creation of new liminal villain through the retelling of the 'Terrible Mother' archetype.

The third section advances the exploration of character reformation from an analysis of the information deficit in the portrayal of stepmothers by Rebecca Gadd to the remodelling of the fembot archetype in *Westworld* and *Ex Machina* by Kirsty Worrow. As one of the most recognized villains the Evil Queen enjoys attention from Svea Hundertmark and Natalie Le Clue. Hundertmark contemplates, through exploration of twenty-first-century adaptations, specifically what makes the Evil Queen the most villainous of them all. Meanwhile, Le Clue's comprehensive inspection of *Once Upon a Time*'s Evil Queen postulates the creation of a new villain character type.

The final section of the collection considers physicality from several perspectives including Hannah Helm's argument, utilizing Feminist Disability Studies, which challenges the narrative of female villainy in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* through the consideration of physical disability, social exclusion and maternal love. Vermaak-Griessel's chapter offers a fascinating insight into the fan perception of Ursula the Sea Witch. The final chapter of the collection, by Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel, analyses several themes as a means to create a type of rhetorical motif of the Evil Queen across various media.

To conclude this introduction it is our supreme pleasure, as co-editors of this magical collection to welcome you into the enchanting and complex world of female villains. Some say that magic does not truly exist, but we hope that in the pages of this book you will discover that it does.

Note

1. Swann Jones, S. (1995). *The fairy tale: The magic mirror of the imagination* (p. 3). London: Routledge.

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Gender

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Chapter 1

“To Destroy. To Hate. To Sow Seeds of Chaos. You Know, Just Girly Things”: Evil Queens, Femslash Fandom and Monstrous Happiness

Alice M. Kelly

Abstract

In this chapter, I explore how the queer-coding, gendering and policing of the monstrous female villain figure of twenty-first-century fairy tale media is interrogated and renegotiated in the transformative narrative tradition of femslash fan-fiction. With fan studies often focusing on the most popular, vocal fandom spaces and cultures, femslash (female-female) fan-fiction has been undertheorized in academic scholarship, just as queer female desire is routinely invalidated by the mainstream media properties that inspire femslash fans (Cranz, 2016; Gonzalez, 2016; Ng & Russo, 2017; Stanfill, 2017). By romantically and sexually pairing female villains with the heroines against whom they are canonically cast as antagonists, femslash fans of *Once Upon a Time* and *The Devil Wears Prada* subvert the heteronormative and anti-feminist plot machinery that pits women against each other. The engagement of femslash fan authors with the depiction of the characters Regina Mills and Miranda Priestly as literal and figurative ‘Evil Queens’ in their source texts highlights the extent to which both women are situated as ‘villains’ because of their position as ‘unhappy queers’ who obstruct heteronormative happy endings (Ahmed, 2010; Pande & Moitra, 2017; Strauch, 2017). While in the Swan Queen fiction *somewhere, someone must know the ending* (maleficently, 2012), Regina is only the Evil Queen in her son’s imagination, as he tries to make sense of her infidelity, *The Lily and the Crown* (Telanu, 2013) recasts Miranda Priestly as Pirate Queen Mir, guilty of mass-murder, rather than merely acerbic barbs (as in the film). Through close readings, I argue that the way these texts ask their readers to consider the limits of both villains’ desirability, by playing with the terms of their respective criminality, shows the extent to which nuancing and negotiating the ‘evil’ of

these ‘queens’ is structurally embedded in these femslash fandoms. The femslash fannish investment these texts reflect, in both the figure of the queer female villain and those who desire her, proposes an alternative version of happiness to the heteronormative happy ending, one that does not attenuate the queer codes that position these ‘Evil Queens’ as monster-outsiders to it, but embraces that monstrosity as a site of power, progress and futurity.

Keywords: Swan Queen; Mirandy; queer theory; feminism; close reading; fan fiction

When the hero-turned-villain Emma Swan is asked about the darkness consuming her and what it tells her to do, in the *Once Upon a Time* fanfic *post tenebras lux*, she replies “‘*To Destroy. To Hate. To Sow Seeds of Chaos. You Know, Just Girly Things*’” (coalitiongirl, 2015). Part of the prolific and widespread ‘Swan Queen’ fandom pairing the characters of Emma Swan and the Evil Queen (Regina Mills), *post tenebras lux* is an example of femslash fan-fiction, fiction written by fans with queer relationships between female characters at their centre. Emma’s facetious assertion that destruction, chaos and hatred are ‘just girly things’ speaks to the awareness within femslash communities of ‘evil’, of the innate villainy of certain female characters, as structurally gendered and discursively produced. In this chapter, I argue that femslash fandom understands female villainy as a social construct that is negotiated by dominant discourse to marginalize and malign specific narratives, bodies and voices deemed non-normative. Consequently, it is also understood as a construct that can be renegotiated within the transformative narratological tradition of fan-fiction in ways that foreground complicated, ambiguous, nuanced, authentic queer relationships between women.

The manifest queerness, feminism or investment in female characterhood of the ‘source’ material does not dictate the scale, depth and breadth of femslash fandoms. Where Alex Cranz argues femslash fans ‘just need that look. That one brief moment between two women that isn’t about a dude’ (2016), Mel Stanfill contends that femslash communities are often fuelled by the ‘compressed spring’ of lesbian potential, whether such energy ever becomes ‘kinetic in the media object itself’ or not (2017, para. 9). The academic neglect of femslash has led to it being woefully undertheorized and underserved by broader fan studies scholarship traditionally organized around white slash juggernaut fandoms (Kelly, 2021; Ng & Russo, 2017; Pande & Moitra, 2017). At its very core, though, femslash confers the somehow radical idea that sexuality may be described and located outside of the phallogocentric meaning-making codes of cisgender heteropatriarchy, or put more simply, that desire can exist without men (Kelly, 2019).

As the ‘Swan Queen’ fandom shows, investing in the queer desires of women often means turning away from heteronormativity’s fairy tale happy ending and towards those monstrous, unhappy female villains who disrupt it (Ahmed, 2010; Austin, 2020; Baker, 2010; Strauch, 2017). Examining both the exaggeration and complication of literal and figurative ‘Evil Queens’ in femslash fan works, I argue that the texts I look at not only interrogate the pathology of female villainy but