Saoirse O'Hair

Professor Sowmya

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From Witches to Cat Ladies: An Analysis of Spinster Tropes and the Reproductive Mandate

The media–whether it be books, television, or the news–is built upon narratives. From Disney movies about emotions to novels about enormous whales, each narrative is informed by a wide selection of tropes, otherwise defined as “common or recurring [themes] or [motifs] in a story or work of fiction” (Relojo-Howell). Contrary to popular belief, using tropes is not necessarily harmful. There is a reason that Shakespeare has had such a long-lasting impact on the world’s artistic memory: he wrote with tropes that resonated with his audience, appealing to basic human truths. For the same reason, countless subsequent artists have also used tropes that Shakespeare himself created in their works. What tropes often become, however, are shallow oversimplifications of complex social identities. Especially for historically marginalized groups, tropes can perpetuate incorrect and harmful beliefs and attitudes. Women are perhaps one of the most prevalent examples; they have long been persecuted, especially in regard to their reproductive choices. Through the weaponization of spinster tropes, specifically those of the “witch” and “cat lady,” the media and popular culture persecute women who fail to abide by the reproductive norms established by neoliberal, patriarchal society. As a result, this phenomenon reveals the unwillingness of society to allow women to maintain reproductive autonomy and the inherent danger involved in the overreliance on tropes.

The modern reproductive mandate is built upon the belief that women must engage in reproductive labor. Reproductive labor does not only encompass the act of childbearing, but also

the responsibilities necessary for raising the next generation of workers, such as child rearing, performing household chores, or caring for the elderly (Callaci). The term originated with the work of Karl Marx who contrasted the production of goods in the economy with "the reproduction of the labor power necessary to the maintenance of that productive economy" (Duffy 315). The capitalist system that Marx so vehemently disagreed with puts a premium on production and therefore demands a productive workforce to do the producing. Thus, in order to be sustained, capitalism must rely on women to engage in reproductive labor and raise new generations of workers (Callaci). Today, capitalism has evolved into neoliberalism, the "philosophical view that a society's political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist" (Vallier). As neoliberalism has become the world's dominant economic framework, the need to produce has only increased–and so, too, has the pressure placed on women to engage in reproductive labor.

From these economic underpinnings, the reproductive mandate has transformed social norms. Across the world, it is taken as a given, an implicit expectation, that women should bear children. Such attitudes can be understood as pronatalism, or the "attitudinal stance that favours and encourages childbearing…and [venerates] motherhood as the sine qua non [essential condition] of womanhood" (Gotlib). Thus, pronatalism has become a vehicle for the promotion of the reproductive mandate. It has enabled society to internalize the mandate's message while losing some of its explicit economic rationale in the process. Today, reproductive norms and other pronatalist beliefs are primarily enforced by the patriarchy. More than "othered," women are objectified so that their bodies are no longer their own. They are instead the property of men and the patriarchal systems those men created. As Hélène Cixous, feminist thinker and author of "The Laugh of the Medusa," writes, "the way man has of getting out of himself and into her

whom he takes not for the other but for his own" (877). This intense subjugation through language and the unconscious perpetuates the reproductive mandate and the norms surrounding women's reproductive autonomy.

It must be said, however, that women have not complacently submitted to the demands of the patriarchy and its mandate. They resisted and were, unsurprisingly, met with great hostility from the rest of society. Whether cognizant of their resistance or not, women who do not have children are subverting the reproductive mandate and face varying degrees of stigmatization as a result, being deemed normatively "bad". Research on social stigma has primarily focused on the perception of stigma by the childless women themselves: the perceived judgments by friends, family, and strangers. From a collection of interviews with voluntarily childless men and women, sociologist Kristin Park observed that "a strong majority of study participants saw negative attributions attached to voluntary childlessness" (30). Specifically, participants of the study recalled feeling like a failure or that they were seen as selfish and strange for their decision to not have children (30). Some of these perceptions may be from internalized beliefs about childlessness as opposed to true external judgments from others, but that does not diminish the pervasive effects of the reproductive mandate and its stigmatization. Those internalized beliefs necessarily came from external, commonly-held beliefs and stigmas. There is, however, evidence that women are correct in their perceptions of the "negative attitudes" towards their childlessness (Kelly 165). A study examining the perception of women with various numbers of children found that childless women were regarded as having the least fulfilling and happy lives (Mueller and Yoder 216). Anecdotal evidence also supports this claim. Sociologist Maura Kelly's review of literature on childlessness found several common reactions to childless women, all of which were negative: childless women were not believed when they said they did not want children,

they were labeled as selfish or unfeminine, or it was assumed they would change their mind or regret their decision later (165-166). In the two cases, a woman's childlessness provoked either negative perceptions or overt negative reactions, both of which illustrate the stigmatization women subverting the reproductive mandate face.

Facing a more severe stigmatization than a general social bias, childless women have become what Kelly calls a "deviant identity" and are subjected to outright demonization (Kelly 165). A New York Times op-ed by Philip Bowring of the International Herald Tribune openly disparages the childless, claiming that those who choose not to have children have their heads "buried in the sands of selfishness" (Bowring). Interestingly, his argument also references the economic rationales of the reproductive mandate and reproductive labor. Bowring problematizes the declining number of working-age people due to the rise in childlessness and argues that "living standards for the future elderly will depend on…the future output of the economy" so therefore "human beings are not just an indispensable factor of production, they are the most valuable factor" (Bowring). It falls upon women, then, to bear and raise the workers that Bowring hopes will fuel the neoliberal economy. He finishes by accusing the childless of "deliberately [declining] to invest in the human future of their societies," directly attacking those who choose not to have children (Bowring).

The reaction to women who subvert reproductive norms is not confined to an internal stigma or words on a page, however. The persecution of the childless extends to concrete actions, and, historically, this meant violence. The thousands of "witches" who were persecuted across Europe and the Americas are the most famous examples of this reaction. The accused were typically independent, older, single women, whose decision not to participate in reproductive labor posed a threat to the neoliberal, patriarchal system (Spencer) Today, remnants of this

violent past remain, but the persecution women face is far more subtle. Childless women are subjected to stereotypes that feature gross generalizations, exaggerations, and falsehoods. These stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in our media habits that they have become tropes: frequently used themes, motifs, or character arcs found in the media (Relojo-Howell). Tropes are an extremely powerful tool, possessing the ability to "shape our expectations, perceptions, and even our beliefs" through a variety of psychological phenomena, namely cognitive framing and social learning (Relojo-Howell). Cognitive framing is a cognitive bias wherein an audience reacts to a stimulus differently depending on how it is "framed" (Perera). Social learning describes the process of behavior and attitude acquisition that occurs by learning from those around us (Relojo-Howell).

Tropes depicting other marginalized groups can be used to illustrate this process. Bradley Gorham, a professor of communications, has done extensive research on how the negative portrayals of Black people in the media affect social prejudices toward the Black community. For Gorham, language is an important part of this process (240). The media constructs (or frames) specific meanings via discourse, which Gorham defines as "language that is infused with particular meanings" (240). He goes on to argue that, "the stereotypes that we come to hold are the products of social interaction, and therefore are likely to represent the biases of those interactions" (231). Since the media is a representation of discourse-constructed reality on which people can base their behavior, it acts as a form of social interaction and plays a major role in stereotype development (240). This is congruent with the models of framing and social learning described above. Putting the two together, Gorham concludes that, "stereotypes in the media can maintain unjust, harmful, and dominating understandings of race by influencing the way individuals interpret media texts" (244). It is worth noting that tropes by themselves are not

inherently harmful. It is only when they are used to perpetuate the persecution of marginalized groups that they become malevolent persecutory weapons. With the ability to affect social attitudes towards a group of people, tropes can all too easily be used for sinister purposes.

This framework can be applied to tropes used against childless women. Childless women are portrayed with spinster tropes in order to persecute them for having subverted the reproductive mandate. Spinsters are traditionally defined by their marriage status (specifically, their lack thereof), and this status is thought to be what associates the term with a negative connotation. In fact, it is their lack of children, not their lack of a partner, that inspires societal stigmatization. In her research on media representations of mothers, Professor of German Literature Alexandra Hill explains that, in regards to spinsters, "the marital status of the woman is of less importance in neoliberalism than her childlessness" (Hill). In a world dominated by neoliberalism, it follows that spinsters are redefined in this way.

Spinster tropes (tropes that demonize the childless for their childlessness), take many forms, but the most notorious are the "witch" and the "cat lady." Both forms originate in real-life figures but have since become tropes used in the media. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the history of the two forms is intertwined. The origins of the cat lady trope can be found in the witch trials–where the witch trope was also developed (Treisman). Cats were heavily implicated in the accusations against witches, and the first witch killed in Europe admitted to directing her cat to kill livestock (Treisman). From this point on, the witch and cat lady forms diverged and evolved separately. Today, cat ladies are represented by a woman who has a socially outrageous number of–or unhealthy obsession with–cats, while the pop culture image of a witch is that of a cantankerous, gnarled woman, optionally wearing a pointy hat and accompanied by her black cat familiar. Examining specific pieces of media that include spinster tropes and interrogating their

usage can provide valuable insights into the consequences of the tropes and the nature of the reproductive mandate as it exists today.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Dolores Umbridge, a vindictive Ministry of Magic witch with a penchant for cats, is sent to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Her reign of terror provokes outrage among the students and, with the help of Harry and company, hijinks ensue. Umbridge is a cat lady, nearing on obsession, whose office is covered in "a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolor kitten wearing a different bow around its neck" (Rowling 265). The film adaptation of the novel puts special emphasis on Umbridge's feline obsession with several close-up shots of her cat paraphernalia (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). When describing the pink, kitten-filled office, Rowling writes that "these were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed" (265). From beloved protagonist Harry's reaction to Umbridge's office, it is clear that her being a cat lady is intended to evoke disgust, or has, at the very least, negative connotations.

Umbridge's character is meant to be universally disliked by the audience, and her designation as a cat lady is used as further justification for that dislike. As a spinster trope, cat ladies are necessarily childless, which stigmatizes the trope and allows it to be used to demonize a character. As opposed to explicitly stating that cat ladies are normatively "bad," Rowling–like many other authors–uses the societal stigma against childlessness to provoke dislike from the audience towards the cat ladies they write. In other words, because of the influence of the reproductive mandate, childless women, in the form of cat ladies, are a deviant identity that lends itself to dislikable characters. Furthermore, Umbridge's love of cats stands in stark contrast to her "contempt for the 'real' lives of others" (Probyn-Rapsey). Her apparent hatred of the children

she teaches makes her cat lady status increasingly disturbing for the audience. As a series marketed to young readers that has seen major worldwide success, the cat lady trope has found its way onto the bookshelves of millions of children. Developmentally, children reading the series are creating belief systems and perceptions of the world, adopting any "repeated encoded experiences" into those systems (Levy). Via social learning, the tropes they observe in the media play a major role in this development. The inclusion of such a harmful trope therefore becomes all the more dangerous.

The popular children's series *The Berenstain Bears* has a variety of holiday-themed books, among them *The Berenstain Bears Trick or Treat*. In the book, Brother and Sister Bear refuse to visit Miz McGrizz's house while they go trick-or-treating because they believe she is a witch (Berenstain and Berenstain 12). Miz McGrizz is not, in fact, a witch; she is simply an old, "scary-looking" spinster. As a childless lady (or bear) who does not abide by reproductive norms, Miz McGrizz faces societal backlash. As opposed to being persecuted by an external audience, like Umbridge, Miz McGrizz is persecuted by the internal community of Bear Country. For example, Too-Tall Grizzly and his gang rope Brother and Sister Bear into playing tricks on "old Witch McGrizz" (Berenstain and Berenstain 14). The misunderstanding and judgment of Miz McGrizz was not limited to the children but perpetuated by adults as well. When the cubs tell Papa Bear that their candy apples came from Miz McGrizz, Papa responds by exclaiming, "from that scary-looking old grouch-puss that lives down Crooked Lane?" (Berenstain and Berenstain 17). While he does not believe that she is a witch, his assumptions about Miz McGrizz as a spinster are no better than his children's.

While The Berenstain Bears Trick or Treat is also written for a young audience, it is highly aware of the tropes that it includes in its content. The book's purpose is to teach children

not to judge others based on their appearances, "debunking" common tropes and hopefully intervening in children's belief-system development. The authors' choice of illustrative example is therefore significant. For the book to resonate with the widest audience, the authors would have chosen the most obvious or popular example of incorrect tropes. This spinster trope–wherein a childless, older woman is assumed to be a witch–was in their eyes the most pervasive and easily utilized incorrect trope. Furthermore, the book was necessarily written on the assumption that older, childless women are a common fear for children and that the attitudes portrayed in the book towards these women are a typical phenomenon. In this way, the book is indicative of the current state of popular opinion towards childless women and illustrates how, even from a young age, children are conditioned to (de)value women based on their reproductive status. Thus, The Berenstain Bears Trick or Treat is not an example of spinster tropes being used to persecute women but is instead a reflection of the phenomenon.

Outside of books or film meant for entertainment consumption, other forms of media have also engaged with spinster tropes–most recently, the cat lady. In a 2021 interview on Fox News, Vice President-elect JD Vance complained that the US was run by "a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and the choices that they've made and so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too" (Treisman). In addition to criticizing cat ladies, he emphasizes their spinster status, adding the (redundant) modifier "childless." Moreover, Vance's scathing comments mirror the cat lady tropes found in Harry Potter. Umbridge can be understood as acting vindictively towards the Hogwarts students because she herself is miserable and lacks human love. In a post-Dobbs political environment, Vance's remarks hit hard for many women, and they took to social media to refute his claims. The queen of pop herself, Taylor Swift, posted a call to her fans to support Kamala Harris on Twitter,

proudly calling herself a childless cat lady (Swift). The active perpetuation of an outdated trope meant to demonize the childless by one of the country's highest-ranking leaders speaks to a larger phenomenon occurring in US politics. There has been a recent rise in the rejection of female autonomy in regard to reproduction, with politicians revoking previously established rights in favor of pronatalist stances. Most recently, this included the Dobbs decision from the Supreme Court that overturned the right to abortion. Whether by coincidence or not, the politicians most in favor of this decision also tend to be some of the most ardent supporters of the neoliberal policies that drive the reproductive mandate (Peters and Woolley).

The reproductive mandate has permeated throughout popular media, resulting in spinster tropes used to persecute childless women. Recognizing the existence of this phenomenon and the powerful effects tropes can have is only the first step. Going forward, Bradley Gorhan recommends "reducing the presence of stereotypical images and fostering critical media skills" to reduce the effects of tropes and stereotypical thinking (245). Excessive reliance on tropes without equally rigorous critical analysis makes audiences complacent bystanders to the persecution of childless women. A perhaps more extreme solution would be the elimination of social labels entirely (i.e. no longer calling women without children childless women), an action feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa is a strong advocate for. Writing of labels in her work "La Prieta," she proclaims that "they would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label" (45). Anzaldúa feels less than her whole person when *they* apply labels to her, forcibly splitting her into weaker, less vibrant parts. Without the burden of labels, tropes would be unable to lump social groups into homogenous, generalized masses. Whether this solution would be effective, or even feasible, requires further research, but it is nevertheless a step forward. Other groups have moved in the opposite direction, deciding to embrace spinster tropes in order to

reframe them. Taylor Swift is a classic example of this movement, frequently calling herself a cat lady on social media (Swift). Regardless of which solution is chosen, the fact remains that one *must* be chosen. The current state of domestic politics and female autonomy demands action, otherwise leaving millions of women at the mercy of the reproductive mandate.

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