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Age, Power, and Beauty in Neil Gaiman's Fantasies

Neil Gaiman's oeuvre is a well-studied section of the fantastic and for good reason: spanning decades, genres, age groups, and media, his works have become a touchstone of contemporary speculative fiction, especially in terms of appropriation of fable and fairy tale into fantasy.[1] These have been examined from critical lenses including fairy-tale studies (Slabbert), the dialogic relationship between his works and Victorian fairy tales (Collins), feminist perspectives (Czarnowsky), and adaptation studies (Perino; Klapcsik). Gaiman focalizes many of his fairy-tale and fable appropriations on the voices of women, but the deployment of fairy-tale figures in postmodern appropriations also involves the repetition of stereotypical representations of women, particularly older women or witches. As Kay Turner notes in her consideration of "Frau Holle," "no matter what narrative name she bears—witch, hag, grandmother, fairy, sorceress, even goddess—the old woman of the fairy tale is distinguished at once by an excess of miraculous power and knowledge" (Turner, "At Home" 51), and that "the charisma associated with these female figures emanates from their unusual propensity for agency" (Turner, "Playing with Fire" 246). The consideration of age constructs in fiction, especially in fairy tales, is necessary because "fairytales' depiction of old age has become a template for viewing older women in reality more broadly" (Anjirbag and Joosen 1). With the context of this critical discussion in mind, I return to Gaiman's works to examine them through a lens that unites the concerns of both age studies and fairy-tale studies, reflecting Sylvia Henneberg's observation that sexism in

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children's classics is "compounded by a hefty dose [of] ageism when female elders emerge only to be diminished" (126). This article will primarily examine *Stardust, The Sleeper and the Spindle*, and "Chivalry" as these are the most closely drawn from fairy tale and fable, and they are all narratives that hinge on the intersection of gender, power, and age. By paying more attention to the construction of older women in these narratives, I ask questions about the potential imagined in society for women as they age.

Often Gaiman's works are characterized as demonstrating "the contemporary urge to rewrite fairy tales from a feminist perspective" (Klapcsik 330). Despite this, women in Gaiman's works with few exceptions dull in comparison to the men and boys whose voices, thoughts, and growth are given far more room to breathe on the page, and in fact, whose gaze often mediates the reader's view of the women they encounter. Considering ageism as a cross-section to the male/female politics that run deeply in Gaiman's oeuvre reveals important insights into how age affects perception and construction of gender and gendered motivations in narrative, as his works become exemplary of how "fairy tales have yet to fully break free from this constraint" (Crofts and Hatter 36) of intertwined age stereotypes and gendered double standards. Susan Pickard describes this double standard with her characterization of the figure of the "old Hag," a figure that "depicts the deep resistance towards old age that is located in our collective consciousness" (2). For Pickard, the "fear of ageing and old age" is, culturally speaking, a "defining existential crisis" (3) that requires deconstruction as it reinforces systems of social inequalities and hierarchies through its interaction in a "complex meshwork of social stratification" (3). Drawing from Gullette's description of the narrative of decline, Pickard illustrates how individuals are socially conditioned to be sensitive to signs of aging as signals that youth is ending, and with it, the best times of individuals' lives—and how this is meant to be avoided at all costs (3–4). Considering that "literary reconfigurations of the hag figure not only provide intertextual revisions of the fairytale, but may also be related to the wider implications of this figure and related discourses on age in reality" (Anjirbag and Joosen 1–2), I will demonstrate here how such preoccupation with aging affects the ways older characters are imagined in fantasy works, especially where age intersects with gender.

It is notable in light of this preoccupation with gender and aging that, especially in his fairy-tale appropriations, Gaiman often draws on mythical representations of women with intertextual resonances. Where readers experience adaptations or appropriations of mythical, folkloric, or fairy-tale figures in wider narratives, readers' recognition and prior knowledge can fill in gaps, leaving them to experience such new works "as palimpsests through [their] memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation"

(Hutcheon 8). Such methods reduce the need for more development of these characters on the part of the author and leave space for other focalizing characters to take center stage. Furthermore, when female characters are drawn from or constructed in order to evoke a mythical quality or element, they do not age or have to change; they steady the narrative and root the sense of otherworldliness through their archetypical invocations, but are never developed further, used as plot devices, and discarded when no longer needed. We see this in the deployment of forgotten goddesses in *American Gods* who are never given the same depth or character development as their male counterparts, and when Bilquis is killed (Gaiman, *American* 406) in an authorial move that parallels a phenomenon known as "fridging" in comic and popular culture discourses. Comic writer Gail Simone coined this term in 1999 to describe a pattern of female characters being tortured, maimed, or murdered in horrific ways to further plot points or male character development (see Romano and Abad-Santos; Simone), which casts Bilquis's death in a light that requires further examination. As Julie Sanders asserts in her consideration of adaptation and appropriation as processes as well as textual objects, myth, fairy tale, and folklore all in different ways offer "archetypical stories available for re-use and recycling by different ages and cultures" (105); what does it mean that in the redeployment of goddesses, witches, and other women with magical or powerful agency in Gaiman's works, these women occupy positions of stasis as characters, and rarely are seen to grow and change? Even when fulfilling their full, empowered potential, such as the women who represent the triple goddess in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the women themselves do not grow or change and develop as individual characters; they exist in an othered space and time in order to facilitate the narrative and growth of the main character.

Similarly, if part of the "aim" of adaptation or rewriting is "not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contraction" (Sanders 15), by revisiting Gaiman's works with an eye to the intersection of age and gender I specifically ask how, or even if, these characters are complicated or expanded from their stereotypical deployment. In *Anansi Boys*, Mrs. Higgler, Mrs. Bustamonte, Miss Noles, and Mrs. Dunwiddy are examples of the "wise old mentor" trope (Henneberg 129). They act as spiritual conduits to another world where Charlie connects with his heritage and not developed beyond who they need to be for Charlie's development. The women of *The Graveyard Book* are long deceased, locked into their identities at the time they died. In *Neverwhere*, the Hunter is implied to be very old, answering a question about her age with "as old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 232). She embodies the ageless, timeless, and mythic sensibility of Faerie, which divorces her from Richard's understanding of age norms (something that is at the forefront of his trying to construct meaning in a new world

as he consistently tries to figure out the ages of his female companions in relation to him). Age is a constant yet underdiscussed companion to gendered construction in Gaiman's fantastic works, and nowhere is that more clear than in *Stardust*.

Stardust and the Pursuit of Youth

Stardust began as an illustrated fantasy novel created by Neil Gaiman with artist Charles Vess. Published as a single volume by Vertigo and DC Comics in 1999 (Collins), it was adapted to film by director Matthew Vaughn in 2007, and the text has been re-released as a traditional novel with Vess's illustrations limited to chapter headings and frontispieces when present. This is not a fairy-tale retelling per se, but rather a narrative that takes place in Faerie with recognizable figures from other fairy story and folkloric traditions, most notably, the witches. The narrative is composed of three interwoven plots: the first, a young man named Tristan/Tristran Thorne[2] is pursuing a fallen star to give to his true love so she'll marry him; the second, the heirs to the throne of the Faerie kingdom of Stormhold are in pursuit of the jewel that will confer the crown to one of them; the third, three witches, referred to as the Lilim or witch-queen in the text, are in pursuit of the star in order to consume her immortal heart and regain their youth. Tristan/Tristran is cast as the hero of the novel and the film, and both narratives are focalized through his experiences. As a consequence, the narrative is cast as a chivalric romance or quest story (Brown). However, the conflict that drives all the plots forward is focused not around him, but rather, around the star, Yvaine, and the witches who are in pursuit of her.

Age dynamics exacerbate the gendered dynamics that also underpin the conflict between the star and the witches. As Crofts and Hatter note, Yvaine "will shine indefinitely, remaining forever beautiful and eternally young" (22), and is the antithesis of the witches. In text of the novel, the Lilim are referred to as crones in a filthy cottage, with eyes the "colorless grey of extreme age" (72), who slay animals to work their divining (69–74), with additional details regarding the "hairy chins" (74) of the two who remain old after the eldest consumes what was remaining of the heart of the last star to fall from the sky and regains her youthful form. In the Vess illustrations their haggardness, wrinkles, and brutality are emphasized, as the divination scene in the comic edition features an illustration highlighting the moment each of the Lilim chooses an organ from the slain stoat, a slightly more than half-page close-up few of three gnarled and age-spotted hands and arms dripping with blood (Gaiman and Vess 65) positioned above the corresponding text. In the film, the horror that is caused by these three women practicing their craft is

emphasized by the age shifting of the three actresses to show an abundance of wrinkles, thinned hair, and bodies that have given in to the ravages of time in their shape and appearance. Strategic age shifting is a practice described by Sanna Lehtonen in which age is changed to achieve a goal (44). In the film the age shifting is both a narrative device where the aged witch is transformed into a younger version of herself and a metaconstruction of the medium of film. For the characters of the witches to be believable, the actresses themselves are also aged-shifted to be old beyond their real ages. This age shifting also emphasizes moral positioning within the story, as the viewers watch one of the sisters remove a live animal from a cage as the other caged animals cry and howl until a glass knife is brought down sharply and the animal dies, and viewers then watch the indifference with which the sisters rummage through its entrails, something repeated in a second divination scene later in the film (*Stardust*). In such scenes, visual connections are made between ideas of age, gender, beauty, and power that underpin how these stock characters are then deployed across this narrative.

The connection between beauty, age, and power is made even more forcefully in the screen adaptation during the transformation of the eldest witch sister, named Lamia in the film, into her younger self. Lamia stands before a mirror, tears the hat (and some of her hair) off her head with a cry, exposing her wispy, thinned hair and balding skull, before using her whole palm to put the glowing remnant of the last fallen star's heart in her mouth. The camera pans around her body as she glows and the transformation takes place. Her skin, eyes, teeth, and hair are all rejuvenated, and as she and her sisters gaze at her in the mirror, she smirks at herself. She then turns around so the reflection of her back can be seen in the mirror over her shoulder. She drops the gown she was wearing to the floor, looks over her shoulder, and smirks again as her sisters roll their eyes before the scene ends. The "hag" (Pickard) or "evil old witch" (Henneberg) does the impossible and reclaims her youth and beauty, but the cost is significant. In the corresponding illustration, the moment of consumption is not depicted, but the effects are, as the eldest, rejuvenated witch in a deep red dress towers in the foreground above her comparatively elderly, huddling sisters in the background and is described as having "scarlet lips" and a "deep red tongue" (Gaiman and Vess 67), colors that are associated with blood, sensuality, and bloodthirstiness, also emphasizing the consumption that has just happened and that is yet to happen. This moment of consumption, especially as visualized in Vess's illustrations and on screen, brings home a commentary about age, beauty, and power, and how these things are intertwined specifically for women in immoral and vampiric ways, as they are made more horrific even than the parallel narrative of fratricide for the throne of Stormhold.

Crofts and Hatter analyze the ties between aging and gender by focusing on the pairings of Yvaine and the witches, and Tristan/Tristran and Prince Septimus, to conclude that the *Stardust* transmedia encode a "distinct gendered split when depicting age and aging for the central characters" where "for the men, the narratives show ageing as primarily positive" (22) versus what they read as an emphasis on youth for women. They also assert that the text disrupts gendered assumptions around aging in a revolutionary way, using "the patriarchal fantasy of the eternally youthful woman against itself, ending patriarchal lineage forever" (25), while the film instead reinscribes age and gender norms and biases, stressing patriarchal succession and disenfranchising Yvaine (26). I agree that aging discourses are heavily gendered in the *Stardust* transmedia, and that the textual ending disrupts patriarchal succession as Yvaine rules Stormhold forever. I also endorse that the disparate ending of the film where the witch is defeated via Yvaine's and Tristan's love before they spend eternity together is a decisive change that reinscribes the fairy-tale resolution of youth and beauty defeating an older, corrupted generation. However, Crofts and Hatter's premise that the narrative favors aging as a positive process for men while youth being favored for women relies on reading the witch sent after the star as the youngest/most beautiful (25), which is not quite correct. Both the novel text and the illustrated text indicate that it is in fact the eldest sister who sets out to capture the star (Gaiman, *Stardust* 72; Gaiman and Vess 65). The film never states it explicitly but it seems implied by the fact that Lamia's physical age is more advanced than her sisters, indicated by the state of her wrinkles, age spots, and balding, as well as her status as their leader. While it is interesting that Yvaine's eternal rule of Stormhold after Una's regency in the textual narrative disrupts patriarchal succession, I struggle with the conclusion that the text's resolution of the conflict between the witches and the star indicates "a new departure from the classic Snow White fairy-tale ending that speaks toward a more progressive relationship between youth and age for women" (Crofts and Hatter 37). Crofts and Hatter are right in stating that the textual ending disrupts the open violence that Snow White fairy-tale retellings usually resolve with, as Yvaine crosses paths with the witch again in the market at Wall, and the witch has given up her quest for the star's heart. While Yvaine's and Tristran's story continues onward from there, this is the last readers see of the witch. The violence between the young and old woman, between the beauty and the hag, might have been removed. However, there is no future for the witch, no implication of a life waiting outside waiting to die, with her sisters, now that her beauty and youth are gone and with it, apparently, her powers.

By looking more closely at the witch's implied end, unseen as it is, I challenge the idea that this resolution points to a more "progressive" generational

relationship because "she at least accepts her defeat and returns to her sisters without any violence" (Crofts and Hatter 37). While it is not the same "violent hyperbole" of the film that "emphasizes once again the traditional youth (good) against age (evil) binaries that dominate Hollywood's depiction of younger/older women" (Crofts and Hatter 38), it also does nothing to destigmatize aging for women, nor does it reflect the potentials for relationships that are other than antagonistic between young and old women that Turner reveals the potential for. Gaiman's description of the witch in the final scene emphasizes the grotesque aspects of aging, the loss of faculties such as sight, the loss of ability through her hobbling on a stick and "palsied and swollen-knuckled hands" (Gaiman, *Stardust* 260), and perhaps most importantly, her ability to occupy space, as she is described as having shrunk to the size of a child through extreme age (259–60). This shift in characterization also embodies a move from powerful witch to the "ineffectual crone" who establishes a "simplistic equation between aging, withdrawal, and decline" (Henneberg 129).

The idea that older women must consume younger ones to retain beauty, power, or relevance, or else fade into the background of society that doesn't hold a place for them, is not one that I would call disruptive or productive. Readers never see what happens when the witch returns to her sisters, or if she even makes it home. We only have Yvaine's hope that they are not too hard on her for her failure, which points to neither a futurity for the witch character—and those she might stand for—nor even a pleasant present from Gaiman's description of her physical form. This exchange happens between Yvaine, who will never show the signs of age, and the witch at her oldest point. This can be read as a reinforcement of Sanna Lehtonen's reading of age shifting as a punishment where "regained youth is a reward" and "premature old age is a curse" (43) in that the witch's immorality has been punished through her having no choice but to bear the weight of her age, while Yvaine's eternal youth and rule and intrinsic good or purity have become linked through the narrative. Additionally, there is no intergenerational exchange or kinship developed in this resolution; a lack of enmity is not a sign of progress. The witch and Yvaine still move in different directions, despite the fact that at some point, the witch is likely the only character who could understand what Yvaine stood to face as an immortal star now earthbound, and a chance for intergenerational kinship born out of a resolution of enmity is lost. As such, while some of the gendered implications of age and succession are challenged in the textual narrative of the *Stardust* transmedia, there is no place for older women in the resolution of this narrative that is at its heart about age. This is a pattern that persists across Gaiman's fairy-tale appropriations.

New Fairy Tale, Same Old Story

The Sleeper and the Spindle is a more direct postmodern retelling in comparison to the *Stardust* transmedia, included in the collection *Trigger Warning* and also published as a stand-alone picture book with illustrations by Chris Riddell. It is a fairy-tale retelling of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," where Gaiman asks what would happen if "two stories were happening at the same time. And what if the women who were already the subjects of the stories had a little more to do, and were active and not passive" (Gaiman, *Trigger Warning* xxxv). Chris Riddell's illustrations add a gothic dimension to this postmodern fairy tale, featuring the kingdoms of Dorimar and Kanselaire. Three dwarfs cross under the mountains between Dorimar and Kanselaire to buy a gift for the queen of Kanselaire before she is married, an event that she views as the beginning of the end of her life, her ability to choose her path freely (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 14). While in Dorimar, the dwarfs find that people are trying to escape the kingdom because of a plague of sleep caused by someone cursing the princess of the kingdom into an enchanted sleep. In the retelling of events, readers experience the intertextual and multivocal pleasure of adaptations, as each character in the inn relates whichever version of the events of several decades prior they had been told, and all the details—or their vagaries—are familiar to readers familiar with the classic fairy tales. Importantly, the dwarfs are told that the princess needs to be awakened with a kiss, that all who have tried the task have failed, and that the enchantress is still at the castle:

> "They say the witch—"
>
> "Fairy," said the fat man.
>
> "Enchantress," corrected the pot-girl.
>
> "Whatever she is," said the sot. "She's still there. That's what they say. If you get that close. If you make it through the roses, she'll be waiting for you. She's old as the hills, evil as a snake, all malevolence and magic and death." (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 16)

This is an important detail. Thus far in the narrative, there have been sparse descriptions of physical attributes, mostly absent of age indicators—the dwarfs are given heights to distinguish them from each other when speaking, one man is described as "fat-faced" (16). No physical description is given of the queen, though Riddell's illustrations, reminiscent of the work of Edward Gorey or even Tim Burton's signature aesthetic, fill the narrative gaps. But the witch has her moral character linked directly to her age: "old as the hills," aligning with the previous description of her as "one of those forest witches, driven

to the margins a thousand years ago, and a bad lot" (16). Age becomes intertwined with both character identity and motivation.

Instead of getting married, the queen of Kanselaire resolves to solve the problem of the sleep approaching her kingdom. From details revealed such as her "raven-black hair" (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 20), that she had "slept for a year" (20), and that she had lived with the dwarfs when she was "little more than a child" (23), readers understand that the queen is the princess "Snow White" all grown up and cast in the role of the hero in Sleeping Beauty's tale. When Gaiman's narrative gaze moves to the castle where the sleep originated, the reader is introduced to two women, one asleep, one awake. One gets a single line: "the fair-haired girl in the high tower slept" (33). The second is given the rest of the page to delineate her activities, and introduced as the only person still awake:

> The woman's hair was grey, streaked with white, and so sparse her scalp showed. She hobbled, angrily, through the castle, leaning on her stick, as if she were driven only by hatred, slamming doors, talking to herself as she walked. (33)

The next time we see her, she is referred to only as "the old woman" and is climbing the tallest tower to stare at the sleeper. She contemplates murdering her with the spindle that started the sleeping curse (38). The ties between old age and animosity toward youth are again present, even if this story is building to a different climax. The sleeper is the witch, and the old woman is the princess whose life and dreams the witch has stolen. The queen wakes the sleeper with a kiss. The old woman remembers the day she was cursed, and the sleeper reveals herself as the witch, saying:

> I said, now I take your sleep from you, girl, just as I take from you your ability to harm me in my sleep, for someone needs to be awake while I sleep. Your family, your friends, your world will sleep too. And then I lay down on the bed, and I slept, and they slept, and as each of them slept I stole a little of their life, a little of their dreams, and as I slept I took back my youth and by beauty and my power. I slept and I grew strong. I undid the ravages of time and I built myself a world of sleeping slaves. (52)

Gaiman gives readers a witch who succeeded in stealing youth and power from a younger woman, and he reiterates the ties between youth, beauty, and power as the crux of female intergenerational conflict. An accompanying illustration (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 53) depicts the moment that the eighteen-year-old

princess encountered the old woman spinning and was cursed awake while the witch slept and reclaimed her power: the witch has a hooked nose, a wizened face and neck, gnarled hands with talon-like nails, and encapsulates the idea of aging as a grotesque process to be rejected and cast off in whatever way possible. In Gaiman's fairy-tale space older and younger women do not co-exist. Instead, older women are displaced as the next generation ages, and those who knew power in their prime are loathe to be replaced by those younger than them. A parallel is drawn between this witch and the queen's stepmother, and she is described as "the golden-haired girl, all childlike and innocent (ah, but her eyes! Her eyes were so old)" (56). The queen addresses her as "Your Darkness" and challenges her saying: "It's always the same with your kind. You need youth and you need beauty. You used your own up so long ago, and now you find ever more complex ways of obtaining them. And you always want power" (56).

Older witches can only regain power and vitality if they feed off the youth and beauty of others and use that youth and beauty to help them regain power. But Gaiman adds another dimension here, too, that these women who pursue youth, beauty, and power voraciously are also starved of love. The witch-turned-girl asks for the queen's love, and it reminds the queen of her stepmother's need for adoration (59). By adding this dynamic of needing youth, beauty, and power as methods of ultimately obtaining love, Gaiman, perhaps unwittingly, passes comment on whether or not older women are imagined as loveable, or deserving of love, when they no longer have the youth and beauty that might have given them power in the past. The old woman eventually defeats the sleeper, and instead of the magic reversing and returning her stolen youth to her, she remains old, having spent her entire life alone. The queen also chooses not to be with her and leaves after giving the direction that the old woman should be taken care of. The queen sets off from the city away from the direction of her kingdom and the wedding she was meant to have, with the dwarfs in tow.

The gender dynamics at play and being played with in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* are not distinct from age dynamics. Fairy tales, as symbolic narratives, rely on patterns of communication: even in postmodern adaptations, ideas of who is good, who is evil, the idea of what evil *looks like*, permeate the retellings even if they are complicated in the end as they are in both of these short narratives. Like in the *Stardust* transmedia, gender dynamics are intertwined with age dynamics, especially around narratives of aging and power. As such, "the patriarchal frame that takes the two women's beauty as the measure of their (self) worth, and thus defines their relationship as a rivalry" (Bacchilega 34) becomes more visible. Perhaps one of the challenges for fantasy studies, fairy-tale studies, and children's literature is to better understand this particular

intersection of power and agency especially in the reproduction of fairy-tale tropes that are frequently appropriated, remixed, or recycled in new narratives across a range of media and directed at a variety of audiences.

The continued intertwining of youth, power, beauty, and intergenerational conflict demonstrates what Susan Cahill calls "an abiding anxiety in relation to regulating the spectacle of the aging female body" (Cahill 58), particularly its place in society and how much power and influence it might have. While Gaiman's narratives are not quite socializing dialogues demanding adherences to aged social scripts for the young, they do repeatedly punish aging women who assert their agency beyond where they are implied to belong, echoing "a conservative impulse to erase and destroy the older, and often more powerful, women in favor of youth and beauty" (Cahill 59). This "conservative impulse" is one that requires further interrogation because, as exemplified in this study of one author's works, it remains pervasive in the wide field of contemporary fairy-tale adaptations that exist across a nexus of media. Moreover, it is a rhetorical and narrative construction that locks in place an ageist binary that mutates the figure of the witch or crone into a flat, less complex character than David Punter argues the figure to be. Punter identifies the figure of the witch as "a figure of resurgence" (78) with "transient, becoming, halting, temporary liminal states" (68), that "occupies this liminal space where many things might be possible, many things are forbidden, and forbidden, transgressive knowledge is the ambition, the hope of circumventing the world of the normal and the everyday" (68). He goes on to acknowledge how transgression is part of how witches and witch-knowledge or witch-becoming are presented (72–73) and how these figures provide wish fulfillment to "cast spells, to curse … to condemn" (79) while also acting as a scapegoat for darker desires (79). Even when adding twists, such as the sleeper being the real witch and the old woman the real victim, Gaiman's witches are stereotypical fairy-tale constructions, natural enemies for the young and fair, but without fully realizing the character's transgressive potentials as these witches are only motivated by personal quests for power and youth. The stereotypical aged figure of the witch is so embedded in such narratives that little space is left for depictions of less witchy older women with different potentials, who are only left with the option of the witch-queen in *Stardust*, to fade into the background without comment as the story's focus instead turns to the next generation.

Accepting "Chivalry" but Rejecting Youth

When not playing into fairy-tale tropes and motifs involving the fear of a loss of beauty and power, Gaiman's constructions of older womanhood still rely on ageist stereotypes and women who are "diminished," to borrow Henneberg's

description. In the short story "Chivalry," included in *Smoke and Mirrors* and *M Is for Magic*, readers meet Mrs. Whitaker, a widow in an English village who buys the Holy Grail in an Oxfam charity shop for 30 pence (Gaiman, *Smoke* 35). Though she is not, in fact, a grandmother, she fulfills the role of the Henneberg's grandmother figure, a "female elder" who is "granted the right to live but [is] cast in hopelessly stereotypical terms" (Henneberg 126). The reader's view of Mrs. Whitaker's life is directed by the narrator's declaration of her routines: her pension collection and stops at the charity shop on Thursdays, visits with Mrs. Greenberg and her macaroons "every alternate Friday" (37), church on Sunday, and dotted through are visits with her nephew and a friend in the hospital, gardening, and small errands. It is a small, retired life that remains nonetheless uninterrupted by the appearance of a knight from King Arthur's Round Table, Galaad, in search of the Holy Grail.

Notably, Mrs. Whitaker's age is never stated. Other than the context clues regarding her pension, friend in the hospital for injured hip, and meeting her late husband Henry "during the war, when he was in the ARP and she hadn't closed the kitchen blackout curtains all the way" (43–44) there are only three direct references to her age. The first two occur when Galaad appears at Mrs. Whitaker's door. Mrs. Whitaker asks him for identification, and the narration explains that "she knew it was unwise to let unidentified strangers into your home when you were elderly and living on your own" (38). Mrs. Whitaker self-identifies as "elderly"; she is self-aware of her perceived vulnerability based on her age. After Galaad provides identification and she invites him into the house, makes him a cup of tea, and he sees the Grail:

> Galaad saw the Grail on her mantelpiece, and dropped to one knee. He put down the teacup carefully on the russet carpet. A shaft of light came through the net curtains and painted his awed face with golden sunlight and turned his hair into a silver halo.
>
> "It is truly the Sangrall," he said, very quietly. He blinked his pale blue eyes three times, very fast, as if he were blinking back tears.
>
> He lowered his head as if in silent prayer.
>
> Galaad stood up again and turned to Mrs Whitaker. "Gracious lady, keeper of the Holy of Holies, let me now depart this place with the Blessed Chalice, that my journeyings may be ended and my geas fulfilled."
>
> "Sorry?" said Mrs Whitaker.
>
> Galaad walked over to her and took her old hands in his. "My quest is over," he told her. The Sangrail is finally within my reach."
>
> Mrs Whitaker pursed her lips. "Can you pick your teacup and saucer up; please?" she said.

> Galaad picked up his teacup apologetically.
>
> "No. I don't think so," said Mrs Whitaker. "I rather like it there. It's just right, between the dog and the photograph of my Henry." (38–39)

This scene highlights the irony that underpins the entirety of the short story, where "the strange interaction of past and present, sacred and profane, fantastic and real is underlined by the fluctuating language, which crosses boundaries between differing styles" (Klapcsik 325). As Klapcsik notes, neither the narrator nor Mrs. Whitaker are surprised to find the Grail in the charity shop amid other bric-a-brac; it is treasured by the protagonist for how it fits the empty spaces in her life rather than for what it is symbolically or historically. Klapcsik emphasizes how the gaps in the narrative allow for the effect of irony, but what might also be considered is that those gaps are centered on how readers imagine Mrs. Whitaker. Other than the description of her hands as "old" in the above passage, readers are never shown what she looks like, in contrast to the physical descriptions of Galaad, the girl who volunteers at the Oxfam shop, and even Galaad's horse, Grizzel. In fact, none of the women who are Mrs. Whitaker's peers are physically described in the text, rendering them invisible to the reader. The use of the word "old" to describe Mrs. Whitaker's hands emphasizes the distance between Mrs. Whitaker and Galaad, making visible the comparison between his youth, awe, and reverence for mythic objects and quests, and her age and pedestrian, everyday concerns, such as the teacup on the rug. This becomes more interesting because Galaad is a man out of time, from an age much older than that of the quintessential pensioner that Mrs. Whitaker is constructed to be. His sense of purpose stands in contrast to Mrs. Whitaker's routine of finding ways of filling her days and her space. The juxtaposition casts both figures in an ironic light.

The last direct reference to Mrs. Whitaker's age occurs during Galaad's third visit, when he offers her three items in exchange for the Grail: the Philosopher's Stone, the Egg of the Phoenix, and the Apple of Life, which can heal wounds, restore youth, and grant eternal life. She handles each of the objects, feeling serenity while holding the stone, "incredible heat and freedom" while holding the egg (44–46), and a reminder of youth from the apple:

> There was a moment, then, when it all came back to her—how it was to be young: to have a firm, slim body that would do whatever she wanted it to do; to run down a country lane for the simple unladylike joy of running; to have men smile at her just because she was herself and happy about it.

Still, she refuses the gift:

> "Put that apple away," she told Galaad, firmly. "You shouldn't offer things like that to old ladies. It isn't proper."

There is no explanation given for why a taste of youth, health, and potential immortality is not a "proper" thing to offer "old ladies," only the implication that, given the temptation to reclaim her past self, she needs to settle herself again with the everyday process of making tea for her guest. The reader never gets access to her thoughts, only to her actions in the moment. The objects that Galaad offers her all have something to do with longevity, youth, or power. She first refuses the sword Balmung, a symbol of power and might, on Galaad's second visit. The Philosopher's Stone is an object that informed readers will recognize as associated with being a cure-all, a source of immortality. The phoenix is associated with long life and rebirth, though possession of such an egg is not necessarily going to pass on those properties to its owner. Furthermore, she keeps the stone and egg for their decorative, not magical, purposes. But the apple is the object that could transform her, return her to the memory of who she used to be. Through her rejection of that, and the sword, she essentially refuses eternal youth and beauty, the things that all Gaiman's other depictions of older women in his fairy-tale retellings seem to desire. Not only *could* it restore her, Mrs. Whitaker experiences a taste of that rejuvenation, and still sets it aside.

"Chivalry" is almost an anti-fairy tale in comparison to the other narratives discussed here. Though there are constructed binaries between Mrs. Whitaker's age versus that of Marie the Oxfam shopgirl, Galaad the knight, and even Mrs. Whitaker's younger self, it is not the antagonistic binary from fairy-tale appropriations deployed in the other stories. Still, "Chivalry" depends entirely on understanding Mrs. Whitaker as an old woman whose life has diminished in her retirement, almost isolated from the next generation who is not involved in her daily life. Of course, Mrs. Whitaker could like being old, could appreciate the experience of age and the life she has lived. It is possible to draw parallels between this character and, say, Sophie Hatter in Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* who finds herself age-shifted older and finds true freedom and delight in her routines as an old woman (Gascoyne 215). However, Sophie always knows that she is young (Kaplan 198). Furthermore, Sophie reflects on her experiences throughout the novel while Mrs. Whitaker's internal life is absent. Without Mrs. Whitaker's own input on her current life, as well as her reflection on her past, it is difficult to read her in the pattern of women engaged in "successful aging" in twentieth-century fiction identified by the scholarly work of Rosalie Murphy Baum (92). Because Mrs. Whitaker

is essentially rendered voiceless in terms of expressing her feelings or thoughts regarding the surreal events she's facing, the picture painted by the narrative for the expectations for older women, especially in the localized British society Gaiman constructs in this story, is not a necessarily appealing future, either. Mrs. Whitaker is not quite the hag figure to be feared as Pickard discusses, nor is she Henneberg's evil old witch: when she bakes there is not a poisoned apple in sight to off a rival. However, her entire definition is that of "old" woman. Readers know nothing of her desires, nothing of her hopes or wants, no sense of her claiming retirement as a time of growth or hobbies. She turns down youth and power in favor of holding on to the objects that symbolize, in this story, serenity and rebirth, but her own rebirth does not seem to be something that she desires. Rather, at the end of the story, she comes across the genie's lamp in the Oxfam shop much in the same way she found the Grail. Even with the knowledge of the potential for wonder and power, she turns away from it. The options Gaiman seems to present for women as they age, if they are not themselves embodiments of mythic figures, is to either hold on too tight to what they were or to let go and be content with the world moving on without them.

A Future beyond Old Age?

Age seems to be the last frontier unchallenged in fairy-tale trope deployment in fantasy. Especially when it comes to ideas about how women might age, authorial choices in character development can reinscribe and reinforce stereotypes about power dynamics between women of different ages, or even women's places in society. As seen in this selection of Neil Gaiman's postmodern fairy tales, certain tropes and patterns can reiterate ageist stereotypes as part of their narrative structure and motivations. His older women tend to be relegated to voicelessness, growing smaller in their day-to-day routines, or otherwise pursuing arcane powers and lost youth. To be clear, I do not think these depictions are deliberately malicious constructions, but rather, a by-product of genre and reiteration of stock characters within the genres of fantasy and fairy tale. Because of the inherent fear of aging that Pickard raises in her discussion of the hag, it is possible to see how these depictions reflect deep preoccupations, evoke horror and disgust within genre parameters, specifically those Gaiman tends to work within. There is a necessary othering that occurs with the depictions of the witches, a sense of mystery that becomes attached to these figures that emphasizes both their liminal and external positions in societies. But such depictions, even when genre specific, still bind into place gendered discourses about aging, beauty, power, and place in society, most often directed negatively

toward older women. Henneberg considers this in conjunction with the "dead mother" pattern writing,

> the reader has the option of concluding that [the mother] might have had some agency had she been allowed to survive. . . . By leaving granny intact but type-casting her as evil, self-effacing, or weak, children's literature denies its old female characters much of that possibility, depriving women elders of the potential we can at least imagine in their dead or absent daughters. (126)

Henneberg's assertions have implications for not only children's literature but also fantasy broadly, especially fantastic works that appropriate fairy-tale figures and tropes into their narrative spaces. While Gaiman's works are not consigned to children's literature, and as an author his corpus contains texts that easily straddle genres and the young adult/adult fantasy or fiction categories, this "deprived potential" is one that can still be applied to a cross-sectional reading of his corpus. Just as other stock characters and narrative tropes have been critically interrogated, deconstructed, and reimagined, so too must be the specter of the haggard or unwanted older woman in postmodern fairy tales and other fantastic literature.

Notes

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2. He is Tristran in the novel and renamed Tristan in the film.

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