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Schubart, Rikke

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# “HOW LUCKY YOU ARE NEVER TO KNOW WHAT IT IS TO GROW OLD”—WITCH AS FOURTH-WAVE FEMINIST MONSTER IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY FILM

Rikke Schubart (University of Southern Denmark)

**Abstract:** *This article focuses on the figure of an aging and powerful witch pitted against younger women in three contemporary fairy-tale movie adaptations: Snow White and the Huntsman (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012), Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (dir. Tommy Wirkola, 2013), and Maleficent (dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014). Each film transforms the aging witch from stock villain to a more nuanced character. This revision is intriguing for its concern with power and gender and for a reflection of contemporary debates about age and power within so-called wave feminism. The article uses two frames. The first is feminism and ageism, focusing on wave feminism and aging, and the second is the trope of the witch, drawing from fairy-tale studies, social history, and social anthropology. The article reads conflict between an aging witch and a young woman as a clash of feminist waves, and the witch’s ‘monstrosity’ as her refusal to be sidelined in a world obsessed with youth.*


**Keywords:** *witch; fairy-tale film; fantasy film; monster; gender; fourth-wave feminism; ageism; Snow White and the Huntsman (2012); Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (2013); Maleficent (2014).*

## Introduction

“You don’t even realize how lucky you are never to know what it is to grow old” (1:33:18–1:33:26), the Queen tells Snow White before attempting to kill her in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012). Ravenna is an old witch, and to stay young and powerful she drains young women of life. If she takes Snow White’s heart, she will have eternal youth and power.

Among monster tropes, the witch stands out for a link to misogyny, sexism, and ageism. In earliest historical records from Mesopotamia (circa 3,000 BC) a witch was a priest-magician (Henderson 2016: 22) whom society believed had magical powers. Such magical abilities, and thus persons, could have various forms—be a magician, a sorcerer, a diviner, and more. Then in Medieval time the witch was re-interpreted as female and targeted in witch-hunts, and in modern time, finally, is also site for entertainment and feminist protest. The witch is a polyvocal monster, both fiction character, cultural trope, and a threat used today to terrorize women (Federici 2018: [Kindle loc.] 841–1246). The witch invokes victimization and agency, fear and fascination, femicide and feminism, fact and fiction. In this matrix of significations, this article focuses on the aging and powerful witch pitted against younger women in three recent fairy-tale movie adaptations: *Snow White and the Huntsman* (from here on *Snow White*), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (dir. Tommy Wirkola, 2013; from here on *Hansel & Gretel*), and *Maleficent* (dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014). Each film transforms the witch from stock villain to a more complex character. I find this revision intriguing for its concern with gender and for a reflection of contemporary debates about age and power within wave

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feminism. The article uses two frames. The first is *feminism and ageism*, focusing on wave feminism and aging, and the second is *the witch trope*, drawing from fairy-tale studies, social history, and social anthropology. To put the argument in a nutshell, I see the conflict between an aging witch and a young woman as a clash of feminist waves, where the witch’s ‘monstrosity’ is her refusal to be sidelined in a world obsessed with youth.

### **Feminist Waves and Ageism**

In my use of ‘feminism’ I take bell hooks’ often-quoted definition: “[F]eminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2014: 7). In this view, the opponent is not the male gender or men as individuals, but the ideology of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” based on oppression of women and other minorities (8). hooks rejects narrower versions of feminism because they create privileges and divide women. Instead she wants solidarity. “Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another” (8).

The wave metaphor starts with Martha Weinman Lear’s 1968 article ‘The Second Feminist Wave’ discussing sixties’ feminism as second wave and a suffragist struggle (from 1848 to 1920) as first wave. Since then, the metaphor remains contested. Does ‘wave’ mean transformation of a feminist movement or a new generation of feminists? A third wave was launched with Rebecca Walker’s article ‘Becoming the Third Wave’ which concludes, “I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave” (2006 [1992]: 5). Postfeminism was in the eighties and nineties embraced as individualism, choice, and multiple femininities.<sup>1</sup> The third-wave feminists reject postfeminism as neo-liberal, and where postfeminism and the third wave overlap in time, the first is associated with a naïve embrace of popular culture, the latter with a critical stance. Also, by naming itself ‘third’, feminists distanced themselves from a second wave. Where first and second waves understood themselves as shared and inclusive, the third wave was “a generational phenomenon raising the question [...] to what extent the rising generation must rebel against the earlier” (Spencer 2007: 299). The third wave critiqued the second wave, their mother generation, for favorizing white, middle-class, Western women, and it would focus on minorities and formulate the theory of *intersectionality*, developed by lawyer and professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw:

[Intersectionality is] a theoretical framework that posits that multiple social categories [...] intersect at the *micro* level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the *macro*, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, compulsory heterosexuality, *hetero-normativity*, ableism) (Launius/Hassel 2015: 114; emphasis in original).

A fourth wave, named by journalist Pythia Peay (2005) and author and activist Jennifer Baumgardner (2011), begins between 2005 and 2008. Like the third wave, the fourth wave focuses on minorities, especially LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender)

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of postfeminism, see for example Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

and people with alternative bodies. The difference between third and fourth wave is a use of social media and online activism. “[A] distinctive trait of the fourth wave movement is its reliance and usage of technology and media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders [...]. The defining differences between the ‘waves’ of feminism are not necessarily the wars waged as much as the tools used” (Looft 2017: 894). Fourth-wave feminists are savvy social media users, and their activism has been accused of shallow feminism because it is easy to tweet, and because of its use of celebrities like Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, and Emma Watson (Looft 2017: 896). A wave metaphor can quickly establish a new generation, however, sociologists Elizabeth Evans and Prudence Chamberlain warn it obstructs continuity between generations: “[I]t is of strategic and intellectual value for feminist writers and activists to critically engage with the narrative [of feminism], to ensure that it does not continue to be used solely as a means by which to reinforce feminist in-fighting and crude, inaccurate caricatures” (2015: 406).

*Ageism* is a system of privilege and oppression intersecting with sexism. Aging is the process of growing older, ageism the idea it is bad to age. As media scholar Anne Jerslev puts it: “[O]ld age is bad, repulsive, and ugly” (2018: 352). We experience aging as lived personal life (micro level) and as social life (macro level). And while we might be more or less able to control private experiences, we must negotiate society’s stereotypes and scripts. Aging is scripted by what linguist Deborah Cameron (2015) calls *the master narrative*, society’s idea of gender and appropriate gender behavior. And both the gender stereotype and the old stereotype are different for men and women.

Seventy years ago, when psychologist Erik Erikson formulated his theory of age and development, old age was a phase of wisdom. Erikson divided the life span into eight phases where adulthood was the sixth (young adulthood, 20–45 years) and seventh (middle adulthood, 45–65 years) phase, and old age (past 65 years) the eighth phase (Erikson/Erikson 1998 [1982]). To each phase he suggested a crisis; in young adulthood the crisis is to establish a family and in middle adulthood it is to become a ‘numinous’ role model with ‘true authority’ to guide a young generation with “ethics, law, and insight” ([Kindle loc.] 987). Later, Joan Erikson, Erikson’s wife and co-author, added the ninth phase, past 80 years. In old age we share our wisdom with society, and Joan calls the ninth phase a ‘gerotranscendence’ which brings “a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe” ([Kindle loc.] 1766). Today, social gerontology divides ‘old’ into young-old (65–75), middle-old (75–85), and old-old (past 85), the latter called *deep-old* invoking the metaphor of falling into the abyss of death (Pickard 2014). And today, aging is not seen as wisdom, but as decay and death.

Ageism intersects with sexism. Sociologists Jay Ginn and Sara Arber point out men are judged by their career, women by a youthful body: “Because women’s value is sexualized, positively in the first half of life, negatively in the second, it depends on a youthful appearance [...]” (1993: 61). A woman’s value is tied to beauty and youth. Naomi Wolf notes in *The Beauty Myth* “[a]ging in women is ‘unbeautiful’ since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken” (1991: [Kindle loc.] 119). On a man, wrinkles signify life experience, but on a woman, they signify loss of beauty. A woman’s face “loses its value when the process of ageing cannot be concealed by any means anymore” (Jerslev 2018: 353) and women struggle to age successfully by staying “fit, fashionable, flexible, func-

tional” with a youthful appearance (Jerslev 2017: 68). The ideal is women should age without visible signs of aging.

### The Witch

The witch is a polyvocal trope who lately is embraced in the West as a figure of revolt. Film scholar Barbra Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine* reads the witch as man’s “morbid interest in the witch as ‘other’ and a fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration” (1993: 74). While Creed sees the witch as men’s projection of fears onto women, other scholars link the witch to protest. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack calls the witch’s magic actions “an apocalyptic feminine explosion of the frustrated desire to speak” (quoted in Creed 1993: 78). And Kristen J. Sollée in *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (2017) discusses women’s use of witchcraft as feminist protest against patriarchy. Yet, in the South and East, the witch is used to oppress women in a historical movement political philosopher Silvia Federici in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018) links to neoliberal economic policies. In Africa and India, the witch is used to murder women and instill terror ([Kindle loc.] 706–714).

The etymology of ‘witch’ is from Old English *wicca* and the Proto-Germanic and Proto-Indo-European words *wiglian* ‘to practice divination’, *wichelen* ‘bewitch’, *wicker* ‘soothsayer’, *wikkjaz* ‘one who wakes the dead’, and *wikkô* ‘necromancer, sorcerer’. Oxford English Dictionary has two entries for witch, “a man who practices witchcraft or magic; a magician, sorcerer, wizard”, and “a female magician, sorceress; in later usage esp. a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019). Under the second entry are figurative uses: ‘witch’ as “a young woman or girl of bewitching aspect or manners” and ‘old witch’ as “a contemptuous appellation for a malevolent or repulsive-looking old woman”. In Merriam-Webster’s definition, a witch is “one that is credited with usually malignant supernatural powers [...] [—] a woman practicing usually black witchcraft often with the aid of a devil or familiar” and “an ugly old woman: hag” (*Merriam-Webster* 2019b).

The etymology of ‘magic’ is unclear. Greek *magus* means *magician, sorcerer, conjurer* and Old Persian *mayu* means *help, power, and sorcerer*. Social historian Lizanne Henderson in *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment Scotland* links the witch to ancient magic: “The *magoi* were a class of priest-magicians from the Eastern Babylonian Kingdom [...] [and] Herodotus, the famed ‘father of History’, reported in the fifth century BCE that the *magoi*, or Magi, ‘are a peculiar caste, quite different from the Egyptian priests and indeed from any other sort of person’” (2016: 22). To the Greek, magic was foreign and in contrast to their civilization and religion. Today, anthropology separates religion from magic, seeing the first as society’s institutionalized use of supernatural acts and the latter as an individual’s use of supernatural acts for private gains (Sørensen 2014: 25). Magic exists in a social field of acts and beliefs, and practitioners are called magicians, witches, sorcerers, priests, necromancers, diviners, charmers, and wise men and women (Henderson 2016: 23). *How* a practitioner was perceived is a matter of perspective: The Greek viewed the Babylonians as magicians, and the Egyptian priests viewed Moses as a magician, not as a prophet.

So, how does the witch transform from magician into a monster? The etymology of monster is from Latin *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn), and in ancient Greece the monster was a warning about evil sent from the Gods (Hellstrand et al. 2018: 147).

In modern-day use, Merriam-Webster defines ‘monster’ as what is *deviant or abnormal, threatening, strange, terrifying, and large* (Merriam-Webster 2019a). Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) distinguishes the monster in horror from other fantastic genres in that it is lethal, disgusting, and seen as abnormal, a breach of ontology: “Boreads, griffins, chimeras, basilisks, dragons, satyrs, and such are bothersome and fearsome creatures in the world of myths, but they are not unnatural [...]. [M]onsters of horror, however, breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story” (16). Hellstrand et al. in ‘Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous’ (2018) discuss ‘monster’ as a border concept and a methodology and outline three uses: as a *rhetoric* to target others as being outside society’s norm, as an expression of *cultural anxieties*, and as a tool for *dialogue* about the nature of society’s borders, of what we deem normal or deviant, human or monstrous:

[...] [T]he monster’s relation to the anomalous ties it to histories of oppression, objectification and resistance often related to issues concerning queerness, disability, race and class. [...] [T]he monster is about the struggle over representation and meaning-making, of categorizing specific bodies, entities and life-forms; and of making visible the constructed, unstable ‘nature’ of these very categories (145).

‘Monster’ can be seen as a dynamic site of meaning-making which has different significations in different genres, and also as a method to enter a position of dialogue with what is outside society’s norm, what is strange, foreign, ‘Other’. Returning to the witch, Christianity in the fifteenth century transformed the witch from magician into a woman in league with the Devil who “carried out *maleficium*, known in Scotland as malefice, acts of harmful magic” (Henderson 2016: 58). It is estimated 100,000 people were accused of witchcraft in Europe, between 50,000 and 60,000 executed, and of these 90 to 95 percent were women (99).<sup>2</sup> Historical records show the accused were of all ages, social circles, and occupations, however, Henderson points to the stereotypes *sexual predator* and *old hag*, the latter “well-past child-bearing years and as such, of diminished value and societal worth. Based on the known ages of accused witches, at least half and possibly more were over forty, with only around 14 per cent under thirty [...] indicative of a prejudice, even debasement, of older women [...]” (82). The figurative uses of witch (as young and sexy or old and ugly) originate in the medieval witch-hunts. But why target women? Federici points to the rise of capitalism and “the relation between witch-hunting and the increasing enclosure of the female body through the extension of state control over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity” (2018: [Kindle loc.] 69). Women were exploited as free-work force in a patriarchal capitalist enterprise.

How does the fairy-tale witch fit into the matrixes of monster, witch, and feminism? As Carroll points out, monsters embody different emotions depending on *genre context*. Supernatural horror and the fairy tale belong to the fantastic, however, horror has emotions of fear and disgust, and the mode in the fairy tale is light with the primary emotion

<sup>2</sup> Percentages vary from country to country. In Scotland, 80–85 percent of witches were female, in England and Russia 90–95, but in Iceland only 10 percent tried for witchcraft were female and of 22 executed only one was a woman (Henderson 2016: 78).

of wonder because a happy end is certain and any transformation is possible—“hands are cut off, found and reattached, babies’ throats are slit, but they are later restored to life” (Warner 1995: xv). The same tropes can have similar qualities (use magic, kill and eat children) but generate different emotions. Thus, in Carroll’s sense, the fairy tale has no monsters, because supernatural beings do not solicit fear.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, fairy-tale scholar Marina Warner discusses the historical realities behind fairy tales. A universal motif is *female rivalry* between a young heroine and an old woman, who can be a mother, step-mother, or witch. “All over the world, stories which center on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering” (1995: 202). Female rivalry is found in patriarchal societies where women must protect themselves and their children from a husband or other wives. An aging wife might be replaced by a younger woman as in Giambattista Basile’s Sleeping-Beauty-tale ‘Sun, Moon, and Talia’ (1634), she could be a widow in need of a new household as in Charles Perrault’s ‘Cinderella’ (1697), or she could be an obstructive mother-in-law as in Perrault’s ‘The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’ (1697). If she could not have children, was unwilling to be a wife, or was old, she was seen as a threat.

Female rivalry is a motif in both fairy tales and wave feminism and interlocks with ageism and sexism. Interestingly, in fairy tales both good and evil old women die. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim links the fairy tale’s good mother to the evil stepmother: “The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one’s angry thoughts and wishes about her [...]” (quoted in Warner 1995: 212). Literary scholar Sylvia Henneberg in ‘Moms do Badly, But Grandmas do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics’ says the fairy tale’s old women fall into three stereotypes: “[W]icked old witch, the selfless godmother, or the demented hag” (2010: 128). However, whether good or evil, “the dead mother plot is a feminist necessity” and old women die (127).

### **Snow White and Age Anxiety**

Female rivalry is at the heart of many fairy tales, including that of Snow White. The good mother, stepmother, and evil witch reflect one and the same mother figure. In Grimm’s 1812 ‘Little Snow-White’, the Queen has a magic mirror that tells her she is “fairest of them all”. When the mirror says her seven-year old daughter is more beautiful, she “became pale with envy, and from that hour on, she hated Snow-White. Whenever she looked at her, she thought that Snow-White was to blame that she was no longer the most beautiful woman in the world” (Grimm/Grimm 2013 [1812]). In Grimm’s 1857 version (Grimm/Grimm 2005 [1857]), the mother has died in childbirth and the envious Queen is a stepmother and witch. In both the 1812 and 1857 versions, the Queen sends a huntsman to slaughter Snow White in the forest and bring back lung and liver for her to eat. In Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (dir. David Hand, 1937), Snow White is not seven, but fourteen, and the witch falls from a cliff and dies instead of being killed by the prince.

Rupert Sander’s 2012 version combines female rivalry with a critique of patriarchy. Snow White is here eighteen (played by 22-year-old Kristen Stewart) and the Queen is called Ravenna (Charlize Theron) and has been given an origin story of trauma. The story begins with the King’s Queen dying when Snow White is ten. When the King res-

cues a beautiful woman held prisoner by a mysterious army, he marries her the next day. “I was ruined by a king like you once”, Ravenna tells him on their wedding night. “I replaced his Queen, an old woman. And, in time, I, too, would have been replaced. Men use women. They ruin us and when they are finished with us, they toss us to the dogs like scraps” (*Snow White*: 0:07:33–0:08:05). Before killing him, she adds: “When a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers. First, I will take your life, my lord. And then I’ll take your throne” (*Snow White*: 0:08:08–0:08:26). Ravenna imprisons Snow White who escapes eight years later. The Queen sends a huntsman to murder the stepdaughter, but the two raise a rebellion, and Snow White kills Ravenna in combat, becoming a new Queen.

In earlier versions we know nothing about the Queen. In the 2012 version, we learn of an attack on Ravenna’s village when she was ten. In a flashback mid-way in the story we see her mother casts a spell: “Beauty is all that can save you, Ravenna. This spell will make your beauty your power and protection” (*Snow White*: 1:01:25–1:01:34). We assume Ravenna was saved by beauty and raped by a king. This is her motive for using magic to kill kings and conquer kingdoms. The film thus links Ravenna and Snow White, who were both traumatized in childhood.

In ‘Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions’ fairy-tale scholar Laura Mattoon D’Amore reads Ravenna as a rape avenger who “uses the tools of patriarchy to protect herself and her brother and, in her mind, to wreak havoc on men who destroy women, thus believing, in her mind and through her own definition, that she is saving womankind” (2017: 387). D’Amore calls the violence a female character uses to avenge men’s abuse of women *vigilante feminism* and sees Ravenna as “a rape survivor, a perpetual victim of men’s whims, and in an effort to survive, she has done what she believed she needed to do to turn the tables on patriarchal power” (395).

I agree rape is important to understand Ravenna, however, I think the link between beauty, youth, and rape is crucial. Beauty saved her from death, and beauty is throughout the film linked to power and youth. When her powers wane, Ravenna ages and is rejuvenated when her brother Finn (Sam Spruell) brings her young women to drain of life. Power equals youth, and it is a specific kind of beauty that restores power, namely *youth’s beauty*. Jerslev points to the hypervisibility of young women and invisibility of old women in the media (2017: 68). Today, women tread a precarious path of ageless aging under society’s ‘age gaze’ which scrutinizes women’s faces for age markers. In the 1812 version, the Queen is in her twenties, and in *Snow White*, Ravenna (played by 37-year-old Theron) in her thirties. When Ravenna drains a girl, she looks in her forties, and later, sitting by a mirror, in her fifties. When Snow White kills Ravenna, in a 25-seconds long close-up on her face, she ages from her thirties to young-old, middle-old, old-old, and, finally, dead.

D’Amore argues vigilante feminism “does not work against the male gaze but rather shatters the lens that frames it [and it is] interwoven with a contemporary sensibility that individual freedom and empowerment constitute a feminist rebellion” (390). However, we can ask in what way Ravenna is feminist. Her powers are linked to youth and beauty, and the mirror speaks in a male voice which sounds like the voice of patriarchy: “She [Snow White] is the reason your powers wane [...]. Take her heart in your hand and you shall never again need to consume youth. You shall never again weaken or age”



(*Snow White*: 0:22:22–0:23:04). Wolf says society uses the beauty myth to discipline women. “Entrepreneurial beauty” is the work women must do to stay young and beautiful, but “they could be as good and as beautiful as you please—for too long; upon which, aging, they disappeared” ([Kindle loc.] 469). Thus, men work as news anchors longer time than women. Similarly, Ravenna’s powers are linked to her face. The King married Ravenna on ‘face value’, so to speak, knowing nothing about her except that she was beautiful. The close-up of her death shows ‘loss of face’, a popular trope in witch narratives.

Ravenna’s costumes connect her to death. One dress is decorated with beetle wings, another with raven bird skulls, her wedding dress has golden nets over her shoulders which costume designer Colleen Atwood said mimicked the human skeleton (Roberts 2012), a headpiece is decorated with bird bones, a corset designed with worm-like metal strings, and when she attacks Snow White, her cape with raven feathers transforms into black ravens. Ravenna is dressed in bones, beetle wings, and bird feathers to signal natural decay and death. In contrast, Snow White brings life to the kingdom, Ravenna has turned into a wasteland. Men fall in love with Snow White, both her childhood friend Will, huntsman Eric, even Finn allows feelings to get in the way. Citizens rise from oppression in a rebellion led by the teenage princess.

From a narrative perspective, Ravenna is the evil Queen who murders people and pollutes nature, and Snow White is emphatic, helps the poor, tames trolls, touches people’s hearts with her speeches. Seen from an age perspective, however, youth is pitted against old age, and Ravenna is a gold-digger who manipulates her way into the King’s bed with ‘unnatural’ beauty. If we read Ravenna as representative of a mother, she is the old generation blocking the way for the young. In the fairy tale, old women are expected to “‘naturally’ withdraw from their social roles so as to make their ultimate disappearance—death—less difficult for the smooth functioning of society” (Henneberg 2010: 129). The powerful and aging witch expresses “the idea that as women grow old, they also grow evil and that any power they have will naturally be put to ill use” (130).

When Ravenna dies, Snow White tells her “you can’t have my heart” (*Snow White*: 1:58:45–1:58:50) and looks in the magic mirror and cries. But what—who—are the tears for? At plot level, they are for Ravenna, which doesn’t make sense. Ravenna murdered the King, imprisoned Snow White, and destroyed the kingdom. In Carroll’s definition, Ravenna is not a monster, yet she is the only character using magic and is singularly evil and clearly deserves to die. So why cry? Perhaps because, at an emotional level, we can read the tears as a daughter mourning a mother. Ravenna’s death makes room for Snow White’s coronation.

The loss-of-face can be read as both warning and proof of lived life. In a discussion of the old woman in the horror film *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (dir. Adam Robitel, 2015), horror-studies scholar Agnieszka Kotwasinska uses the concept ‘transaging’ about multiple ages being present in a person, like multiple selves. Rather than have a fixed identity at a certain age, transaging is “a multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory process, which provides the audience—continuously, and simultaneously—with images of past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves across the whole lifetime” (Moglen; quoted in Kotwasinska 2018: 188). Ravenna’s aging can be seen as “a spectacle that un-settles the frame” (190). *The Taking of Deborah Logan* “manages to reimagine female old age” (190). Similarly, Ravenna’s feminist potential is not only revenge

on men, but also her spectacular display of women's frustrations with age. From a wave perspective, Snow White's refusal to give her heart echoes third and fourth wave feminists, who rid themselves of a parent generation and move forward. To them, Ravenna represents the 'monstrosity' of an old generation and her 'revenge' a politics of anger and greed that lacks empathy and solidarity.

### **Hansel and Gretel and the Female Entrepreneur**

Tommy Wirkola's *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013) twists the tale of Hansel and Gretel. The film has a group of witches organized by Grand Witch Muriel (Famke Janssen), and the theme of eating children is also a story of witch-hunting. Muriel is what we could call an entrepreneurial witch, whose aim is not personal gain but to organize witches in collective defense against witch-hunts.

In the 1812 Grimm fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel' (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1812]), a father leaves his children in the forest because the family is starving. The mother has convinced him this is best. In the 1857 version (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1857]), she is a stepmother. In the forest, the children find an old witch who wants to eat them, Gretel pushes her into the furnace, and they return to live happily with the father (the mother/stepmother has died). The tale describes the old woman as a "wicked witch who was lying in wait there for children [...] if she captured one, she would kill him, cook him, and eat him", and "as old as the hills and leaning on a crutch" (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1812]). *Hansel & Gretel* plays out the fairy tale in its title sequence and then opens with Hansel (Jeremy Renner) and Gretel (Gemma Arterton) as adult witch-hunters hired by the mayor in a village to find twelve children kidnapped by a witch.

The tale reflects female rivalry and also a historical poverty, that in the past made poor people leave children to die. Again, the witch represents mother and stepmother. Wirkola's *Hansel & Gretel* expands the story to Hansel and Gretel now being independent contractors selling their services. The villagers are represented by, on the one hand, the mayor, and, on the other hand, a sheriff who wants his posse to hunt the witches. Thus, the sheriff and siblings compete for the same enterprise, the witch-hunt financed by the village. Out in the forest Muriel summons 'sisters from all dark corners of the land' in a plan to brew a magic potion on the night of a blood moon. This requires the heart of a White Witch and the sacrifice of thirteen children, but, if successful, the potion will protect against fire and put an end to witch-hunts.

Thus, Gretel (played by 26-year old Arterton) and Muriel (49-year old Janssen) represent a young and old generation. In her analysis of *Hansel & Gretel*, D'Amore interprets Gretel as another example of vigilante feminism. D'Amore focuses on Gretel's childhood trauma (captured by a witch) and the sheriff's rape assault. "Gretel embodies this decision to empower herself through violence, channeling vigilante feminism to protect herself and her world from threats beyond the power of others to solve" (2017: 398). The film offers "an attractive characterization of female empowerment" (398) when Gretel headbutts the sheriff. However, if we understand feminism as a struggle to end sexism, Gretel's violence doesn't lead to feminist action. She doesn't care a young woman, Mina, is almost burnt as witch in the beginning. Hansel saves Mina, whom he thinks is human, but who is a white witch who later helps them kill Muriel. From a power perspective, Gretel sides with her brother and sells her services to a patriarchy

headed by the mayor and sheriff. Muriel, on the other hand, represents agency outside patriarchy. Henderson reminds us the typical accused witch was

[...] an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behavior [...] [who] does not require or give love [...] does not nurture men or children, nor care for the weak [...] [and] has the power of words—to defend herself or to curse (2016: 77).

Looking at the plot from a witch’s perspective, a different story emerges. Yes, Muriel lives in a subterranean lair with cells for abducted children and keeps a troll as slave. From a human perspective, she *is* a monster. But she is also an entrepreneurial aging and powerful woman, living as an outcast because men try to kill her. When bounty hunters enter her forest, she protects her property: “This is my land! Dare you! There is no use in praying. Even your God knows better than to come here” (*Hansel & Gretel*: 0:20:48–0:21:32). Unlike Gretel, she emphasizes with sisters, saving them from capture, and looking forward to share the magic potion with them: “It will change everything. We will be invincible” (*Hansel & Gretel*: 0:28:10–0:28:20). “[T]he witch, or non-conformist woman, pits herself not only against men but other conforming women. She thus becomes alienated from both male and female society” (Henderson 2016: 77). The insistence on *her* land, *her* free will, and *her* organization of witches, makes Muriel a threat. Federici, in a political analysis of witch-hunts, points to the targeting of women who own land or are financially independent. In India and Africa, women are accused of being witches and beaten or killed, crimes that go unpunished by authorities, an “institutional tolerance of domestic violence [which] creates a culture of impunity that contributes to normalizing the public violence inflicted on women” (2018: [Kindle loc.] 780). In Tanzania, 5,000 women a year are burnt as witches (2018: [Kindle loc.] 86) and in India women are killed as witches (*Reuters Bhubaneswar* 2019).

There is a disturbing misogyny and targeting of otherness in *Hansel & Gretel*. The witches are presented as both monsters and social outcasts: They are young as well as old, dressed in rags or in alternative life-style costumes (Goth, punk, hippie), and some are biological rarities, e.g. Siamese twins or have lymphatic filariasis or sacral agenesis. The film also includes iconic activities listed in the infamous book for witch-hunting, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486): Witches fly on broomsticks, assemble at night, practice dark magic, and eat children. This ‘otherness’ legitimizes any type of violent retaliation and we see witches being beaten, kicked, shot, burnt, and tortured. Gretel defends herself against rape assault, but she also gleefully inflicts violence on the witches. When Hansel tortures a young witch, Gretel smiles as he puts on brass knuckles. The end, where Hansel machineguns every witch, reads more like femicide than heroism, the latter being the film’s intention.

*Hansel & Gretel* has a mixed feminist message. We find the young and old, but also the ugly and beautiful, human and witch. White witches are beautiful—Mina, Gretel’s mother Adriana, who was a Grand White Witch, and Gretel—and evil witches are ugly with human faces masking witch faces that are angry, white, and with black blood veins. They do not desire beauty, but safety. Muriel’s sisterhood embodies radical feminist violence and includes individuals of alternative lifestyles and bodies. In a wave perspective, Gretel is a media-savvy neoliberal selling her services (using posters and news

stories) and Muriel is the leader of the minorities, of whose rights the third and fourth wave talk. In this reading, Gretel sides with patriarchy and Muriel is the feminist.

### **Sleeping Beauty and Ruling Power**

Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014) splits female rivalry into *ruling power* and *maternal love*. The witch is now hero and protagonist, the Protector of a magic kingdom, and she only turns evil because she is betrayed by a man from the human kingdom, and, finally, is redeemed when she sacrifices herself to save his daughter. In a double oeuvre, the witch survives but cedes her power to a young woman.

Now, to unravel the complexity at work, let us first look at female rivalry in the 'Sleeping Beauty' fairy tale. In 'Sun, Moon, and Talia' (2013 [1634]), a lord places his sleeping daughter in "one of his country mansions [...] on a velvet throne", where she is found by a king. He impregnates Talia, who has twins in her sleep. When the Queen discovers the affair, she tries to eat Talia, and the King burns the Queen and marries Talia. In Perrault's 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood' (2013 [1697]) is added the theme of inviting all but one fairy to the celebration of the child. The King and Queen forget "a very old fairy" who casts the curse. When a hundred years have passed, a prince finds the princess, but when he takes her back to his kingdom, his mother, who is an ogress, tries to eat her. Finally, in Grimm's 'Little Briar-Rose' (Grimm/Grimm 2015 [1812]), the uninvited fairy curses the princess, and after a hundred years, a prince comes by, "so amazed at her beauty that he bent over and kissed her". In these tales, the old women cling to social positions and represented as obstacles to a new generation: The Queen cannot have children, the mother-in-law eats people, and the fairy is just old and evil.

We recall the old woman in fairy tales is expected to disappear to make room for the young. However, the idea of a powerful woman can also create fear if seen as a threat to society. Federici suggests women were targeted as witches as part of changing socio-economical social structures, where female bodies were tamed to serve an emerging capitalist class:

Outside these parameters, outside of marriage, procreation, and male/institutional control, for the capitalists as well, female sexuality has historically represented a social danger, a threat to the discipline of work, a power over others, and an obstacle to the maintenance of social hierarchies and class relations (2018: [Kindle loc.] 454).

The powerful witch refuses to acknowledge men's authority. Thus, in the film's start, the child-fairy Maleficent lives isolated from humans in the moors when she becomes friends with the boy Stefan. Later, the adult Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) is Protector of the moors and Stefan (Sharlto Copley) is servant to the King. When the King attacks the moors, Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) tells him, "you are no king to me" (*Maleficent*: 0:10:55–0:11:00), and fights off his soldiers with powerful swings of her wings. The King promises his throne to who can kill Maleficent, and the power-greedy Stefan uses Maleficent's feelings for him to drug her and cut off her wings. "He did *this* to me, so he would be king?" (*Maleficent*: 0:24:05–0:24:11). A bitter Maleficent curses King Stefan's daughter Aurora to fall asleep at sixteen and only wake "by true love's kiss"

(*Maleficent*: 0:32:40–0:32:47). But as the girl is raised by three fairies in the woods, she comes to love Aurora, who believes her a fairy godmother. Maleficent tries to lift the curse, however, it is not by a prince’s kiss, but by Maleficent’s kiss, that the curse is broken. Aurora helps Maleficent get her wings back and after Stefan falls to his death, Maleficent crowns Aurora as Queen of both kingdoms.

Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) transformed the fairy tale’s Queen, mother-in-law, and old fairy, into the witch Maleficent who rules in a gloomy castle and can turn into a dragon. Interestingly, Stromberg’s *Maleficent* splinters the evil Disney character into several ‘versions’ of Maleficent: We see her as first a child, a fairy with horns, wings, and earth-colored costumes, who looks like a Valkyrie when she as adult defends the moors. Then there is the iconic villainess from Disney’s version, in a long dress, black cape, and with horns wrapped in a black headpiece. And finally, there is a redeemed Maleficent with her wings restored, clad in leather jacket, pants, and high-heeled boots, a modern costume like those worn by the action heroines in *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* (dir. McGinty Nichol, 2003). In a transage perspective, Maleficent contains multiple ‘selves’ that represent her different life stages, and the film thus offers a multi-dimensional witch.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of love and ruling power is ambiguous. On the one hand, Maleficent defeats men. She also lives outside of the nuclear family and patriarchal society. On the other hand, the bitter and childless Maleficent must redeem herself through maternal love. And in the sixteen years from the curse is cast, she thinks only of Aurora. Henneberg says of grandmothers, “she has withdrawn from her own life [...] she has no history before [her loved ones] and no life apart from them” (2010: 130). It seems the only purpose for a (good) woman is to watch over a child, and Maleficent confesses at Aurora’s bedside: “I will not ask your forgiveness, because what I have done to you is unforgivable. I was so lost in hatred and revenge. Sweet Aurora, you stole what was left of my heart and now I have lost you forever” (*Maleficent*: 1:15:50–1:16:18). This sanctity of maternal love erases the female ruler.

In *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017) British historian Mary Beard says women in politics are discriminated against and portrayed as evil witches and Medusas, and “[w]omen in power are seen as breaking down barriers, or alternatively as taking something to which they are not quite entitled” ([Kindle loc.] 347). Women in politics are seen as not ‘real’ women, but cultural monsters ridiculed for looking like men (when they wear suits), or for behaving like witches. Beard disagrees with the feminists who embrace amazons, witches, and the Medusa as figures of female strength. These were monsters in antiquity, and today “we have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man” ([Kindle loc.] 332).

If the aging witch holds on to her powerful position, she must die. Thus, in *Mirror Mirror* (dir. Tarsem Singh, 2012) the evil Queen turns to dust when the King returns. And Ravenna returns in *The Huntsman: Winter’s War* (dir. Cedric Nicolas-Troyan, 2016), where she tells her sister Freya (Emily Blunt), “[d]id you not think I wanted a child? Did you not think I wanted love? But these things were not meant for me. I have a higher plan” (*The Huntsman*: 1:45:18–1:45:32). However, if a powerful witch wants to live, she *must* cede power. Maleficent crowns sixteen-year old Aurora and the film

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<sup>3</sup> The film calls Maleficent a fairy, but we will understand her as a witch, because the Church believed fairies as real as witches and burnt people for being fairies (Henderson 2007).

salutes maternal love. In the end, a volatile Maleficent flies high into the sky, an image of female strength—but not of ruling power.

### **Conclusion—Witches, Waves, and Voices**

The trope of an aging and powerful witch is elaborated and explored in the contemporary fantasy film for feminist potentials. She invokes a matrix of meanings tied to a historical past, genre, and generational conflict. Feminists like Federici and Beard link her to political and socioeconomic forces, where changing social roles and politics of land-ownership and workforce leave women vulnerable in patriarchal societies.

Ravenna, Muriel, and Maleficent represent a new and complex evil witch, a new version of the witch as monster, who invites dialogue about what aging and powerful women look like. This witch dissolves boundaries of youth and aging, and she is no longer a lonely figure but has a family (Ravenna's brother and mother, Muriel's group of witches, Maleficent's goddaughter Aurora). Sociologists Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer suggest that media representations of old women are helpful when "[...] the women behind the characters and the characters themselves serve to confront and reframe the anxieties, fantasies, and ambitions of many older women" (2012: 177). And they warn that the wave metaphor "[...] pits older women, as a tremendously valuable resource of experience, wisdom, and skills, against young women rather than as supportive of them and transferring social capital that might strengthen younger generations of women" (171).

I believe this aging witch is a step towards an increased visibility of aging women and that she offers reframing and images of transaging. Her social inclusion, however, remains problematic, and the convention of passing power from old to young persists. Also, the actresses embodying her—Theron, Janssen, Jolie—express the privilege of being white, Western, and able to pay for the entrepreneurial work needed to age without visibly aging. Still, the aging and powerful witch can be read as a source of agency. Beard says we must redefine power from being structured in male terms as a 'job' to instead be seen as collective action: "What I have in mind is the ability to be effective, to make a difference in the world, and the right to be taken seriously, together as much as individually. It is power in the sense that many women feel they don't have—and that they want" ([Kindle loc.] 506). Such power could be a collective movement across waves and generations. Today's aging and powerful witch expresses such a movement.

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### Biographical Note

Rikke Schubart lectures at the University of Southern Denmark. Her research is on emotions, gender, and the fantastic. Recent publications are *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Gender Engagements* (Bloomsbury, 2016; with Anne Gjelsvik). She recently published an article on Gal Gadot and *Wonder Woman* in *Continuum* and co-edited the *Continuum* Special Issue 33:2 (2019) on women in the transmedia fantastic. She is director of the network ‘Imagining the Impossible—The Fantastic as Media Entertainment and Play’.

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