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Who is the Fairest of Them All? Disney's Depiction of Non-Normative Embodiment in its Villainesses

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Who is the Fairest of Them All?
Disney's Depiction of Non-Normative Embodiment in its Villainesses

by

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Abstract

The world of Disney has long been criticized for the lack of empowered princesses, racial representation, and unrealistic body images in its princess films. While steps have been made to provide a fairer representation through the bodies of the princesses, there has not been much progress in the way villains' bodies are depicted. Most Disney villains exhibit a form of disability or non-normative embodiment including missing limbs, old age, or fatness. This thesis will analyze the bodies of three well-known Disney villainesses from three different eras—The Evil Queen, Ursula, and Mother Gothel—and will demonstrate how their bodies reflect the historical and cultural anxieties around non-normative embodiment for the time in which they were created.

Keywords: Disney, Disability Studies, Non-Normative Embodiment, Medicine, Fatness, Aging

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Introduction

The world of Disney has faced both popular and scholarly criticism about how it depicts gender roles, race, and body image. However, there has not been adequate attention drawn to the characterization of disability in Disney films, especially in the princess worlds. Specifically, there is a noticeable correlation between Disney villains and non-normative embodiment. While the Disney princess films have been applauded for taking steps forward to provide examples of more independent and racially diverse women, their villains demonstrate Disney's persistent problematic depiction of non-normative and disabled bodies, which in turn reflects the stigmatized position of the disabled in society. This thesis aims to investigate links between Disney villains and the specific social anxieties around disability and health in the time period during which corresponding Disney Princess films were made.

Disney's princess films follow the stories of perfectly petite princesses and their quests to find true love while villains work to stop their happiness. In Disney's quintessential good versus evil tales for children, the princesses are always at the precipice of physical perfection. Their petite frames and doe eyes create a beauty standard that becomes synonymous with being ethically and morally good. Meanwhile, in the same story, villains embody disability and non-normativity in some way: Ursula is fat and purple (*The Little Mermaid*), Lady Tremaine is old and wrinkled (*Cinderella*), and Doctor Facilier has a hanging belly and a gap tooth (*Princess and the Frog*). In the films, their physical flaws serve as a reflection of evil. Some Disney villains are overtly disabled. For example, Captain Hook (*Peter Pan*) is missing a hand, and in the newest Disney film *Moana*, Tamatoa is missing a leg. However, the villains being analyzed in

this thesis do not adhere to the standard definition of disability; instead, the Evil Queen (*Snow White*), Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*), and Mother Gothel (*Tangled*) gesture to disability, especially when considered in a historical context. By applying a disability studies lens to these three villainesses and their princess counterparts, the stories of good versus evil take a backseat, and fears of disability and non-normative embodiment emerge.

This thesis will investigate one film from three historical eras or, to borrow Maegen Davis's formulation, each "wave" of the Disney princess movie franchise:¹ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (wave one), *The Little Mermaid* (wave two), and *Tangled* (wave three). Each chapter will investigate and analyze a specific movie while discussing the social anxieties surrounding an aspect of non-normative embodiment that I argue were at the forefront of culture at that moment in time. In fact, these modes of embodiment rise to the level of disability in their immediate historical context. Chapter one discusses the role of the Evil Queen as reflecting the fears of seeming or looking unable to work during the Great Depression. Ursula is the main focus of chapter two, serving as a representation of the fears about obesity and heart disease during the 1980s, and chapter three analyzes Mother Gothel as a direct representation of the present-day fears of aging and looking old. Each of these women take measures to ensure their evil plans come to fruition; however, their actions and physical characterization represent non-normative embodiment in the 1930s, 1980s, and 2010s.

¹ In the article "From Snow to Ice: A Study of Progression of Disney Princesses from 1937 to 2014," Davis separates Disney's princess films into three "waves": earlier movies, middle movies, and most current movies. Each of these waves were based on representations of gender.

Disability Studies

The foundation of Disability Studies is based on understanding disability as socially constructed and exploring the effects those constructs have on disabled people. This discipline is fairly new, having finally gained its academic identity in the 1990s after the first postgraduate program in 1979 and attempted political and educational initiatives in the 1980s (Oliver and Barton). Although young, Disability Studies calls attention to a group of people that often find themselves ignored or misunderstood by society. Definitions of “disability” vary depending on who or what is establishing the meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary and the Americans with Disability Act provide what are known as “functional model” definitions of disability, which define disability as resulting from “an individual person’s physical or mental limitations” (Michigan Disability Rights Coalition). Basically, the functional model equates disability with a person’s practical inabilities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines disability as “a lack of ability (to discharge any office or function); inability; incapacity; or weakness,” while the Americans With Disability Act (ADA) from 1990 defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” These two functional deficit model definitions contribute to the idea that disability can limit one or more aspects of a person’s life.

What is known as the “social model” of disability differs from the functional model in that disability is not seen as inherently limiting. Instead, the limits disability is perceived to cause are created by societal constructs. A few examples of physical social constructs are buildings with wheelchair ramps only located at the back of the building or lecture-style classrooms that have chairs built for a specific body size, making sitting in

the lecture hall chairs uncomfortable or impossible for people with larger bodies and other forms of non-normative embodiment. Social stereotypes of disability also affect the lives of disabled people. Often disabled people are seen as helpless or pitiful, or unable to accomplish tasks “normally.” For example, a man without a leg could be seen as slow and dependent; in actuality his physical limitation does not impede upon his ability to do a task. However, this man may not be asked to attend a meeting across town because people do not think he can. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder provide a definition in *The Body and Physical Difference* that claims disability is made up of “cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function” (Mitchell and Snyder 2). According to Mitchell and Snyder, ideas created by society of what is considered “normal” cause some bodies to be seen as limited, casting disability as outside of what society deems normal and leading to isolation for those with disabilities.

Disability scholars who are responsible for theorizing the social model proclaim and emphasize the humanity of the disabled. According to *The Handbook of Disability Studies*, for some, disability is a personal battle—one that they want to hide because they see it as a “shameful condition.” However, others see disability as empowering: “a symbol of enriched self-identity and self-worth and a central force coalescing a community intent on extolling the fundamental values of life, human rights, citizenship, and the celebration of difference... clarifying what it means to be human.” The differences in bodies and minds that disability brings together are powerful because of the social bonds they can form between people and the opportunities the differences

produce for society to charge and learn (Albrecht, et. al., 1). Disability can be seen as a positive instead of as a hindrance on someone's life.

Other disability studies scholars view disability as a part of every person's natural progression, noting that aspects of disability like aging are inevitable and unavoidable. Bodies are not built to last forever. In *Bodies in Revolt: Gender Disability and a Workplace Ethic of Care* Ruth O'Brien states:

Disability should not be viewed as an identity, but rather as a condition that shapes how people do things. This condition, moreover, is ever changing. Few people escape facing it sometime in their lifetime. This is inherent in our organic nature—all people are dying. Hence the term 'disabled' should not be used to characterize the unusual mind or body; it describes what habitually happens to the mind or body. It captures the human condition. (35)

Almost everyone will experience some form of disability at some point, so rather than seeing it as a negative, disability scholars, including O'Brien, see it as something to be expected—a part of life for everyone because they experience disability themselves or because a loved one does. Similarly, in her article "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contradicts the idea that disability is out of the ordinary: "Disability is perhaps the essential characteristic of being human. The body is dynamic, constantly interactive with history and environment. We evolve into disability. Our bodies need care; we all need assistance to live" (Garland-Thomson 21).

Similarly, Lennard Davis questions the assumption of disability being outside of the norm: “But how strange this assumption. What is more representative of the human condition than the body and its vicissitudes?” (xv). Davis continues by stating disabled people make up the largest minority in the United States, which furthers the question of why the disabled are treated as invisible. Davis also asks why issues of perception and accessibility have been ignored. “Is there not something to be gained by all people from exploring the ways that the body in its variations is metaphorized, disbursed, promulgated, commodified, cathected, and de-cathected, normalized, abnormalized, formed, and deformed?” (Davis xvi). There is value in physical disability and difference and in exploring disability, but society will not acknowledge it, causing the disabled to remain hidden and seem like the societal other.

Susan Wendell looks at neutral and positive views of disabled bodies as different in her book *The Rejected Body*. Disability does not have to be stigmatized in a given culture, but instead, it can be a valuable source of knowledge. Wendell notes that the experiences people with disabilities have can help “enrich and expand our culture” while also changing the way we look at life (Wendell 69). One example of this cultural growth and change to a way of life is through a disabled person’s ability to “criticize cultural myths about the body and mind” because they are unable to conform to the cultural bodily ideals that have been established (Wendell 69). They provide a point of view that can see through the myths of bodily ideals, which gives them “intrinsic” value in a society that historically devalues them.

Disability Studies focuses on negative assumptions and on disability as a social construct in order to understand the effects those constructs have on disabled people.

According to Simi Linton, many scholars in this field claim that disability is often understood as a negative marker of identity,² which affects society's perception of disabled people. People with "physical, emotional, sensory, and cognitive conditions" are grouped together to advocate for political power and representation: The word "disability" "has been used to build a coalition of people with significant impairments, people with behavioral or anatomical characteristics marked as deviant, and people who have or are suspected of having conditions" (Linton 12). Unfortunately, even with the growing voice and political power forming within the disabled community, the action of grouping and isolating disabled bodies from everyone else still creates a sense of discrimination. People are isolated because of perceived differences when, in all actuality, they are not abnormal.

The social construction of disability is a cornerstone of Disability Studies because it helps shed light on the limits placed on an individual's life and daily operations by a given culture in a given historical moment. *Gendering Disability* by Bonnie Smith and Beth Hutchinson classifies the social construction of disability as

a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations...Like femaleness, disability is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally

² The disabled community advocates for how they prefer to be labeled or referenced. Simi Linton elaborates on the way disabled people view themselves, noting problematic phrases and words that Linton deems "nice words," like "physically challenged" or "handicapable." However, most prefer to be called "disabled person" because person-first terminology like "people with disabilities" frames disability as a deficit rather than as an identity (Linton 26).

fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. (77)

Susan Wendell also notes elements of how the social climate disabled people may find themselves in can shape how they are perceived. One example she gives is from the point of view of disabled women; they find themselves working twice as hard, fighting the stigma that disabled women are weaker than disabled men. In *The Rejected Body*, Susan Wendell states: “Women with disabilities are discouraged from having children because other people can only imagine caring for children in ways that are impossible for women with disabilities, yet everything necessary could be done in other ways, often with minor accommodations” (39).

Culturally, disability is also associated with several stereotypes³ that further limit and stigmatize disabled people because physical and mental limitations are seen as different or as a disadvantage (Wendell 38). For example, many disabled people may be described as “suffering from” a condition. However, they do not live in a “perpetual state of suffering, uninterrupted by pleasurable moments or satisfactions” (Linton 26). Stereotypical narratives of disability like the “victim” and “overcoming” narratives associated with a false idea of “suffering” disempower the person affected (Linton 26). Many disabled people still live happily regardless of the obstacles that may be in their way. Unfortunately, many disabled people feel like “the other” in society or the workforce regardless of how happily they live. Otherness correlates with societal isolation. Susan Wendell describes the relationship between unrealistic and stereotypical

³ Linton describes negative labels or “nasty words” that the disabled community recognizes; “cripple,” “freak,” “deformed,” and “gimp” are a few (Linton 26).

representations of disability and the ways disability tends to be hidden as a way for society to avoid confrontation, causing disabled people to never be truly seen.

Disability studies also examines what it means for someone to be labeled “normal.” There is no set of guidelines to constitute normalcy, and concrete definitions are debatable because everything is based on the point of view of the person doing the defining. Disability Studies scholar Simi Linton provides some explanation for “normal” while also acknowledging how the descriptor is extremely problematic: “norm or normal are terms describing individuals or characteristics that fall within the center of the normal distribution on whatever variable is being measured,” basing the definition of normal on how a distribution of a specific characteristic like height or weight falls. Linton also explains how the label “abnormal” describes “those who are not deemed normal:” [they are] “devalued and considered a burden or problem, or a highly valued and regarded as a potential resource,” so there could be positives associated with being labeled abnormal (Linton 22). For example, someone with an extremely high IQ could be labeled as abnormal because the extreme differences reflect their position as someone “highly valued and regarded as a potential resource” (Linton 22). By contrast, disability is considered to fall in the category of being devalued. This thesis will focus on the negative stigma of abnormal and how the anxieties of abnormality in their historical context shape the villainesses and their motives.

Because the anxieties around disability and non-normative bodies shift with the passing of time and the changing of culture, there must be an understanding of how disability varies from time to time and place to place. The cultural and historical relativity of disability is of the utmost importance in understanding *Snow White and the Seven*

Dwarves, The Little Mermaid, and Tangled. Ato Quayson says we need to examine disability in historical context, stating, “different kinds of disability can be shown to have historically followed different rhythms and patterns of institutional evolution in the West and elsewhere” (Quayson 4). In fact, there is a history of disabled bodies representing the social attitudes of the norms in a given culture or moment through characters and how they are presented. Quayson illustrates how different disabilities become “touchstones” or “focal points” during different historical periods, such as the Middle Ages. At that specific historical moment, disabled figures were characterized as “the beggar, the monster, [and] the criminal” (Quayson 4).⁴

In the Middle Ages, Isidore of Seville and other writers’ creation of a “taxonomy of monstrosity” began classifying disabled bodies as types of monsters. The reasoning for this during the Middle Ages can be traced to the cultural influence of Neoplatonism, which claims “physical beauty is a reflection of true spiritual goodness” (Geckle 167). “Monster” was a synonym for congenital disabilities, and a sort of “moral map” was also influencing disability’s association with monstrosity (Quayson 5); the classification of disabled bodies as “monstrous” reflects the historical and cultural attitudes of the Middle Ages and it continued through the Renaissance.⁵ Cultural and historical moments continued shaping the perceptions of disability as time passed. One example is during the

⁴ There is also a history of disability serving as an isolating factor or a factor that, as Quayson describes, put disabled bodies on the margins of society. This isolation can be seen textually in the Bible, as lepers were seen as unclean and unable to gain access to heaven after death.

⁵ Fourteenth-century England “saw a complex attitude of city authorities toward the management and containment of disease and disability,” ultimately equivocating disability with the poor. In 1571, the city of Norwich’s census described a third of the sick and poor as “lame, crooked... suffering from dumbness, deafness...” (Quayson 7).

1940s: During the Third Reich's reign, "disability came to bear the burden of a moral deficit that was thought to threaten the national character as such and thus, along with Jews, had to be violently extirpated" (Quayson 13). This further demonstrates a constant working dynamic between culture, history, and disability—a dynamic that Disney's villains also reflect.

This thesis will use disability studies as a way to investigate the non-normative bodies found in the Disney princess films at specific historical moments. While the Evil Queen, Ursula, and Mother Gothel do not have bodies that most would consider "disabled," their bodies are distinguished by their non-normativity. Moreover, the concepts of disability studies allow us to interpret the ways that their bodies are constructed as evil and villainous. Disability Studies allows us to foster a deeper understanding of the cultural anxieties about non-normative embodiment that can shape Disney movies and the villains. In terms of the three villains being analyzed in this thesis, there is a noticeable focus on the Disability Studies theories of "passing" and "pace of life" with regard to the non-normative embodiment each woman represents. Hiding a disability in order to avoid the stereotypes or outlooks associated with being disabled falls into a practice called "passing." Passing can be a deliberate move to protect oneself from discrimination from society, or it may even be an internalized hatred. Most of these feelings come from the societal constructs placed on marginalized populations.⁶ Ursula, for instance, strategically practices passing in *The Little Mermaid*. Susan Wendell

⁶ This is common in lesbian and gay culture as well as with race, and many disabled people pass as a way to "conceal their impairment." There can also be an "unconscious, Herculean effort to deny oneself reality of one's racial history, sexual feelings, or bodily state" (Linton 19).

theorizes the “pace of life” and expectations of performance. “Pace of Life” explains that the expected speed that we go about our daily lives and the expectations of performance has to do with how a task is completed rather than the final product. Set paces and expectations can cause a person with disability to be marginalized because able-bodied people set the “normal” pace. The pace can also be why some qualify as disabled in people’s eyes. As a person grows older or a society becomes faster, the speed with which he or she completes a task slows. Therefore, an increase in the pace of life—an increase dictated by standards society deems “normal”—will cause an older person⁷ to seem like they are unable to complete a task.

Disney and Disability

Many Disney villains are physically disabled, and some of the sidekicks seem to be mentally disabled. Both groups serve as a contrast to the princesses of their specific stories. Some of the most obvious examples of mental disability in Disney are found in sidekicks that play secondary roles, usually to add some humor at the expense of their own physical safety and mental well-being. Karen Schwartz, Zana Marie Lutifiyya, and Nancy Hansen analyze the negative portrayals of mental disability that Disney created in three films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Dopey, the seventh dwarf from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is portrayed as “mentally retarded,” having “Down Syndrome-like features” (179). He represents otherness because of the exclusion he experiences through his own actions and those of

⁷ I am choosing age as my example of “pace of life” and expectations of performance because that is how they apply to the Disney villainesses.

the other six dwarves. Dopey is never able to march in step with the other dwarves, he is not included in group huddles, and he does not choose to be first for anything unless another character forces or directs him to action. Gus, one of the mice from *Cinderella*, is also portrayed as “other” and seems mentally disabled through his depiction. His voice is lower and slower than the other mice, and he stutters. The other mice frequently shush him because he speaks out of turn or at inopportune times because he does not know any better. Like Dopey, he finds himself outside of most group huddles. Gus serves as the ultimate inverse to the always-cunning and quick-witted Jaq. The last of the sidekicks Schwartz, Lutifiyya, and Hansen analyze is LeFou from *Beauty and the Beast*, a man who “scampers like a small animal and waddles like a penguin” (187). In fact, LeFou acting like an animal as an already disabled character serves to enhance the mental disability trope in sidekicks. When Gaston hits him on the head, a hollow noise is heard, implying a lack of intelligence and literal brainlessness. The strong and handsome Gaston repeatedly abuses LeFou, and LeFou never truly succeeds on his own, suggesting he is not capable of doing so. These representations of mental disability “send a negative message about mental disability, and those harmful messages have damaging effects on individuals” (Schwartz, et. al. 191).

Disney films more often feature villains that reflect anxieties about physical disability. The world of disability—physical ability, aging, isolation, otherness, passing—is portrayed in Disney’s films, from the very first movie in 1937 to the most recent in 2017. In 1994, Disney released *The Lion King* and introduced the villain Scar—a lion with a noticeable scar across his left eye and a name that explicitly acknowledges a physical difference. He looks completely different from the other lions in Pride Rock

because he is very slender and is hunched over. Scar's ultimate contrast comes in the form of the movie's hero, Simba, who has a very muscular frame, straight spine, and no scar. There is also a noticeable contrast between Captain Hook and Peter Pan in Disney's *Peter Pan*. While Peter Pan is a young boy with the ability to fly, Captain Hook is an older pirate with a hook for a hand, making him the ultimate contrast to the film's heroic boy. He also has a name that directly reflects his disability. Hook is obsessed with the cause of his disability, the crocodile that took his hand. Both Scar and Captain Hook adhere to the pattern of disabled villains that Disney has established, and although they are more obviously disabled than the three villainesses I will investigate, they serve to further characterize disability as a form of monstrosity that Ato Quayson mentions.

Maegan Davis has identified three waves of Disney princess films that correspond with the development of more independent, strong female figures. However, in "Grotesque Drag Queens and Toxic Matriarchs: Motherhood and the Subversive Female Body in Disney Animated Films," Allison Footit draws attention to a problem in Disney that has not been solved, even as more recent Disney movies—that is, third wave movies—have taken great steps to provide young girls with more independent

princesses.⁸ She argues that Disney villains are subjected to unfair body stereotypes,⁹ both in terms of physical appearance and ability:

Disney has been attacked and critiqued by prominent scholars for its problematic display of gender roles and its demonization of aging, non-maternal women. The most common villain in Disney film is the anti-matriarch: an evil, post-menopausal woman who stands against everything the Princess can be said to embody, namely the sustainment of the royal lineage and the hetero-normative family unit. These villainesses are visually grotesque, overly consumptive women whose larger than life power threatens not only their individual victims, but the heteropatriarchal society as a whole. (9)

The Evil Queen, Ursula, and Mother Gothel fall into Footit's description of grotesque female bodies—of non-normative bodies, which is the term and lens I prefer when

⁸ In "From Snow to Ice: A Study of Progression of Disney Princesses from 1937 to 2014," Davis describes the differences between earlier movies, middle movies, and most current movies, or first, second, and third waves. The first wave consists of the original three Disney princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, who all embody the stereotypical "helpless damsels in distress" (Davis). The second wave of films features a shift to princesses that are somewhat independent and sometimes impulsive with their decisions, providing a much more progressive princess than those of the first wave. The second wave movies are *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*. Although there is seemingly progressive shift, Disney's most recent films, the third wave, allowed princesses to evolve into "strong women who can fend for themselves" (Davis). The women in these films are Tiana, Rapunzel, Anna and Elsa, and Moana.

⁹ Footit also claims that the villainesses are the most complex and fascinating, embodying powerful feminist values, but the characters with the most feminist characteristics are also the ones that always lose in some way, usually ending their stories in a violent death.

looking at these three women. Their bodies suggest a cultural and historical record of a lack of positive representation of the disabled, which reflects the historical record of disability Ato Quayson investigates and that this thesis will dissect.

Disability in society is typically viewed as a negative. This outlook is partially because of socially constructed views established by law and medicine, lack of exposure, and inadequate education of what it means to be disabled. Much of the isolation and discrimination so many disabled people experience is because media outlets avoid disability. Disney is one media outlet that has chosen to negatively personify disability through villains that reflect anxieties and fears about non-normative embodiment. Because not much research has been done on the topic of Disney and disability, there is an opportunity to establish links between Disney's villains, disability, and specific time periods during which Disney villains were created. This thesis will apply a Disability Studies lens to the world of the Disney—specifically the villains. The three movies I analyzed represent each wave of Disney films. Because the villains exhibit some form of non-normative embodiment, I raise the question of what it means to be physically disabled in the evolving world of Disney: What counts as a proper or acceptable body in the world of Disney? Moreover, I will investigate historical medical contexts of the 1930s, the 1980s, and the 2010s in order to prove a link between Disney's response to non-normative embodiment and disability at each moment in time, and how that awareness is translated onto the villains.

While Disney has a history of obvious disability displayed in the bodies and behaviors of sidekicks, there is a noticeable difference in the bodies of villains in Disney princess movies. The Evil Queen, Ursula, and Rapunzel serve as three examples—each

from one wave of the Disney princess history—of non-normative embodiment that reflects specific societal anxieties around disability and the abnormal for the time period in which each movie was created. These reflections of anxieties will be analyzed and investigated through a disability studies lens in order to establish a link between the bodies of villains and the historical moment of their debuts. As I will demonstrate, the female villains in Disney movies reflect anxieties about non-normative embodiment spanning over eight decades of film.

Each villain and princess relationship will serve as a primary source to close read in order to further investigate the outlook on disability that Disney maintains. The first wave's film is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). I will note the transformation the Evil Queen makes into an older, seemingly disabled woman on a mission to murder the princess. The Queen's decision to change into an old woman implies Disney's awareness of disability and physical appearance and how the two together can create an image synonymous with incapacity. The second wave film is *The Little Mermaid*. Ursula, a fat purple sea witch, acts as the villain in this movie and is the embodiment of fears of obesity during the 1980s.¹⁰ She chooses to transform into a beautiful, physically flawless woman in order to keep Ariel from winning the love of Prince Eric. Ursula sees changing herself as her only true opportunity to be successful, so she passes as a "normal" bodied woman whose figure reflects the same body type as Ariel. The last film being analyzed is *Tangled*, which features a villain named Mother Gothel who is obsessed with youth. She steals magic from Rapunzel in order to stay young, which is indicative of the 2010s

¹⁰ I will be using fat instead of obese when describing Ursula's body because obese refers to the medicalization of her body, and I am looking at the historical context of it.

youth-obsessed society. I argue that through the three films being investigated and in the other films, Disney communicates and teaches young people that disability is something to be feared and disabled people are inherently evil.

The Evil Queen and the Great Depression: Fairest Desires and the Necessity of Bodily Strength

“Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” These twelve iconic words helped to establish the Disney princess dynasty that now stretches over eight decades. The year 1937 marked a historic moment for pop-culture: Disney debuted its first princess film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, which featured an Evil Queen fixated on the princess Snow White’s beauty. Since the release of this film, Disney has made millions of dollars off of its princess franchise by creating fairytales and happily ever afters, spanning over eighty years and continuing into the future with films like *Frozen* and *Moana*. Snow White was the first member of Disney’s legendary princess club, but the film also gave the franchise its first depiction of evil, setting a precedent that was followed in years to come with other villainesses.

The Evil Queen, Disney’s first villainess, was a woman hell bent on killing Snow White in order to ensure her status as the “fairest one of all.” After the huntsman fails to kill the princess, The Evil Queen decides to murder the princess by poisoning her with an apple, but she does not attack Snow White in her younger, “fair” form. Instead, the queen chooses to transform into a “Peddler Woman.” Why does the Evil Queen transform from what is considered to be a “normal” body to an older one in order to get what she wants? Her decision to transform not only allows Disney to define what womanly evil looks like but it also reflects the fears of looking old and unable to work in the 1930s. To understand the Evil Queen’s role in creating an evil archetype in Disney films, we must first understand how the Evil Queen reflects the fears of looking unable in 1937. By gaining a better understanding for the time frame in which the film was made, we will be

able to see how Disney ultimately equates looking disabled or being disabled with evil in order to advance its own story of good versus evil.

The Great Depression, Employability, Pace of Life, and Bodies

The Great Depression began in 1929—eight years before Disney’s movie was developed and released— and was in full swing by 1937, the year *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was released. The Great Depression was a moment in history when the ability to perform physical labor meant bringing home money and food for one’s family. According to Thomas Fahy in “Worn, Damaged Bodies in Literature and Photography of the Great Depression,” the look of a body was the ultimate determinate of employability. “The working-class relied on physical labor for survival,” so people wanted to look physically able upon first glance” (Fahy 15). Fahy explains,

The damaged body was an unwanted reminder of physical hardships, suggesting dependence and immobility at a time when people needed to find work wherever possible. Since the able body was the only tool that many people had for rebuilding their lives, its loss through impairment and illness was devastating, unthinkable. (4)

During the Great Depression, disability was interpreted as a negative feature of the body that represented a person’s inability to do the required work assigned to them. Moreover, if men and women looked disabled or their bodies looked like they had wear and tear, an employer could turn them away solely based on their perception of their body’s ability to do work. Regardless of one’s actual ability or strength, if he or she appeared infirmed,

they were believed to function as disabled. In fact, Tanali Hamlet of the Independence Care System states that during the Great Depression, “workers with disabilities [had] an unemployment rate of just over eighty percent,” which was a noticeable difference to the national average of twenty-five percent unemployment at the same moment in time. Moreover, when the Works Project Administration (WPA)¹¹ was enacted under the New Deal, “numerous state and federal regulations barred job seekers with disabilities from enjoying any of the program’s benefits, categorizing these jobseekers as ‘unemployable’” (Hamlet). The federal government enhanced the perception of apparent infirmity or apparent physical disability equaling inability. Bodies were judged through a utilitarian lens—whether or not they seemed able to do work quickly and efficiently. In other words, you had to look strong and able in order to be valued. This explains why the dwarves are not treated as if they have a disability in film. They are workers in a mine and leave their home every morning to do intense physical labor. Their employment shows their size is not considered a hindrance or limitation to the work expected of them. While the Evil Queen’s apparent age, hunched back, wrinkles, and swollen joints cause her to be assumed limited, the dwarves’ appearance does not.

Age also played in a role in how a body was interpreted during this time period. Because age was generally associated with the acquisition of disability, looking old could also disqualify a person from potential employment. According to Meredith Minkler’s “Aging and Disability: Behind and Beyond the Stereotypes,” historical culture contributes to the construction and outlook of age, relating it to dependence, disease, and

¹¹ The WPA aimed to employ “mostly unskilled men to carry out public works infrastructure projects” (Works Project Administration).

failure. Because of the historical beliefs surrounding age and disability, an “older” body could be assumed to not be able to do normal physical labor, regardless of the person’s actual ability. Looking old and disabled resulted in no work, and that translated into the fear of being dismissed based on physical appearance.

Susan Wendell’s theory of the “pace of life” is extremely relevant to age and the historical context for the Evil Queen. Wendell uses this term to explain that the speed in which we go about our daily lives can cause a person with disability to feel marginalized because able bodied people set the “normal” pace. The pace set by the norm varies from place to place and culture to culture, and “pace of life” is part of what Wendell calls “expectations of performance.” This focuses on how a task is completed instead of the final product. “Pace of life” and expectations of performance can also lead some to be seen as disabled who might not otherwise. Wendell explains if someone cannot meet these expectations, then he or she may be seen as disabled or his or her disability may be magnified:

When the pace of life in a society increases, there is a tendency for more people to become disabled, not only because of physically damaging consequences of efforts to go faster, but also because fewer people can meet expectations of ‘normal’ performance... those who cannot meet the new pace become conspicuous and disabling, even though the same limitations were inconspicuous and irrelevant to full participation in the slower-paced society.

(37)

Age plays a major role in this aspect of disability as a social construct because as a body ages, the speed a task is completed and how it is completed in many circumstances slows. Because able-bodied people set the normal pace, there can be a sense of impatience when it comes to a disabled person and a task. This can even affect a disabled person's value in the job force: "expectations of individual productivity can eclipse the actual contributions of people who cannot meet them, making people unemployable when they can in fact do valuable work" (39). In terms of the Great Depression, the expectation for a slower rate of completion of a job meant that older bodies lost employability because the expected pace of life was too fast. This created anxieties and fears surrounding age and non-normative embodiment because if someone was not hired, he or she seemed incapable. There was now the risk of not being able to work or provide food or shelter to family members. The ability to survive was in question, and one's survival relied heavily on the appearance of one's body and the work a body looked able to complete.

The Evil Queen's Transformation

Disney's shaping of the Evil Queen relies heavily on the aesthetics of disability and the assumptions made about a body that looks disabled. Before she transforms into her disguise the queen is relatively fair: She has a full face of makeup on including purple eye shadow, pink blush and red lipstick. She has a tight black caul over her head, so her hair color cannot be immediately seen (See Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1

The Evil Queen wearing a full face of makeup while she is alone in her castle shows that she already has some anxiety about her appearance, and her obsession with Snow White's beauty only amplifies her obsession. In the Evil Queen's transformation scene, it is revealed that she has long black hair. Her body shows no true signs of aging pre-transformation. When the Evil Queen decides to take matters into her own hands by poisoning Princess Snow White, she chooses to change forms. The Evil Queen's physical appearance cements her and disability with evil; Disney has the character that looks disabled perform the ultimate evil deed—murder. The queen transforms into a “Peddler Woman,” which is the actual title of the disguise in her book of spells. A spell book is traditionally associated with an evil character or evil doings, so a section in the book to explicitly mentioning age reinforces a pre-existing negative outlook on being old or looking old. The queen expresses her motives behind choosing that disguise by repeatedly saying, “They will never suspect.” The Evil Queen believes the other characters—Snow White and the Seven Dwarves—will never suspect an old woman with

a hunched back, swollen joints, a snaggle tooth, and warts to be able to cause harm to someone, much less poison a person. The queen believes they will not think she is physically capable of killing the princess because her body does not look able. There is a kind of two-fold awareness exercised by the queen in terms her perception of her appearance versus the audience's interpretation and the other characters' interpretation of her new body. While the queen reflects the Great Depression's belief of age and disability signaling inability, Disney capitalizes on those same bodily features to clue the audience into the queen's evil intentions, which is a tradition in literature; in "The Role of Media in Promoting Images of Disability-Disability as Metaphor: The Evil Crip," Marilyn Dahl states, "It has been a convention of all literature and art that physical deformity, chronic illness, or any visible defect symbolizes an evil and malevolent nature and monstrous behavior" (Dahl).

Disney's use of the Evil Queen's non-normative embodiment during a time when the fear of looking unable to work prevailed in society suggests a connection between pervading anxieties of non-normative embodiment during the time a film was created and that film's evil characters. Not only does Disney acknowledge the anxieties during the era of the movie's creation, but they also create an archetype of evil based on age and disability—an archetype that still exists in 2018. In Nada Ramadan Enahla's essay "Aging With Disney and the Gendering of Evil," she notes Disney's decision to create an evil old woman¹²: "The link between old age and villainy is taken a step further when

¹² The Evil Queen never has an actual name; in fact, her character's title in the credits is Evil Queen. Other characters call her names like "wicked witch" and "old hag," dehumanizing the woman, which "indirectly equates wickedness" with looking old or having some form of non-normative embodiment associated with aging (Elnahla 116).

the queen is in disguise, for the aging beauty queen is transformed into a hideous, grotesque, much older woman. The ugliness of her disguise mirrors her fatal obsession with youth and beauty” (117).

The setting of the Evil Queen’s evil lair, combined with the actual transformation scene, solidifies the relationship between being old and being presumed evil. In order to transform, she must first escape to her hidden dungeon where she keeps all of her magic potions. She travels down spiraling flights of stairs, throwing her black cloak into the air while mice lurk in the shadows, and as she travels deeper into the depths of her dungeon, the music gets louder and the screen gets darker. During her travel, she even passes a room that has a skeleton hanging by a chain around its neck as another skull rests on a stone. When she finally gets to her secret lair, the first image to reveal the new setting is of a raven¹³ perched on a skull with the only source of light coming from a nearly melted candle. The Evil Queen has passed multiple symbols of death and darkness before she gets to her lair, and she is unaffected by the bones and darkness, which shows a familiarity her surroundings. Moreover, it shows a comfort with evil. Once in her lair, she plots her final revenge and reaches for her book of disguises. She is ready to enact her revenge. The queen’s decision to transform shows a direct awareness to how disability defines bodies: She says, “I’ll go myself to the dwarves; cottage in a disguise so complete no one will ever suspect. Now a formula to transform my beauty into ugliness, change my queenly raiment to a peddler’s cloak.” The most notable words from this part of the Evil Queen’s dialogue is “no one will ever suspect.” She is alluding to Snow White and

¹³ A raven is a bird that feasts on dead flesh and is also a symbol for bad luck, bad omens, and bad news.

the dwarves not suspecting an old woman capable of any misdoings or evil—because she looks disabled, they assume she is not able to commit murder or cause harm. They will never suspect. “*No one* will ever suspect.”

The Evil Queen’s language throughout her creation of her transformation spell also reflects historical assumptions of disability and non-normative embodiment during the Great Depression. She explains the roles of each ingredient the potion calls for, and two of them are directly linked to making her look, sound, and seem old: “Mummy dust to make me old... To age my voice, an old hag’s cackle.” Using Mummy dust to help bring the appearance of aging is a direct reference to the passage of time and aging. Mummies are hundreds of years old, meaning death has long since taken the life of the man or woman preserved in bandages and buried in the pyramids. The use of the dust of a mummy is inherently grotesque because the Evil Queen is ingesting the dust of a body that is hundreds of years old. Moreover, using mummy dust alludes to grave robbing, an immoral criminal act. Further contributing to the disguise of an old woman is the “old hag’s cackle” to mask the Evil Queen’s voice. For the queen to call an older woman a hag shows a negative point of view towards older women. A hag is traditionally depicted as an ugly old woman, but according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a hag also may be defined as “an evil spirit, demon, or infernal being, in female form.” For the Evil Queen to use a word that has a correlation with both physical appearance and age shows that she is taking total claim to evil.

After the transformation scene ends, the queen whispers to herself “A perfect disguise,” before turning around to reveal herself to a raven, which she terrifies with her new, older appearance. The bird’s fear of her physical body—her age—is reflective of

the contemporaneous cultural fear of looking old and having judgment cast upon one's body before any proof of physical ability can be shown. In fact, the Evil Queen not only looks old now, but her body is decrepit. There are some old people that look much stronger than she does. There is also a trope in literature of animals being able to see the true character or identity of a person, even if they are in a disguise.¹⁴ The raven's fear shows that it can see the evil lying inside the queen. There is also a sense of irony that a bird associated with bad omens is terrified of an old woman. It is also important to note that the queen becomes much more vitriolic in language and cruel in action after she transforms into her old disguise, which further associates old age with evil. In fact, she becomes the purest form of evil after she transforms into an older body; she only makes the poison apple that she describes as "sleeping death," after she has become the Peddler Woman. This is a stark contrast to her use of the word "formula" to describe her transformation spell while still in the form of the Evil Queen. She takes full responsibility and duty to kill Snow White after she takes the form of an aged woman, making her the true embodiment of evil only once her body takes its older form.

The scene in which the queen is actually making the poison apple is also noteworthy because of her language. She becomes very descriptive with the way Snow White will sleep forever, and she has a very excited tone in her voice: "When she breaks the tender peel, to taste the apple in my hand, her breath will still, her blood congeal. Then I'll be fairest in the land!" Not only is her description of Snow White eating the apple extremely vivid, but the two most violent lines rhyme: "her breath will still, her

¹⁴ This happens in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus's dog recognizes him. This also happens in *The Little Mermaid* when Prince Eric's dog does not trust Ursula while she is passing.

blood congeal.” This shows her happiness for the eminent death that is about to take place. No other character in the film creates a rhyme when they reference the poisoning of Snow White. Her rhyming makes it seem as if she is marveling at the prospect of Snow White being poisoned; she is excited to see her evil plans come to fruition, and that excitement makes her seem even more evil. She continues by imagining what the dwarves will do and takes pleasure at the thought of it. “The dwarves will think she’s dead. She’ll be buried alive.” She pauses to cackle and then exclaim, “Buried alive!” This serves to enhance the fears of becoming old or looking incapable that so many people felt in the 1930s. This creation of an old evil woman establishes a tradition of Disney villainesses that followed this film and its legacy.

As an old peddler woman, the Queen looks disabled, but she is actually just as physically capable as the other characters and as herself in her pre-transformation form. The conflict between presumption and reality—or social construction and reality—is what the Evil Queen capitalizes on, which suggests that primary perception of a body is also a source of anxiety. When she leaves her castle to find Snow White, she rows a boat from the watery exit of her lair, and she also easily travels through the forest to find Snow White. She also successfully poisons Snow White in the form of the Peddler Woman. Her actions further defy the belief that old looking bodies are unable to perform physical tasks when she sprints away from the dwarves at the end of the movie. When the dwarves are chasing her, she runs through the forest, climbs a mountain, and moves a boulder in her Peddler Woman disguise and in a torrential rainstorm.

The first time Snow White sees the Evil Queen in her old disguise she is taken by surprise as she is making gooseberry pies for the dwarves to eat when they come back

from mining. The queen's large shadow is cast over Snow White as she finishes a pie, causing the princess to gasp and momentarily throw both hands up. The shadow consumes the body of Snow White much like the poison from the apple will in a few minutes. The queen begins asking Snow White if she is alone in the cottage, and as the princess answers, she seems very nervous and cautious. However, this does not seem to be because of the age of the woman. It is because she was startled and because the dwarves had warned her not to talk to any strangers while they were away. However, Snow White's hesitancy to answer the stranger quickly vanishes and she becomes more comfortable with the old peddler woman.

Snow White never truly suspects the old woman of any wrongdoing when she appears at the cottage window, even though there are countless warning signs for the princess. When the queen first appears in her disguise, she startles Snow White as she stands in her black coat, which is a stark contrast to the sunlight outside and serves to foreshadow the suspended animation that will soon consume Snow White much like the queen's cloak consumes her entire body (see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2

We the viewers see evil, but Snow White sees infirmity. As the queen tries to hand Snow White an apple, little white, blue, and brown birds attack her in an attempt to save Snow White, even the cute, tiny animals see through the queen's disguise. It is not just the animals associated with darkness like the raven. After the birds attack, Snow White shoos them away, "Shame on you, frightening a poor old lady." Snow White calling the queen "poor" and "old" implies that she associates the two words together¹⁵: she is adhering to the perceptions of age at the time. Snow White believes the old peddler woman is frail and unable to travel comfortably, so she invites the woman into the cottage. The queen sees her window of opportunity to further trick Snow White into thinking she is frail and incapable and feigns a heart attack. She hobbles over to Snow White for support, and when they touch, there is a stark physical contrast between the two: Snow White is standing upright with glowing skin and rosy cheeks while the queen is hunched over with grey skin and white hair. Not only is good being contrasted with evil but old age is being contrasted with youth through the body of Snow White, reminding audiences of the body that is deemed workable or able.

After Snow White helps the disguised queen to a chair, the woman gives her an apple, convincing the princess that it is a "magic wishing apple." However, with each step the queen takes toward Snow White, the princess backs up until she is cornered with nowhere to hide, seeming to become more and more scared of the old woman. Snow White has let a stranger, whose intentions are unknown, into the cottage—her safe haven—and put herself into direct danger. She incorrectly read the peddler woman's

¹⁵ Poor also means pathetic and pitiful.

body as unable, and now that same body corners her. Both characters are in a dark corner of the cottage at this point in the film, and only one of them will walk back into the light alive. Even though she seems nervous and uneasy, Snow White still takes the apple, so the stereotype of old bodies must have prevailed. As soon as she takes a bite, Snow White begins to feel faint, and the queen utters the same deadly words from the apple poisoning scene: “Her breath will still. Her blood congeal.” In the precise moment of suspended animation, the queen is still rhyming words and smiling. She is taking pleasure in her murderous victory. As Snow White collapses, the Evil Queen begins to cackle as lightning strikes outside. Her evil deed is done, and its violence is being marked by a violent storm. Nature begins reflecting evil, validating the queen’s role as the villain.

The dwarves, who viewers can interpret as disabled based on their size, do not think twice about chasing an old woman, nor do they find it strange that an old woman is able to move as quickly as the Evil Queen can. They do not buy into the false stereotypes. In fact, they have described the queen since the beginning of the film as an “old witch.” The only characters that do not believe in the limitations of a body based on age are also the only other characters that exhibit some form of non-normative embodiment to the viewers. This relates to Susan Wendell’s claim that disabled can see through the myth of what is deemed “normal” or “able.”

Disney’s New Villainous Archetype

Disney used the platform of its first princess movie to create an archetype for its villains that it still used today. The company has a history of using the contemporaneous social constructions and anxieties around disability and taking advantage of the negative

connotations usually associated with disability's presumed limitations. By giving the first Disney villain a form of non-normative embodiment—one that reflected the anxieties of the Great Depression—Disney associated disability and non-normativity with evil. In terms of Disney and the Evil Queen, the decision to exploit anxieties around looking old, incapable, and weak during the Great Depression Era leads to the cemented classification of the Evil Queen and other bodies that are old or simply look old as wicked. The social injury to looking old is only enhanced during a time like the Great Depression, but the precedent Disney set for its future films arms the company with a dangerous platform to make disability visible as a negative image through bodies of villains. The Evil Queen was just the beginning for Disney.

Ursula's Dark Magic and Fears of Fatness in the 1980s

Disney's *The Little Mermaid* was released in 1989 and featured the story of a love-struck mermaid princess that wants, more than anything, to live on the land and win the love of Prince Eric. In order to make her dreams a reality, she strikes a deal with the fat, evil sea witch Ursula, who convinces Ariel to trade her beautiful singing voice for legs and the chance to find true love. Ultimately, Ursula's motivation to help Ariel is not philanthropic or selfless; she has her own dark reasoning behind this deal with the princess. Ursula wants control of the seas, and the only way to get it is with King Triton's crown and triton; as Ariel is the young daughter of the King, Ursula takes advantage of the opportunity to sabotage a princess.

Disney breaks from its usual trope of a noticeably older, human woman as its villain with Ursula because not only is she old, but she is also fat.¹⁶ Her most noticeable physical feature is her size, and her weight alongside tentacles and purple skin enhances her role as villainess.¹⁷ Moreover, her fatness is also associated with moral weakness and depravity, and those associations are related to the specific context of the 1980s. Ursula's size does more than serve as a stark contrast to the very petite Ariel. It also suggests her true motivations, establishing her role as the villain through a bodily image of evil. Another notable sign of non-normative embodiment featured in this movie is Ariel's muteness. While she has no voice for a majority of the movie, she is never seen as evil nor is she ostracized from the society that has welcomed her. This is because she is still

¹⁶ Obesity is the medical word; fat activists say "fat" in part because they say fatness is a social construct, and they aim to look at its non-medical dimensions.

¹⁷ Just like Dr. Facilier in *Princess and the Frog*, Ursula's skin color can be seen as a gesture to racial otherness.

skinny and pretty; her body represents the ideal figure and works to enhance the evil shown through Ursula's fatness. Ariel's skinny body is also what inspires Ursula to use magic and transform into Vanessa, a skinny, pretty woman, which alludes to passing, a disability studies theory about hiding one's non-normative embodiment. Ursula's passing is strategic, as she does more than just use magic to hide her fatness and avoid stigma. She uses magic to win. Ursula's body marks her as an evil character and represents the historical and cultural fears of fatness in the 1980s, which was a time when diets focused on preventative measures to avoid heart disease, high cholesterol. However, while these diets were on the rise, obesity rates skyrocketed, causing fatness to hit an all-time high and anxieties of becoming fat to intensify.

The Diets of the 1980s and Anxieties of Obesity

President Eisenhower's heart attack in 1955 raised questions about what caused heart disease and how to prevent it in the future. An investigative video by the *New York Times* titled "The Diet of the 1980s May Be Why Americans are so Fat" reveals the bad science leading to the health decline and rising obesity rates of the 1980s through interviews with the scientists of the time. Following then-President Eisenhower's heart attack and a national outbreak of fear, scientists presented a link between high fat and high cholesterol diets, believing they led to increased heart disease. In 1980, their research inspired the first government issued dietary guidelines, which focused on "cutting back on a variety of nutrients including fat and cholesterol" (*The New York Times*). Four years after the issuance, research seemed to indicate lowering cholesterol would lead to a lower risk of heart attacks, but there was a problem with the science

because 1980s also saw adult obesity rates skyrocket. A deeper look into the claims made about lowering fat and cholesterol in diets during the “no fat craze” found that “about ninety percent of dietary guidelines were best guesses” (*The New York Times*).

Although the low-fat and low-cholesterol diet originated from a fear of heart disease and a desire to manage weight, it ultimately backfired in the form of rising obesity rates. There was no true correlation between total fat and cholesterol intake and heart disease, and the anxieties surrounding fatness became more intense as levels of obesity rose. People wanted to be skinny because they believed being skinnier equaled being healthier, but their attempts were ineffective because obesity rates were rising, even with these new diets. The fault of the diets was soon revealed: the study that inspired the government regulations used cholesterol-reducing drugs to find a viable link between cholesterol and heart disease, and scientists assumed a low cholesterol diet would work the same way as the drug. One scientist summed up their final conclusion by saying, “We took a leap of faith” (*The New York Times*). That leap of faith was not a safe one, and there were negative consequences of the bad science. Obesity was assumed to automatically mean someone had an unhealthy diet, which implied a lazy or slovenly lifestyle. As a characteristic is shamed and criticized, the fear of having that characteristic grows. As obesity became more and more scrutinized, the anxieties around becoming obese rose, making fat people feel isolated and unwanted. I argue that Ursula reflects the lifestyle associated with obesity in the 1980s, making her the ultimate physical manifestation of anxieties of non-normative embodiment.

Another connection to make about the fear of obesity and non-normative embodiment is the increase of eating disorders in the 1980s. Carl Lawson wrote an article

for *The New York Times* titled “Anorexia: It’s Not a New Disease” in 1985, four years before *The Little Mermaid’s* release but during the time the movie was made. In it, he states anorexia nervosa, an “illness in which victims deliberately starve away twenty percent or more of their body weight,” has had a grip on the public since the 1890s (Lawson). He references the history of the disorder and reveals the thin body considered on-trend in the late nineteenth century: “Among the privileged middle-class girls by the 1890s it was desirable to be thin for various social and cultural reasons” (Lawson). In fact, according to Ann F. La Berge’s research in “How the Ideology of Low Fat Conquered America,” having a slim body frame was a cultural phenomenon, especially among women in the late nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century, there was a concrete culture of dieting in America. Counting calories and daily weighing became habits for women in America, and the desire to look thin in order to look good in more revealing clothing was growing (La Berge 141-42). By 1985, according to a Gallup Poll of the time, nine percent of girls from the ages of thirteen to eighteen believed they had symptoms of anorexia nervosa, and the poll also found that among the teenagers surveyed, forty-seven percent of girls and thirty-nine percent of boys knew someone with the eating disorder (Lawson). 1967 included the rise of the British supermodel Twiggy, whose frail frame became the ideal figure for women to achieve, but the death of Karen Carpenter in 1983 caused anorexia to become part of mainstream media’s conversation about public health.¹⁸ There is clearly a historical tradition of being thin, and the tradition

¹⁸ See Josie L. Tenore’s article “Challenges in Eating Disorders: Past and Present” for more.

has persisted through the years. Thinness may have been trendy before the 1980s, but it became imperative to be skinny in the eighties because of the beliefs about obesity.

Fatness is slowly becoming acknowledged as a disability under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), but there is resistance in part because of the problematic assumption that fatness is fixable. April Herndon explains in “Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies” that many people with “normal bodies” see fatness as a “voluntary condition resulting from poor eating habits and [a] sedentary lifestyle” (Herndon 124). Because of this belief, the potential for weight to be considered a disability that would be covered under the umbrella of the ADA is often protested, causing a feeling of isolation for fat bodies. Additionally, many members of the fat community do not want to be labeled as “disabled” because this stigma partnered with the historical and cultural perceptions of obesity lead to a fat man or woman feeling ostracized. Simply put, many fat people do not identify with disability. Ursula’s body reflects the anxieties around becoming a social other and the anxieties around non-normative embodiment brought on by diet that first emerged during the 1980s. Specifically, Ursula’s body reflects the fears of obesity in the 1980s.

Herndon, who writes from her own point of view by calling herself a “large woman” in American society, analyzes those narratives in her research by referencing two reasons for “fataphobia.” The first narrative is the medicalization of fatness, which presents obesity as an epidemic or disease and dehumanizes people, causing them to be seen as a bodily statistic of weight. However, Herndon does note that members of the medical field are beginning to acknowledge the problem with defining obesity as a fixable disease: “The data linking over weight and death, as well as the data showing

beneficial effects of weight loss, are limited, fragmentary, and often ambiguous” (125). There is an unfair and uneducated belief that obesity and death are part of an easily fixed causal relationship. In all actuality, there is an extent to which someone with a larger body cannot prevent their size because there is a correlation-based (not causal) relationship between obesity and health.

Social perceptions of fatness like the ones that originated from the fears of the 1980s are said to have a greater negative effect on fat people than the medicalization of obesity. Herndon explains the social narrative about fatness by stating, “A majority of people in the United States believe that fat is unhealthy, immoral, and often downright disgusting” (125). She continues by citing cultural narratives about fatness, including the assumption that the lifestyle of a fat person is unfairly assumed to be lazy. According to April Herndon, such narratives are responsible for “the black cloud of misunderstanding and hatred that heavily hangs around the shoulders of people of size” (Herndon 126).¹⁹ These social narratives are a byproduct of the historical fear of being obese and the effect weight can have on someone’s life. These narratives are also reflected in current pop culture: Until recently, there have not been fat superheroes, most fat characters serve in the role of villain, goofy friend and comic relief, and body positive women are pushing for representation in the modeling industry.²⁰

Fat Ursula

¹⁹Herndon also cites the impacts of being an overweight woman by noting that any reference to a woman’s size, especially of a larger woman, suddenly silences her because of the embarrassment brought on by preexisting social perceptions of obesity.

²⁰ The body-positive movement focuses on encouraging women to embrace their size and fight for fair representation in the images produced in mass media.

Disney has had quite a few fat villains like Captain Ratcliff (*Pocahontas*) and the Queen of Hearts (*Alice in Wonderland*),²¹ but Ursula is the ultimate obese other. She lives in a sea cave that resembles a giant fish skeleton in the dark depths of the ocean, far away from the mermaids in the kingdom of Atlantica. The literal isolation of Ursula's home foreshadows the villainy she soon reveals. Viewers will assume there is a reason a member of the sea kingdom has been banished to a fish graveyard to live with two eels and hundreds of small, worm-like creatures that line the entrance to her cave, which viewers later learn are former victims of deals they made with the sea witch that ended badly. Before her body is ever revealed to the audience, there is already a sense of uneasiness associated with Ursula because of her physical placement in relation to Atlantica and the mermaids. Ursula is isolated because she is an evil sea witch who uses magic for her own success, which plays into Disney's traditional villain trope.²² However, Ursula's social isolation also makes sense given that she is fat and does not look like the other mermaids. Her isolation reinforces the idea that if someone is fat, he or she must hide his or her body away from society.

Ursula's first scene introduces the audience to her non-normative body while she watches a magical bubble playing live images of Ariel and Flounder swimming back to Atlantica. The entire frame is dimly lit with the most light coming from the whites of Ursula's eyes (see Figure 3.1).

²¹ Ratcliff's villainy is that of a white conqueror in the New World. He attempts to wage war against the Powhatan Indians in order to get gold, which they do not have. The Queen of Hearts has an affinity for decrying "off with their heads," and she makes the same threat to Alice, the movie's protagonist.

²² Each villainess looked at in this thesis uses magic for evil, and other villains do the same: Jafar, Dr. Facilier, and Maleficent.



Figure 3.1

They are practically glowing, acting as the only source of light in this scene. Her eyes being the only source of light in this scene enhances her evil. Eyes are considered to be the windows to the soul, and if they are the only things seen in a shroud of darkness, they are alluding to the darkness in Ursula. She is hidden in the shadows as she speaks, reflecting the fears of mysterious, unknown things hiding in the dark.²³ Ursula still has not been fully revealed, and this image of her eyes glowing in darkness provides her with an aura of fear before she ever comes into the light. When she does finally emerge from the shadows, the first part of her body to be revealed is not her face but her large right arm. As it reaches out of the nest to rest on a piece of rock, three distinct arm rolls are visible. The very first part of Ursula we see serves to emphasize her size and nothing else.

As the first shot of Ursula focuses closer and closer into the shadows in which she sits, she is seen reclining in her nest with her hand resting on her stomach and a seashell platter filled with shrimp propped inside. Ursula watching a bubble while eating parallels

²³ There is a tradition of thinking that there is a relationship between fear and the unseen. Edmund Burke talks about the power of the obscure in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*: “When we know the full extent of any danger... a great deal of the apprehension vanishes,” so something terrible in that is hidden in the dark becomes even scarier (74).

the real-world image of a fat person of watching television and eating food on the couch (see Figure 3.1), reflecting the assumed behaviors of lazy or slovenly lifestyles associated with obesity. Further emphasis is put on Ursula's eating habits as the next shot is a close-up of her mouth when she eats a live shrimp.²⁴ After she throws the food in her mouth, there are slurping and crunching noises followed by a loud gulp. Ursula eating a creature while it is still alive and the intense focus on the way she eats amplifies the grotesqueness of her body. The noises provoke sense of discomfort in the audience, causing the anxieties around fatness to become further evident and apparent. This focus on the noises Ursula makes as she eats can serve as a reflection of the "majority of people in the United States [believing] that fat is... down right disgusting" (Herndon 125). Ursula's grotesque eating habits follow the cultural expectations set on fat people.

The opinions and assumptions about fat bodies reflecting unhealthy and immoral lifestyles are reflected in a piece of Ursula's dialogue that occurs as soon as she finishes eating a shrimp. She dramatically exclaims, "And now look at me. Wasted away to practically nothing. Banished and exiled and practically starving." As she says "Wasted away to practically nothing," Ursula runs her hands down her figure, meaning she claims her body is withering away. However, the body on screen suggests otherwise, meaning Ursula claims to feel unsatisfied and underfed. In fact, this claim is easily backed by the last descriptor she gives herself: "practically starving." She proclaims she is hungry, but she ate shrimp just seconds prior to this declaration, demonstrating an insatiable appetite. There are two ways to read this scene. One reading is that Ursula is being sarcastic, and

²⁴ According to the American Heart Association, "shrimp and crawfish have more cholesterol than most other types of seafood."

she is aware of how she is perceived. However, she does not care about the opinions of others, which makes her even more threatening to the social norms her body already defies. The other reading is that Ursula is being serious; her insatiable appetite can be seen as an allusion to her constant hunger for power, but it is also a literal reference to her constant hunger, which reflects fears of overeating and obesity. Moreover, her unsatisfied hunger shows she is a glutton and greedy, further adhering to the perceived immoral lifestyles of obese people. Regardless of how she is read, both options make her a subversive character in this movie.

There also is a traditional trope in Young Adult Fiction of fat bodies, immoral lifestyles, and sex. Ursula is overtly sexy when she sings her song “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” shimmying her breasts right into the center of the frame before they are used to cover the shot and transition to the next scene. She also encourages Ariel to use “body language” to get the prince to fall in love with her. When Ursula tells Ariel this, she thrusts her hips back and forth, implying she knows how to use her sexuality to her advantage. The same sexual behavior fat bodies like Ursula’s demonstrate are investigated in Beth Younger’s “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature.” Young argues that there is an intersection between body image and sexuality in young adult fiction, and traditionally, the fatter characters are the ones with immoral sexual behavior.²⁵ She also claims that for some fat characters,

²⁵ Young looks at Judy Blume’s *Forever* as a way to explain the sexual behavior and how it defines a fat character, in this case Sybil. She notes that Sybil is described as having “been laid by at least six different guys” and the reasoning behind her sexual behavior is “her need to feel loved” (48). Sybil ends up pregnant and has to give the child up for adoption. Her entire sexual experience is shed in a negative light. Meanwhile her friend Katherine, who is very skinny and petite, has multiple sexual encounters with her boyfriend. Her stories of getting birth control and becoming empowered through her

sexual behavior is a result of them looking for self-assurance or validation because their bodies do not adhere to the societal norms of being thin. Ursula reflects characteristics of being a fat, sexual character in her appearance alone (see Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2

She wears jewelry, blue eye shadow, red lipstick, and red fingernail polish. She also has a beauty mark like that of Marilyn Monroe, a famous sex symbol, and noticeable cleavage. Moreover, she dresses like this even though she lives alone and has very little contact with the outside world.

Another notable moment in Ursula's first scene is the exit of her nest. She comes out belly first—again taking the focus away from her face like her arm did earlier—and lands on the ground with a thud. This subtle thud highlights her weight because very few objects should make a loud noise when they are floating to the bottom of the ocean. Ursula spreads her tentacles to make for an easy, floating landing, but she still thuds,

sexual experiences contrast to those of Sybil's, and the main difference between the two girls is their size.

landing on her tentacles with her back to the camera. The next six seconds of dialogue feature Ursula with her back to the camera and her large buttocks and broad shoulders serving as the focal points of the shot. This marks another moment at which Ursula's body and size are focused on more than her face. When her face is finally in a well-lit, close-up shot, she is immediately put into darkness with just her eyes glowing, hiding her large body and face once more. Her identifying feature in this introductory scene is her fat body.

Later in the movie, the scene when Ursula and Ariel finally meet face-to-face in Ursula's lair lays bare the extreme bodily differences between the antagonist and the protagonist. During the scene, Ursula makes a deal with Ariel: the princess will sacrifice her voice in exchange for legs and three days to win Prince Eric's love or else she will surrender her life to the sea witch. Ursula's body is tremendously larger than Ariel's tiny frame. The first side by side of the two characters is just their faces, but even then, the size difference is immediately notable. Ariel's head is approximately the size of Ursula's neck and chin area. In another moment while they stand on either side of Ursula's cauldron, their bodily differences are highlighted. Ursula's body takes up most of her half of the screen with little visible background while Ariel is barely a presence on her half of the screen. The extremities of size are also comparable in terms of the objects Ursula has in her lair. Ursula is bigger than the cupboard that she pulls ingredients for her transformation potion out of while Ariel's shoulder width is smaller than some of the ingredient bottles. During this scene, it becomes apparent that the ridiculousness of Ursula's body size compared Ariel's reflects anxieties of obesity because two bodily extremes are sharing the screen and each body represents good or evil.



Figure 3.3

Another interesting note about this scene comes from the clothing both women wear. Ariel is just in a seashell bra, but Ursula's entire torso is covered (see Figure 3.3). Upon first glance, it could be easily argued that the outfit choices are because they are two different species of sea creatures. However, a moment in Ursula's song "Poor Unfortunate Souls" proves otherwise. As Ursula sings, she mentions the story of a fat mermaid she helped who was "longing to be thinner." As she tells the story, she conjures up an image of the mermaid, and the fat mermaid is wearing the same full coverage body suit as Ursula. However, after Ursula transforms her into a thin mermaid, she has on a seashell bra like Ariel. There seems to be some sort of uniform for fat sea creatures, which marks Ursula as other due to her weight.

Moreover, Ursula's evil is also enhanced from the lighting in her "Poor Unfortunate Souls" scene. The sea witch's solo is dimly lit, much like her introductory scene, and the only source of light comes from her magic cauldron and the magic contract Ariel signs. When the first moment of illumination occurs as Ursula opens her cauldron, her entire stomach is highlighted and it stands out among the darkness of the lair. In Ursula's only solo of the movie, there is little to no light and the glow from the magical objects adds to the impending danger Ariel finds herself in within minutes. Ursula's

lighting, just like her body, is a stark contrast to the lighting in Ariel's own solos. Both versions of Ariel's "Part of Your World" are naturally illuminated from the sunshine. There is no magic to provide light and no darkness to dim it; the light associates Ariel and her body with nature and goodness. Moreover, unlike Ursula, Ariel is not isolated in the darkness—she is not hiding her body from the world because it is considered skinny, healthy, and natural. However, the natural light never finds Ursula in her lair because she is fat and evil. Her body is unnatural and unhealthy, especially in the context of the 1980s. This lack of natural light or refusal of the natural light to find Ursula reflects the social isolation many fat people feel and Ursula embodies.

Ariel must rely on her body and beauty to prove that she is the one Prince Eric should marry—to prove that she is the perfect match for him. Ursula must rely on her wit and magic to get what she wants, but in order to succeed, Ursula needs more than wit. She needs a body like Ariel's, and she gives herself one in the form of "Vanessa." Ursula's transformation alludes to a practice called passing, which some disabled persons use to hide their disability to shield themselves from the negative stereotypes placed on disabled bodies and to avoid discrimination and isolation²⁶. For Ursula, the decision to pass is a strategic:²⁷ she masks her non-normative embodiment to enchant Prince Eric and win control of the seas. Ursula gave herself a petite frame like Ariel's because she knows

²⁶ Disabled people who are able to pass may feel a sense of isolation from the disabled community they are technically a part of, so when they do reveal their disabilities, many describe it as "coming out" (Linton 21). Linton cites a woman's "coming out" to describe emotional toll passing can take: a woman was physically disabled for years, and she decided to "come out" after noting attempts to be like others were not making her happy. She became more comfortable with taking ownership of her disability, leading to an easier lifestyle for herself.

²⁷ Passing can be accidental or strategic. It just depends on who is doing the passing.

that she would not make a convincing bride-of-choice for Prince Eric if she removed her tentacles but remained fat. For Ursula to find success, she had to hide her fatness—she had to pass. While Ursula’s transformation into Vanessa is never seen on screen, one scene that highlights Ursula’s passing is when she is getting dressed for her marriage to Prince Eric (see Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4

Scuttle, Ariel’s seagull friend, flies by and hears Vanessa singing—using Ariel’s stolen voice—and celebrating her future success over the mermaid princess and King Triton. Vanessa twirls around and stands on her table to gaze into a mirror, which is larger than she is, to reveal Ursula’s face staring back at her. There is a moment when both Vanessa and Ursula share the screen and are connected through the mirror. Vanessa has a sharp jawline and small arms while Ursula has a double chin. Vanessa’s entire bosom is the size of Ursula’s face, and Ursula’s fat upper body takes up the entire mirror. She has

transformed her body to successfully hide the fat features deemed immoral and disgusting—she has passed.²⁸

There are other examples of Ursula passing with Vanessa's body. As soon as Prince Eric sees her walking in the darkness, the magic from Vanessa's seashell necklace enters the eyes of Eric. His eyes being what is immediately affected by the magic show that physical appearance, specifically being skinny and beautiful, is most important. The scene ends after Eric is entranced and cuts to Ariel discovering Vanessa and Eric are engaged. While Prince Eric may be under a spell, his servants and Grimsby, his most trusted ally, are not, and they all believe Vanessa is perfect. In fact, Grimsby even says upon meeting her, "She is lovely." Through all of this, Vanessa does not speak. She is being judged on Eric's word and her own physical presentation. In order to successfully win over members of Prince Eric's kingdom, she must adhere to the social expectations of a woman's body. Vanessa must be thin and petite just like Ariel. However, Ursula's plan to take over the seas fails, as she is foiled by a combination of sea life helping Ariel force Ursula out of passing and Ursula's own actions—she creates a giant whirlpool that brings shipwrecks to the surface. Prince Eric impales her with one of the old, sunken ships after she becomes a giant version of herself, restoring proper order to the ocean kingdom. Ursula's violent death in an enormous form of her fat body enhances the fearfulness of her body while also making her even more isolated because now both mermaids and humans fear her.

²⁸ Not everyone in the kingdom is convinced. Prince Eric's dog Max growls at Vanessa as she walks down the aisle at the wedding, showing yet again that animals can see past disguises, or in this case, passing, and will know the true character of the person they see. Unfortunately, the animals are not the ones making decisions in this film, and Ursula successfully passes.

Ursula's Larger Impact

Ursula represents the lengths to which people will go to adhere to the bodily norms established by society, and she represents to anxiety of not being able to adhere to the norms that have been set. Unfortunately, she also follows the traditional archetype of villainous non-normative embodiment Disney established with its first princess movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Through the second wave of Disney films, there are other evil characters with elements of embodied otherness including skin color. Mulan battles a male villain Shan-Yu, who has grey skin, sharp teeth, and glowing yellow eyes, alluding to yellow fever or animalistic violence. Shan-Yu's grey skin makes him look totally different from the other Asian characters in this film. *The Little Mermaid* shows that by the 1980s, Disney was still using anxieties about non-normative embodiment as the inspiration for the bodies and characterizations of villains moving forward. Unfortunately, this tradition persisted into the third wave of Disney princess films with movies like *Tangled*.

Old Mother Gothel's Love Affair with Hair and Contemporary Anxieties about Aging

Disney's *Tangled* features a love affair with hair. The story centers around the relationship between the youth-obsessed Mother Gothel and the young princess Rapunzel, and serves to expose the anxieties around aging in the 2000s and 2010s. When Mother Gothel kidnaps Rapunzel, she does so to use the stolen princess's magical golden locks to prevent her body from aging beyond repair. Each day when Mother Gothel visits her unknowing captive, she caresses each strand of hair. Gothel expects Rapunzel to always be ready to sing the magical song that makes Rapunzel's hair glow and rejuvenates Gothel's aging body. A centuries-old woman stealing an infant from her crib in the dead of night, locking her in a tower with no contact with the outside world, and tricking the child into thinking the centuries-old woman is her mother raises question about motherhood. However, I am going to focus on an underlying issue—an issue from the real world that Disney highlights through Mother Gothel's dangerous obsession with Rapunzel's healing hair. Namely, Mother Gothel's decision to kidnap the princess Rapunzel for instant access to her magic hair reflects present-day anxieties about aging.

Being Old

In the twenty-first century, Americans associate old age with inability, fragility, and weakness, which has led to a notable increase in the efforts to prevent bodies from aging or looking old. According to "Aging and Disability: Behind the Stereotypes," written by Dr. Meredith Minkler of the University of California Berkeley, the medical definition of geriatrics has caused anxieties about the probability of a cognitive decline caused by aging. Geriatrics focuses on diagnosing and treating disease in the elderly

while also addressing problems specifically related to aging, of a “nearly linear decline in physiological measures” from the age of thirty-to-eighty (Minkler 245). The mention of “linear decline” in the definition of geriatrics is what leads to the greatest amount of anxiety about aging. That perceived decline is investigated by Richard L. Beaulaurier and Samuel H. Taylor in “Dispelling Fears About Aging with a Disability: Lessons from the Disability Rights Community,” which states seniors’ belief that the onset of aging signifies the arrival of death via “a descending spiral with little hope for improvement” (Beaulaurier and Taylor 89). The geriatric fear of linear decline has been debunked in a study by Dorothy Field, K. Warner Schaie, and E. Victor Leino²⁹: “longitudinal studies... have demonstrated that, contrary to myth, no significant decline in intellectual functioning occurs with aging for the majority of older people, with the exception of the ‘terminal drop’ in cognitive ability that frequently occurs just prior to death” (Minkler 246). This means that the pervading belief that cognitive decline happens quickly with age is false. The “cognitive drop” feared by many does not happen once someone becomes classified as a senior or described as elderly. Instead, it happens just before death. Disproving the belief that there is a consistent decrease or “linear decrease” in ability as age increases can help us recognize that the anxieties around aging are based on falsehoods that have contributed to the way we view aging.

The proof that the linear decline does not truly exist may help to defeat the pervading beliefs that after looking old or passing a certain age, life as we know it will inevitably take a turn for the worse where bodies are seen as frail and dependent.

²⁹ This study was featured in *Psychology and Aging* and was titled “Continuity in Intellectual Functioning: The Role of Self-Reported Health.”

Richard L. Beaulaurier and Samuel H. Taylor investigate this fear of developing disability and losing the youth and independence that we believe we have a possession over:

As people age, it becomes increasingly important that they become aware of how rewarding and fulfilling life is, or can be for many people with disabilities... When individuals and families gain such understandings *before* the onset of a disability, limits to independence resulting from diminishing physical capabilities can be reduced or eliminated.

Ideally, this awareness of “how rewarding and fulfilling life is” could decrease the societal desire to look young. Unfortunately, until media outlets like Disney make changes to the way older characters are depicted, they will continue to contribute to the problem of fears of aging and may hinder improvement.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports there were 15.9 million “surgically and minimally-invasive cosmetic” procedures in the United States in 2015, marking an overall increase of 115 percent since 2000. The leading procedures include breast lifts (eighty-nine percent increase), buttock lifts (252 percent increase), lower body lifts (3,973 percent increase), and upper arm lifts (4,959 percent increase). In, 2017, The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reported another increase in those same procedures in just one year³⁰: breast lifts increased by three percent, buttock lifts increased by

³⁰ The following percentages only calculate the percentage increase from 2016 to 2017.

thirteen percent, and upper arm lifts increased by one percent.³¹ Other procedures that saw a noticeable increase were Botulinum Toxin Type A injections, which work to reduce facial lines like crow's feet and forehead creases. Soft Tissue Fillers and Chemical Peels, which both work to reduce the look of aging through removing outer layers of skin and softening wrinkles and lines, also saw an increase in use. This increase in cosmetic procedures all dedicated to making the face or the body look younger shows just how anxious we are to make faces and bodies look youthful, and it reflects the desires Mother Gothel has to look young—she just uses magic instead of plastic surgery to achieve her youthful physique.

Cosmetic companies release new anti-aging creams and formulas with each passing year, further reflecting the anxieties of looking old and the efforts to prevent the onset of aging. L'Oreal Paris has the Revitalift skin care package of “creams, treatments, moisturizers, pads, and serums,” and Neutrogena's website features celebrities in their anti-aging campaign with the quote, “We're not anti-aging, we're anti-wrinkles.” However, as wrinkles are a signifier of aging, the company's slogan is actually “anti-aging.” Neutrogena also features moisturizers and lotions that prevent signs of aging and looking old by providing products that keep women looking young. They, too, are hiding the natural process of aging. Dior makes an anti-aging crème called “Capture Totale” the “multi-perfection crème.” They call this \$165, two-ounce product “the new age-defying victory,” claiming it “circumvents the laws of time.” The company promises the crème will instantly correct all visible signs of aging on one's face, including wrinkles. These

³¹ Arm Lifts' increase from 2000 to 2017 was 5,235 percent, growing from 338 to 18,033 (The American Society of Plastic Surgeons).

companies' campaigns³² and products are only a few examples of the cosmetic industry highlighting the fears of aging in the 2000s and 2010s: people do not want to look old, feel old, or be labeled as old because those labels will affect the way they are seen by society. In 2018 we *are* "anti-wrinkles" and "anti-aging" just like Mother Gothel.

Untangling Old Mother Gothel

Examples of Disney's traditional typecasting and characterization of older women include the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, who poisons Snow White to maintain her status as the fairest of them all, and Lady Tremaine, the evil stepmother in *Cinderella* who forbids Cinderella from going to the ball and locks her in her room to keep her from winning the love of Prince Charming. In fact, Disney establishes from their first film that their older, female villainesses will do whatever it takes, "bartering everything for the sake of eternal youth, beauty, and social and political power" (Elnahla 116). Disney repeatedly associates old women with evil, which instills in children the belief that aging bodies are frail and inherently wicked; instead of being perceived as fragile and dependent, the older population must also worry about having the classification of wickedness attached to their bodies. Mother Gothel is the newest addition to this cast of evil, aging bodies.

³² Olay also carries an anti-aging package much like L'Oreal Paris, except these products are called "Olay Regenerist." There are anti-wrinkle primers, "rejuvenating cream" cleansers, "recovery cream," and moisturizer (Olay). All of these are created with the focus of looking younger with each use of the product, which is just another example of the numerous cosmetic products dedicated to helping people look young. This product offers to turn back time, which is exactly what Gothel wants.

In the opening scenes of *Tangled*, Flynn Rider, the prince figure, gives exposition via voiceover about how the characters of the film have found themselves in their current situations. The glimpse of Mother Gothel in the movie is when she first finds the magic flower that formed from “a single drop of sunlight.” Gothel is hiding behind a large rock and holding a lantern. She wears a red cloak that covers most of her body other than a hand holding a lantern and her face, which is wrinkled. Her lips are turned inward toward her mouth, which resembles a toothless mouth (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1

As Gothel begins walking toward the flower, she is visibly shaking and uses the rock as a way to keep herself steady as she moves. She is also hunched over, and her left arm is struggling to hold the lantern high, which would be needed to shed light on more surface area at once. However, she cannot even hold it eye level. These elements imply Mother Gothel has grown too old and weak to do most tasks including holding a lantern, which reflects the social anxieties and fears of becoming old and incapable.

The next time Gothel is on screen in the introductory narration is when Flynn Rider explains the true power of the flower after noting, “Well centuries passed...” It has

been hundreds of years since Gothel first found the magical plant, and this time Gothel is in a black cloak, which seems to signify signifies that she has grown darker and more evil with the passing of time. She has her hood on when she approaches the flower that she has been hiding for centuries; at first glance, all that can be seen is her wrinkled face and seemingly toothless mouth. Again, she is hunched over, slow moving, and cannot lift her lantern higher than her chest. When she sits next to the flower and lifts the woven basket she has made to hide it, Gothel quickly looks around in the darkness to make sure no one is near to see her most prized treasure before removing her black hood to reveal a full head of grey hair. As she steps closer to the magic flower, which is emitting a golden glow, her age is visibly highlighted: she has swollen joints in her hands, grey eyebrows, wrinkles all over her face, and a saggy neck—but as she sings, all of her physical signs of aging disappear. Not only does the flower’s glow illuminate the aging body of Mother Gothel, but it sheds light on the truth of Mother Gothel’s obsession with staying young. The flower’s removal of visible signs of aging reflects the steps many people in present day take to eliminate signs of aging through cosmetic procedures and serums. While both the flower, surgery, and cosmetics hide wear and tear, neither removes the true age of a person—but because his or her age is now hidden, the flower, surgery, and cosmetics have done their job to appease the fears of looking old.

As we learn in the opening scenes, Gothel was obsessed with being young long before Rapunzel came into the picture. In fact, her age is clearly defined by the dress she wears throughout her film; it is from the Renaissance, “which is 400 years before the time period of when the film takes place in the 1780s... [further proving] how Gothel and Rapunzel do not match up and how long Gothel has been living” (Elnahla 123). In the

opening scene, Flynn Rider calls Gothel's desire to look young and her use of the flower as "creepy," meaning her thinks it is bizarre for this woman to travel to this flower for years and years just to look young. In fact, the passage of time shows that looking young seems to be the only thing Mother Gothel does for hundreds of years. It is the only thing we know about her, and it is her reason for being. Gothel becomes part of Disney's historical trope of establishing old women as evil characters as she hoards the powers of the healing flower for herself and refuses to share it with those in need of its magic. Moreover, Gothel's centuries-long dedication to remaining young also reflects the negative sides of passing³³ like being isolated from one's true community; for Mother Gothel, not only is she isolated from her contemporaries, she has outlived them.

One important quote that reemerges throughout *Tangled* and emphasizes current-day outlooks on aging is the song that activates the healing power of the flower and Rapunzel's hair. When Mother Gothel visits the flower to rejuvenate her body—to take the preventative measures to stop her aging—she sings, "Flower gleam and glow. Let your power shine. Make the clock reverse. Bring back what once was mine, what once was mine." This song becomes what causes Rapunzel's hair to glow, and that same magic is what rejuvenates Mother Gothel when she visits the captive princess. Gothel asks the flower and hair to heal the wear and tear time has left on her body and remove the

³³ There are negative effects on those that practice passing. Simi Linton shares that a disabled person that is able to pass endures an emotional toll because they are hiding a part of themselves; unfortunately, there can be extra stress put on the physical demands of his or her life because he or she chooses not to use devices to assist him or her. In reality, that is a sacrifice many are willing to make because feeling isolated or misunderstood seems much worse.

physiological signs of non-normative embodiment she has acquired with the passing of time.

Gothel sings to the flower for the first time on screen through a shot of just her hands reaching out of her black cloak toward the glowing, magic plant. The golden light reveals signs of aging, like liver spots on her arms, wrinkles on her hands, and veins on her arms. The shot also highlights Gothel's hands trembling while she reaches them out, which is another physical sign of aging associated with weakness and fragility. Her voice is also trembling and slow as she sings, and she speaks in a whisper, struggling to finish the song. In fact, the voice she has in the opening scene is completely different from the one she has in the rest of the movie, while in her younger looking body. As she finishes the last two lines of the song, her voice gets stronger and louder, and the shaking in it is gone. Her wrinkles disappear, her lips become fuller, her neck's skin is tighter, and her hair is jet black. Right after her transformation, she hears people coming in search of the flower, so she quickly runs away. Her ability to move quickly and grab the lantern effortlessly is a stark contrast to the ability of the body she previously exhibited. This contrast follows the fears of becoming old and unable because many believe older bodies cannot operate in the same fashion because they are too fragile. This belief reflects the falsehoods of the linear decline of a body because while Gothel is older at the beginning of the film, she is still able to get to the flower, carry the lantern, sing the song, and kneel next to it. However, because it takes her longer to complete these tasks and her

completion of them does not follow the established expectations of performance,³⁴ her age is considered limiting to her.

Royal soldiers soon find Gothel's magical secret, and the magic flower that healed her is taken away. When royal soldiers bring it to the ailing queen in the castle, she eats the flower in order to survive her final stages of pregnancy, causing the magic of the flower to translate into Rapunzel's genetic makeup. One important feature of the magic flower is that it is being used for explicitly medical purposes for the ailing queen, which makes its use for Gothel in healing her aging body. In fact, Flynn Rider describes the flower as having "healing power" and as being responsible for giving the kingdom a "healthy baby girl." Members of a kingdom searched for the flower—or a "miracle," as Flynn Rider describes it in the first scenes—to save the life of their queen, and Gothel uses the flower to heal herself. It is as if old age requires medical treatment, as if it is some kind of disease. Mother Gothel's motivations to kidnap Rapunzel and use the healing power of magic reflect the fear about a decline in independence associated with old age, even though there are studies that have disproven the decline.

Another notable line of the song is, "Bring back what once was mine, what once was mine." Gothel is taking ownership of her youth and expects to always possess what was once hers, demonstrating an important problem about aging that Disney's fictional kingdom does not acknowledge. Gothel's desire to look young and be young raises a few questions: Why not live forever? What does it matter what her body looks like when she

³⁴ Pace-of-life refers to the time it takes to complete daily activities, and people with "normal" bodies establish the timing. Susan Wendell discusses this in her research. Just like Gothel in *Tangled* an older body can complete a task, but it may take longer to complete. Pace of Life and expectations of performance can also be seen in Disney's first villainess, The Evil Queen.

can spend centuries experiencing life, culture, and evolution? The answer is simple, and the implications of the answer reflect anxieties of aging. While in numerical age Gothel is substantially older than any other character, she does not look older than everyone else. Gothel chooses to look young and retain her abilities in a young body because she reflects anxieties of the twenty-first century that aging people are incapable and unable to care for themselves. She embodies the fear that increased aging correlates with decreased independence.

One scene in particular really highlights Gothel's love affair with hair and what it symbolizes—youth—is the first scene Rapunzel and Mother Gothel share together. When Gothel arrives outside of the tower, she yells to Rapunzel to let down her hair. When there is not an immediate response to Gothel's request, she also adds "I'm not getting any younger down here!" Gothel expresses her desire to get to the hair and its magic to prevent her aging, and what Rapunzel hears as a playful joke from her "Mother" is actually a very literal statement from the youth-obsessed kidnapper. Gothel's passive aggressive attitude toward Rapunzel is also demonstrated in that sentence and further seen throughout the movie. She seems to be frustrated that she now has to visit a teenager instead of a flower to get what she wants. Gothel shows a lack of love for Rapunzel because her intentions to care for Rapunzel lie in her desire to hoard her hair's healing powers. Gothel's lack of affection for Rapunzel is strange because after years of watching a young woman grow up and after countless hours spent with her, Gothel is still only concerned with looking young not with the well-being of Rapunzel. This proves that Gothel's only concern in life is her physical appearance, and her lack of love for Rapunzel also reinforces the stereotype of old women as evil in Disney's films.

Moments after she yells up to the top of the tower, Gothel, still wearing her black cloak, makes her entrance by climbing up Rapunzel's hair. When she removes the hood, her hair has a greyer tone to it and her eyes are sunken, showing she has arrived for the sheer purpose of rejuvenating herself. She has come to visit the hair, not her "daughter." In fact, when Gothel gets into the tower, she does not hug Rapunzel. She goes straight to the mirror to look at herself and check for signs of aging, ignoring Rapunzel completely. Gothel's dismissive behavior shows that the only true target of her affection and attention is Rapunzel's hair. While Gothel stands at the mirror and investigates her body, she notices signs of time by pulling back her face to where she believes it should be and noting two liver spots that have appeared on her left hand. Rapunzel begins asking her a question, but Gothel quickly interrupts, saying, "Rapunzel, Mother's feeling a little run down. Would you sing for me, dear? Then we'll talk." Her interruption of Rapunzel and refusal to listen until after she sings shows Gothel only came to the tower for "healing." She is actually annoyed with Rapunzel and rolls her eyes at the young princess as she goes to fetch a stool to sit on.

Rapunzel does sing for Gothel, but she sings quickly because she wants to talk about her birthday. Gothel does not like the quick song and yells "Wait! Wait!" repeatedly because she is scared she will not get the youth she desires. However, both women get what they want by the end of the song: Gothel is healed and Rapunzel can talk. She asks Gothel to let her see the floating lanterns for her birthday, but the process to get to the question is arduous: Gothel calls Rapunzel's mumbling an annoyance and smiles with impatience. It seems strange for a woman serving in a maternal role for a

teenager to be so insulting and callous toward the daughter figure in her life; however, Rapunzel is not her daughter. She is merely the source of youth for Gothel.

As soon as Rapunzel makes her birthday wish, Gothel immediately tells her no, refusing to let the hair out of her possession and marking the beginning of the song “Mother Knows Best.” The point of the song is to scare Rapunzel from the outside world in an effort to keep her hair hidden. Gothel begins by singing, “You’re as fragile as a flower,” which is an explicit reference to where she originally got her youthful appearance from and where she wishes she could still get magic. Gothel then reminds Rapunzel why she keeps her in the tower, making Rapunzel think it is because she loves her too much to expose her to the dangers of the outside world. However, when she sings the lines “You know why we stay up in this tower... to keep you safe and sound, dear,” she is not saying it to Rapunzel. Gothel says this while she is running her hands through Rapunzel’s hair, turning her back to Rapunzel and making eye contact with her hair (see Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2

She even nuzzles the hair after she says those words. “You” and “dear” do not refer to Rapunzel; they refer to the hair Gothel desires more than anything else, which in turn

represents her centuries-long obsession with hiding her age. The endearing terms spoken to the hair are only reinforced when Gothel calls Rapunzel “gullible, naive, positively grubby, ditsy, and a bit... vague.” A decent person who has known someone for years would not call her daughter or daughter-figure stupid or dumb, but Gothel does because she is not concerned with a teenaged girl that stands in between her and the magic she craves. The only reason she cares for Rapunzel being alive is because she cares so much about staying young.

The ending of the song best demonstrates the false relationship Gothel shares with Rapunzel. Gothel says, “I love you very much dear,” looking directly at Rapunzel, and the princess responds with, “I love you more.” However, Gothel then runs her fingers through Rapunzel’s hair, and while looking at the hair, says, “I love you most.” Again, “you” refers to the hair not Rapunzel: Gothel explicitly and intentionally refers to the one thing keeping her young as the ultimate recipient of her love. After this, Gothel leaves the tower and scene by saying, “I’ll see you in a bit my flower.” She references the flower, the original source of magic, again, equating Rapunzel with an inanimate object instead of seeing her as a person of value. Gothel is also only in the tower for a total of five minutes and twelve seconds; after days of not seeing her “daughter,” she only stays long enough to get the magical cure she craves and have brief conversation. This same pattern can be inferred to have happened numerous times since she first stole the princess. The amount of time the two spend apart—Gothel in the world and Rapunzel in the tower—is more than likely substantial. This assumption of time is supported through the movie because Gothel does not have access to Rapunzel’s after the princess escapes the tower, so there is a long amount of time Gothel can last before she has to come back for more

healing. Therefore, Gothel must visit Rapunzel for a few minutes every week, and then she leaves her in the tower to continue living in total isolation just like she once left the flower hidden under a basket, away from the world. This shows Gothel only visits when she needs the magic instead of visiting to see Rapunzel.

Gothel's obsession with youth becomes deadly by the end of the film. She captures and stabs Flynn Rider while he tries to save Rapunzel, and after Rapunzel bargains with Gothel to live with her forever in exchange for Flynn Rider's life, he foils the plan by cutting off her hair. As soon as he makes the cut, Gothel begins screaming "No!" repeatedly, mixing in an occasional shriek. While she screams, she tries to gather as much hair as possible in hopes that it will not turn brown and lose its healing magic forever; however, she cannot stop the loss of magic or youth (see Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3

She holds the hair in an aging hand that has become veiny, pale, wrinkled, and swollen, and she begins asking, "What have you done? What have you done?" The camera moves to her face, which has become wrinkled with yellow teeth, liver spots, and grey hair. She immediately runs to a shattered mirror and sees her reflection, which causes her to scream and sob while pulling her hood over her face. By hiding the age she has been so

ashamed to reveal, Gothel shows that her first concern is to conceal, which reflects her centuries-long dedication to looking young. In the midst of her tantrum, Gothel falls out of the window of the tower, and when she hits the ground, she is nothing but dust. Her turning to dust alludes to the cremation of bodies that many people choose upon the death of a family member and returns everything to natural order because there is no longer a woman living longer than she should.

Mother Gothel's Ending Obsession

Gothel's transformation and panic at being old shows the inevitability of death and the need to embrace aging that Richard L. Beaulaurier and Samuel H. Taylor discuss. By understanding "how rewarding and fulfilling life with disability and old age is, or can be...before the onset of disability," the fear of aging is eliminated (Beaulaurier and Taylor). Throughout the film, Gothel did everything in her power—hiding a flower, kidnapping an infant, hiring henchmen, attempting murder—to stay young, and all of her efforts ultimately backfired. Gothel's story reflects the issues pertaining to aging that our current society still battles today. She reflects the fears of non-normative embodiment in the 2010s. Because she adhered to the anxieties around aging bodies and the fear of growing old, she was never able to enjoy the last stages of her life.

Conclusions

The public world is a place where the ideal body—one of strength and performance—is valued. “Weakness, illness, rest, recovery, pain, death, and the negative (devalued) body are private, generally hidden, and often neglected... disability and illness [go] underground, because there is no socially acceptable way of expressing it” (Wendell 40). The lack of acknowledgement is why there is a lack of understanding and tolerance for the devalued body. However, Susan Wendell notes that the sheer public presence of people with disabilities “has many potential benefits for people without disabilities” because the non-disabled will form a better understanding of differences among people and of “realities of physical limitations.” This could also lead to a shrinking fear of disability—a fear that directly leads to the stigmatizing stereotypes and the isolation people with disabilities experience.

There is a connection between Disney villains and non-normative embodiment for each historical and cultural moment at which they were created. The Evil Queen represents fears about looking old and unable to work during the Great Depression, when bodies were judged on appearance. Ursula embodies the anxieties around fat bodies or becoming fat during the 1980s—a time at which the cholesterol and fat-free diets came to the forefront. Mother Gothel reflects current-day fears of looking old and the extreme preventative steps that are taken to hide the look of aging to not be seen as frail and dependent. The first three waves of Disney have seen a direct reflection of the cultural and social construction of disability, and the non-normative embodiment put on screen has not helped to advance a deeper understanding or appreciation for the disabled community.

However, there have been notable steps taken in Disney's newest film *Moana*, which was released in 2016. One of the characters is Moana's grandmother: an older woman who believes in reincarnation in the form of an individual sea creature that speaks to each person, which, in her case, is a stingray. Her grandmother embraces old traditions of the ancestors that have come before her and encourages Moana to do the same; she encourages Moana to embrace her history. There is an underlying lesson taught by Moana's grandmother throughout the movie about appreciating ancestors that paved the way for further exploration and living; however, she reminds Moana that the only way her future was possible was because of the people who came before her. Her grandmother celebrates death by remembering ancestors, and she looks forward to her old age and death because of what she believes will come. After her grandmother's death, Moana sets sail, and while she is floating on the open sea, discouraged and alone, a giant glowing stingray swims up beside her and floats onto her boat, morphing into the spirit of her grandmother. The spirit is able to provide her granddaughter with solace and strength even after death. She is still present and influential in Moana's life as an old woman and as a spirit.

Moana's grandmother is a step in the right direction in terms of aging and the non-normative embodiment associated with it because the grandmother is one of the most loved characters in the film. However, even with positive steps made toward aging, there is still an evil crab named Tamatoa, and he has one of the most explicit disabilities in Disney—he is missing a leg, and he also has cavities in his teeth that have been filled with diamonds. While there was a positive step in the right direction with the grandmother character, the inclusion of an evil disabled character does not help Disney's

case. In order for there to be true positive change in the Disney films, there need to be more good characters—more heroes and princesses—that exhibit forms of non-normative embodiment or disability, like Moana’s grandmother. When that moment comes and when there is a villain with a body that is considered “normal,” there will have been positive steps made to provide audiences with a better understanding of disabled people.

The importance of Disney’s depictions of non-normative embodiment cannot be stressed enough. The influence they have over society and the next generation means that they are the ones setting the social cues to follow. Disabled bodies, aging bodies, larger bodies, and other non-normative bodies are historically and culturally typecast as villainous or monstrous, and that negative classification only serves to enhance and encourage the social constructs that negatively affect people in the real world who have similar bodies. Too often, disabled bodies are seen as limited and unable. Too many times aging bodies are seen as dependent and fragile. Too many times larger bodies are seen as slovenly and lazy. Rarely do we see these bodies realistically or positively represented in the media, and until that happens, literature, movies, and other media will continue playing a hand in the negative shaping of non-normative embodiment. However, if a large media conglomerate like Disney were to create a character that embraces her non-normative embodiment, the company can help recreate the present-day narrative of what it means to be disabled.

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