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“We’ll Cook Him Up in a Stew”: Stepmothers and Primogeniture in the Brothers Grimm’s The Juniper Tree

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“We’ll Cook Him Up in a Stew”: Stepmothers and Primogeniture in the Brothers Grimm’s *The Juniper Tree*

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

What larger social concern could the continued popularity of the nineteenth-century cannibal stepmother narrative in twenty-first century crime and news reporting be indicating? In this paper, I compare a fictional episode of cannibalism in the non-canonical Brothers Grimm’s tale, “*The Juniper Tree*,” with the true story of the 2010 murder and subsequent dismemberment of Zahra Baker in Hickory, North Carolina to consider the larger cultural implications of cannibalistic stepmothers. In doing so I argue that, despite the half-hearted attempt by mainstream animation studios to try to create semi-Feminist adaptations of the canonical fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault, narratives similar to “*The Juniper Tree*” in fact reinforce a pro-male model of inheritance at the sacrifice of both wives and their girl children. These adaptations also communicate modern social anxieties surrounding blended families, especially regarding heteronormative visions of childhood, savior narratives around adoption, and easy answers about inheritance.

Keywords

Brothers Grimm, cannibalism, *The Juniper Tree*, Feminism, gender, adaptation

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On October 11, 2010, Australian native Adam Baker appeared on Good Morning America to make a plea for information on his daughter, Zahra Baker, who he said had vanished almost a week earlier. Three days before this public appeal, on October 9, at five-thirty in the morning in Hickory, North Carolina, Zahra's stepmother, Elisa Fairchild, called 9-1-1 to report a small grass fire in the Baker family backyard. When emergency services arrived on the scene in Hickory, North Carolina, they found a ransom note on the windshield of Adam's company Chevy Tahoe. A second 9-1-1 call was placed at two o'clock in the afternoon on the same day. Adam reported that the inside of his Tahoe was soaked in gasoline and he believed his daughter had been mistakenly kidnapped instead of his boss' daughter; the Baker's rented their home from Adam's boss. Zahra Baker was reported missing that day but police believe she was killed more than two weeks earlier.

The Caldwell County and Catawba County Child Protective Services had visited the different residences of the Baker family several times before the murder; Elisa had a history of physical, verbal, and psychological abuse of her stepchild and the other children she had with different ex-husbands. Elisa and Adam met through an online dating site. The first time the pair saw each other in person was in the airport when Elisa visited the man and his daughter in Queensland, Australia, before becoming engaged to him just a few weeks later. Adam would be her seventh husband. They moved to the United States shortly after Zahra's cancer went into remission. Having previously battled both bone and lung cancer, the lower part of one of her legs had been amputated and she had to wear hearing aids. Her prosthetic leg was found on October 27 and was matched with the serial number from her medical records. Elisa would eventually lead police to find several of Zahra's bones, but not her skull.

The stepchild's death was ruled an "undetermined violent homicide." Zahra's stepmother was indicted for second-degree murder on February 21, 2011. She would have been charged with first-degree murder if she had not agreed to lead police to Zahra's remains. Elisa had secreted the child from her family, both before and after the crime. She desecrated Zahra's body to hinder the murder investigation and prosecution. Elisa Baker took advantage of a position of trust. Eventually, on February 21, 2013, the Hickory Police Department confirmed that a skull found the previous April belonged to Zahra Baker. The ten-year-old girl was just one of Elisa Baker's multiple biological and step sons and daughters from her many marriages.

Stories of stepmothers like Elisa Baker bring to mind well-worn stereotypes about stepmothers, often functioning as proverbial witches, which are the particular purview of fairy tales. It might be surprising to see the "wicked stepmother" trope pop-up in a true crime story such as this, and yet it does—over and over again. West European fairy tales are particularly associated with the trope. These stories, thought to have been originally shared orally, have become childhood favorites with their Disney treatments. Elisa's story provides a clear example of the thin line between twenty-first century portrayals of second wives and nineteenth-century cannibal stepmother narratives. In this way, Elisa Baker takes the place of the proverbial witch. As Sheldon Cashdan argues, no matter what form the witch comes in, "she is easily identified by the lethal threat she poses to the hero or heroine" (Cashdan 17). This threat derives from the fact that these stepmothers, who take the place of the witch, are effectively a third, alien force that steps into the family after an assumed tragedy.

The actual term we use to name these proceeding wives carries the social

connotation of the time. Step in its combined form comes from the Old English *ástíeped* for “bereaved” or Old High German *stiufen*, “to bereave.” Combining these etymological origins, a stepmother would be one who becomes a mother to an orphan (OED). Due to higher maternal mortality rates in the pre-modern period, stepmothers could be understood as constant reminders of the mother and wife the original family had already lost. From the stepmother’s position, any children preceding her arrival would be a constant reminder of the woman she has come to fully replace. The stepmother’s characteristics are described only in comparison to the first wife. This split can be seen in stories like Cinderella.

In some of the earlier tales that inspired the now-famous Disney film, there is no fairy godmother; it is the ghost of the mother who brings the girl her dress for the ball and secures a future for her. In order to provide tension, the fairy tale genre employs the convention of missing mothers—women who are often dead before the story has even begun. Employing psychoanalysis, Cashdan theorizes that

the way young children deal with this distressing state of affairs is by mentally “splitting” the mother into two psychic entities: a gratifying “good mother” and a frustrating “bad mother.” The child then responds to each image as if it were a separate and distinct entity so as to inject some semblance of order into what otherwise would be a highly unpredictable world. This allows children to respond internally to their maternal caretakers as “good mommies” one moment and as “horrible mommies” the next without having to deal with the inherent inconsistency. (27)

Cashdan suggests that there might not be two different women in the stories. The stepmother and the dead mother might be symbols for the two different “mommies” a young child creates.

In this essay, I aim to expand on the critical conversation concerning the role of the stepmothers in fairy tales by considering the embodied implications when cannibalism is introduced into this trope. Sometimes the voracious need for power leads to a necessary meal of human flesh. The presence of cannibalism in the earlier versions of canonical stories such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White,” as well as those outside “Fairy Tale Canon,” like “The Juniper Tree,” suggests a prominent cultural preoccupation: that cannibalism is a direct response to either a physical or physiological hunger, blurring the distinction between the needs of a mother’s body and her psyche. Assuming that, as Marina Warner suggests, pre-modern European women depended on their husbands and children to determine their social and economic place in the world, the husbands, the fathers of the children being eaten, are crucial—their indifference actively shapes the extreme actions stepmothers take to satisfy complex desires (Warner 238). In other words, despite its veneer—and subsequent marketing as a form—of female empowerment, the cannibalistic stepmother narrative is in actuality a cautionary tale for men.

BEAUTIFUL, PIOUS, AND SICK

Cannibalism is featured prominently in a lesser-known German fairy tale, “The Juniper Tree,” as published in 1857 by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and translated by Maria Tatar in 1999 for *The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition*. In the opening of this tale, a rich man has “a beautiful and pious wife. They loved each other dearly” (Tatar 190). She, unfortunately, dies when she sees her child for the first time because he is so

beautiful. When the wife was eight months pregnant, she requested that she be buried under the juniper tree where she first wished for a child. The apathetic father is heartbroken “he wept day after day. After a while he felt better, but he still wept from time to time. Eventually he stopped and then he took a second wife” (Tatar 190). As an example of the anxieties produced by inheritance confusion, this first child is, in fact, a boy, while the second wife gives birth to a daughter shortly after the wedding. When the stepmother looks at the boy, she feels “sick at heart,” suggesting that he is a routine reminder of the uncertainty of both her and her daughter’s financial future should anything happen to her husband (Tatar 191). Possessed by the devil—perhaps because she already plotted against her stepson—this second wife seeks to secure the family fortune for her own daughter.

The story takes on a new complexity when the daughter, Little Marlene, in fact advocates for her half-brother rather than seeking to harm him. She asks her mother for an apple and then asks if her older brother may have one as well; this kindness shows Little Marlene’s virtue as being opposed to her mother’s moral bankruptcy by wishing to harm an innocent child. Uncertain, the stepmother turns against her own flesh. The boy arrives home from school and leans over and into a heavy chest to select an apple. The stepmother slams the lid down hard enough on his neck that his head falls into the chest of apples. As a potential punishment for Little Marlene’s loyalty to her half-brother, and therefore the original wife and the conventions of male inheritance, the stepmother plans to blame her own daughter for the murder. Little Marlene’s mother instructs her to slap her stepson across the face as a punishment. As the stepmother has merely tied the boy’s head back onto his shoulders with a handkerchief, it topples off of his shoulders with the strike: ““Little

Marlene,’ said her mother, ‘what a dreadful thing you’ve done! But don’t breathe a word to anyone, for there’s nothing we can do. We’ll cook him up in a stew” (Tatar 192). By making her own daughter believe she has committed the crime, the stepmother has effectively silenced the only other witness to the murder with the threat of exposing her evil act. In so doing, however, she has also alienated that whom she would protect and for whom she was seeking financial stability in the first place.

For many of these fictional stepmothers, their husband’s existing biological children pose an economic threat to any children they may bring into the home either by birth or from a previous marriage. When the husband dies, following the conventions of primogeniture, his elder children will get everything, leaving the stepmother’s children to struggle or try to marry above their station. If there are both biological and stepdaughters, however, the eligible bachelor pool decreases with each female competitor to the stepmother’s children. These women are not killing and eating children that are not their own randomly or without premeditation. Unlike the Old Christians rugby team in the Andes or the Donner-Reed Party at Truckee Lake, it is not done for survival. It is a different desperation that drives these women to cannibalism, a desperation born out of a need to ensure their place in a world that saw them as worthless. These stepmothers are eating the flesh and organs of their stepchildren to ultimately dominate their new family. These almost ritualistic killings erase all evidence of the first wife while also threatening the husband and remaining children into silence and, therefore, an expected unwavering loyalty to the stepmother. How do you confront someone who placed your child on the dinner table in front of you? Her actions have threatened what is left of the family into unquestioning obedience. These subsequent

wives took these steps to dominate the family of the first wife “because they wished to promote their own children’s interests over those of another union’s offspring” (Warner 238). They had to secure a place in a nineteenth-century society that saw them as easy to replace, a society that forced them to rely on the male breadwinner for survival (Warner 238). Because of the sins they represent and the awful atrocities they commit, the cannibalistic stepmothers, or witches, must die (Cashdan 53). Fittingly, they usually die in relation to some kind of fire symbolism, be it hot iron shoes or actual flames. If the witch has to die at the end, “the reader must be convinced that she deserves to die. Whereas killing another person can be understood, even condoned if there are mitigating circumstances, cutting them up into little pieces and consuming them extends beyond the pale” (Cashdan 47). Cannibalism is one of the only acts of evil the majority of people can agree turns a human being into something else entirely. So the jealous mother must eat her son’s new family, the wicked queen must eat her stepdaughter’s heart, and the new mother must murder and devour her stepson.

SLEW ME, STEW ME

The mother and her daughter make the stew and Little Marlene cries so hard that they need no salt to season the meat. The stepmother makes a vague excuse for the son being gone and the father eats all of the stew on his own. He eats all of the meat off the bones and throws them under the table as he goes. At the end of the meal, Little Marlene collects all of the bones into a handkerchief and sets them at the base of the juniper tree in a secret act of memorial. By doing so, Little Marlene morally aligns herself with the first mother for a second time. One reading might be that Little Marlene could be the ghost of the boy’s mother come back to watch over her son. Another, more nefarious, is that both

the first mother and Little Marlene prioritize inheritance exclusively through the male line over all other priorities, including their own survival. A good wife is one who sacrifices herself as an individual for the good of the societal norm of primogeniture.

As recompense, Little Marlene’s older brother experiences a kind of rebirth as a songbird in order to repay those who protected the male line. The bones disappear and a beautiful bird emerges and flies away. The bird begins singing his famous song:

My mother, she slew me
My father, he ate me,
My sister, Little Marlene,
Gathered up my bones,
Tied them up in silk,
And put them under the juniper tree.
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!
(Tatar 193)

For this singing, the bird is gifted a gold chain, a pair of red shoes, and a millstone. The bird then flies back to his home where the father is feeling happy, the stepmother is frightened, and Little Marlene is weeping. The stepmother is so scared she says “my teeth are chattering, and I feel as if there’s fire running through my veins,” tearing off her bodice to get free of the imaginary heat (Tatar 195). The bird begins to sing his song and the husband goes outside. When he finishes his song, the bird drops the golden chain which fits perfectly around his father’s neck. The golden chain adds to the husband’s wealth and in turn, to the inheritance the daughter would have gotten had the son remained dead. He is now contributing to his own inheritance as the songbird. It also speaks to the father’s materialism and sense of value. The stepmother falls to the floor. Little Marlene goes outside and the bird finishes his song and drops the red shoes to his half-sister. The red shoes are a reward to Little Marlene for turning on her own mother, they can also

be seen as a symbol of freedom, showing what is valuable to her in contrast with her father. Then the fire symbolism appears: “The woman jumped to her feet and her hair stood straight on end like tongues of flame. ‘I have a feeling that the world is coming to an end. Maybe I’d feel better if I went outside’” (Tatar 197). With the same sound that the chest lid made, the stepmother is killed with a bam! as the bird drops the millstone on her head, crushing her to death. A pillar of flames rises from the spot and then the son is standing in the front yard. The millstone, the third and final gift, would have been seen by audiences at the origin of the tale as a biblical reference along with the apple the stepmother offers to the son. The millstone relates to a passage in Matthew in which it is recommended that anyone who leads children to sin is better off throwing themselves into the ocean with a millstone around their neck (*King James Version*, Matthew 18:6). The stepmother convinces Little Marlene to not only slap her brother when he does not answer her, but also forces her into covering up a murder, cooking her brother in a stew, and then lying to her father about what they have done.

CANNIBALIZING CUTENESS; OR, SOME CONCLUSIONS

Cashdan contends that identity politics, particularly when it comes to gender and privilege, cannot be effectively applied to the fairy tale genre: “there is danger in attributing too much significance to this notion since it implies that fairy tales are faithful representations of reality; they are not” (Cashdan 18). Cultural realism is only one way in which a didactic message might be carried in a work of short fiction and does not exclude fairy tales from doing other kinds of social work. As fictitious stories, one need not consider the literal, biological implications of cannibalism, but rather that this theme reinforces and rationalizes a

model of male hegemony—challenging widespread assumptions that the Germanic fairy tale offers an early semi-Feminist vision of resistance through storytelling. By contrasting the first mother and her male lineage with the second mother and her female lineage, such early nineteenth-century fairy tales reinforce an impossible image of the ideal woman: the mother, already dead.

Additionally significant to revealing the purpose of the portrayal of these cannibalistic stepmothers are the ways in which this narrative is repeated even in twenty-first century crime reporting, condemning the second mother regardless of the conditions in which she was forced to make those decisions. The Wicked Queen still wants to eat Snow White’s heart, the witch still wants to devour Hansel and Gretel, and somewhere, a stepmother still murders her “cute, freckle faced” stepdaughter, Zahra, who “told an older woman who was herself fighting cancer that losing her leg was not to be worried about. ‘It’s okay,’ she said, ‘because I’m going to be getting a Barbie leg, so I don’t want you to be upset’” (Blanco). I argue that the cannibal stepmother narrative has made a resurgence in modern adaptations and films—such as *Tangled* (2010), *Mirror Mirror* (2012), *Into The Woods* (2014), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Cinderella* (2015)—not because of higher divorce rates but, instead, because of the varied models of blended families they produce.

Blended families are a threat to a range of social norms precisely because they come in all shapes and sizes—except for the fetishized nuclear family. Blended families challenge heteronormative visions of childhood, undermine savior narratives around adoption, and eschew easy answers about inheritance. Stepmothers operate outside the boundaries of family norms. As women who often take power, magic and otherwise, into their own hands, stepmothers become monsters because they decide on a

future for themselves and their children. Whether it is Elisa Baker and the escalation of abuse or a second wife trying to secure the family fortune for her biological children, there will always be wicked stepmothers and witches. There will always be women who succeed the first wife. The hereditary implications of this succession demand that they die to preserve the good mother's perfection and the practice of primogeniture.

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